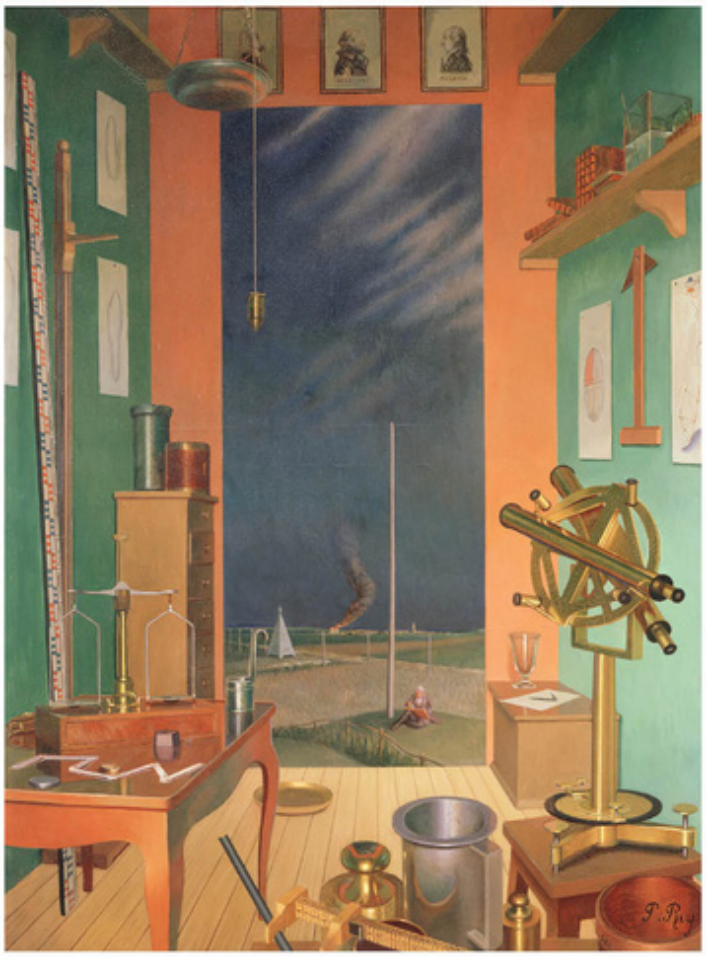
FIFTH EDITION

REAL WORLD RESEARCH



COLIN ROBSON

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REAL WORLD RESEARCH

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A Resource for Users of Social Research Methods in Applied Settings

Fifth Edition

Colin Robson

WILEY

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Dedicated to Alex, Tom, William, Iris, Jude and Aska

CONTENTS

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I am extremely grateful for the help and support given to me by my wife Pat, not only in her usual roles as a meticulous copy editor, sympathetic to my efforts to maintain a relatively informal spoken style, and as an efficient secretary, but also coping heroically with the many and various unexpected demands thrown at her by my stroke. Add to these demands the well-known trauma associated with buying and selling a house and the organizational complexity of single-handedly packing everything up, then moving the household across country, from Bath to Kent, with husband and his helper following in an ambulance. The marriage vow of 'In sickness and in health' has been well and truly kept.

I must also acknowledge the outstanding contribution of my full-time carer and helper for sixteen months, Caesar Maseko. His professional work is of the highest standard. He was courteous and considerate at all times; I could not have had a better carer. Over and above this, he took an informed interest in my work at the computer for this edition. Whenever I had a bad day – and there were several when a misplaced keystroke caused the disappearance of the whole day's work – he would spur me on, reiterating his confidence in my ability to complete. And, not least, he developed an interest in the woes of Huddersfield Town, even when his beloved Arsenal had its own troubles!

PREFACE

The first edition of this book was based on material I developed as leader of a course programme in social research and evaluation at the University of Huddersfield. I was seeking to provide something appropriate to the ideals of an innovative Department of Behavioural and Social Sciences, which I headed when it was a polytechnic. It was a multidisciplinary book, covering several social sciences, primarily psychology and sociology, and also interdisciplinary, in that the course units themselves combined material from more than one discipline. I was influenced by the experience of leading a series of applied social science research projects, mainly in the field of special educational needs. When I couldn't find a suitable textbook for the new course, I wrote a comprehensive set of handouts for the job, paying even-handed attention to research methods that dealt with quantitative and qualitative data.

This fifth edition remains a course book, among other things. However, the world has changed in many ways since those heady days in the 1970s. I feel strongly that there is an even greater need – and opportunity – for real-world research. By that I mean not only for this book, in which I have, naturally, a vested interest, but also for the approach that is central to it. There are threats to the tendency to seek answers to society's ills by getting the best evidence possible. Fake news is a tool for achieving power and influence. Experts are derided for putting forward evidence-based proposals that go against deep-rooted prejudices.

The central purpose of this book has remained essentially unchanged over the various iterations: to give advice and support to those who wish to carry out a real-world research project – that is, a project that looks for answers to the problems we face in areas such as healthcare, education, business and management, and other people-related fields rather than being primarily concerned with advancing an academic discipline. The focus is mainly on projects for which social research methods are used for collecting and analysing new data. But the change introduced in the last edition, where greater attention was given to 'desk-based' projects that rest solely on existing research, has been retained and developed. Such projects are common in some fields of research. This is partly because the real world, in the shape of the various agencies that are willing to provide funding for research, calls more and more for this type of research – not least because it is quicker and cheaper than empirical projects of collecting new data. Another reason is that, in some disciplines and fields of study, the norm has always been for students to do desk-based research, while in others students are now restricted to it for a variety of reasons – for example financial restrictions when resources are limited and ethical concerns when safeguarding the people who participate in the research and the students themselves is important.

As well as taking note of the real world on behalf of students, the book seeks to address the needs of researchers, both new and established. Their real world is increasingly challenging. Pressures on those who work in universities intensify when their ability to obtain funding for research and complete projects with measurable impact becomes crucial not only for their personal careers but also for the future of their department, or even of the institution itself.

Other changes in the context of carrying out research projects come thick and fast. They include:

- an increased emphasis on ethical considerations when carrying out research with people;
- the need to come to terms with ethical committees;
- the mighty bandwagon of evidence-based everything; and
- the all-pervading Internet. . .

The present edition attempts an even-handed approach to these changes, recognizing their existence and importance while pointing out the problems they pose.

Discussions with colleagues and students directly involved in this kind of research and feedback from users (and non-users) of earlier editions have all helped to provide an agenda for changes and development in this new edition. It has also proved very instructive to review the citations of 'real-world research' in books, journal articles, conference papers, theses, and other publications. Findings about how social researchers actually go about their research, as opposed to how research methods textbooks say they should (e.g. Bryman, 2006), have reinforced my perception that jobbing researchers who get published often seem to get on quite adequately without worrying about philosophical matters such as epistemology and ontology. I have tried to restrict these matters, putting them on a 'need to know' footing. This is not a Luddite crusade against all things theoretical; it is just an attempt to have their explanatory value demonstrated. Advocacy of a realist approach, which featured in previous editions, is continued because I believe that it has that kind of value. The compromise is that the treatment is very much 'realism lite'. Increased interest in social research methods and their teaching in UK universities continues, fostered by the Economic and Social Research Council's highly successful Research Methods Initiative. The various workshops, reviews, and briefing papers produced under the aegis of the initiative and their highlighting of methodological challenges for the twenty-first century are invaluable, as will be seen from numerous references in the text. This mention of a UK initiative prompts me to make it clear that, while I am UK-based and no doubt to some extent UK-biased in the selection of materials, I have made a conscious effort to cast the net wide in both journal and book references. There appears to be a degree of unhelpful chauvinism in the research methods literature (this attitude takes extreme form in some books from the United States). Appreciating other countries' different approaches and traditions is yet another example of the value of the anthropologists' advice to spend some time in the neighbouring village.

The distinction between 'fixed design' and 'flexible design', introduced in earlier editions, is retained in preference to the more commonly used 'quantitative design' and 'qualitative design'. Also, I have now settled on the term 'mixed design' rather than the widely used 'mixed-methods design'. There are good arguments for these deviations from accepted usage, and they are presented in the appropriate place.

I have, as a matter of principle, retained the same basic structure of the text as in previous editions. I've tried to front-load some material, particularly on ethical issues, providing overviews on a wide range of social research methods as well as on the different approaches to social research that seem to be particularly relevant to real-world research. Matters about the importance of collaboration and cooperation with others and about the value of the active participation of all those concerned, when one tries to do research that makes a difference, are also highlighted. In similar vein, I've given early prominence to the implications of that elephant in many rooms, the Internet. Ignore it at your peril.

The references have been updated where appropriate. 'Golden oldies' have been retained whenever the older material seems to make a point better than more recent efforts. The chapters themselves and the website material attached to them are heavily referenced, so that readers can follow up topics and issues that interest them or look likely to be relevant to their research. I believe that principles and issues are often more easily grasped through examples than through lengthy explanations. My preface to previous editions ended with the following credo:

> I hold two diametrically opposed views about many aspects of life. On the one hand, I consider doing research, including real world research, as pretty straightforward and simple. Approached with integrity, and some forethought, anyone should be able to carry out a worthwhile project. On the other hand, it is enticingly complex, to the extent that some very bright people, who have devoted their working lives to the task, continue to dispute how it should be done.

The book seeks to reflect both these views. I have tried to signpost a way through the minefield, so that someone with little background can feel empowered to produce a competent piece of work relevant to a problem or issue of concern. I have also attempted to give an indication of what Baranov (2004, p. 8) refers to as 'issues and debates below the surface of social research methods', and there are sufficient leads for the interested reader to follow these up with some discussions of interesting but more peripheral matters. As may be evident, there are aspects of current practices and conventions in social research that I view as misguided, for example the heavy reliance on significance testing in statistical analysis, and I have tried to give a voice to sceptics and dissenters. I remain convinced of the centrality of research questions to the process of conducting real-world research. Working out a good set of related research questions helps you to get your ideas sorted out. Working out how you get answers to these questions shapes the design of the research. The answers are the key part of your findings.

As you may have noted, this text is back under sole ownership. Kieran McCartan has had to withdraw, owing to the pressure of other academic commitments. I thank him for his assistance and I wish him well.

Why a resource for users of social research methods in applied settings?

To my mind, a resource is something that can be used in various ways – by different people in different ways, and for different purposes at different times. For *Real-World Research*, these people include:

- students on courses, who are expected to carry out a small piece of research as an important element of their course programme;
- members of staff in a firm, business, or other organization who have been given a task that, although perhaps not described as research, requires them to investigate a problem and come up with answers;

- individuals (or groups) who wish to carry out a research project related to their interests, perhaps in connection with a charity or some other organization;
- novice and other researchers who seek advice and help on doing a project in and about the real world.

Why social research methods? Because the book covers doing research projects that are focused on people. Social research methods are useful tools for this. They provide information on how to do it and how not to do it. This is not just a 'research methods' textbook, although it can be used as one (keep reading).

Why applied settings? Because the book is not centrally concerned with academic social science, which seeks to be at the forefront of developments in sociology, psychology, and other disciplines within its remit. The focus in real-world research is on being useful and usable and on real-world applied settings – homes, schools, businesses, and all kinds of workplaces.

Real-World Research looks to be and feels like being a big book. Its effective size depends very much on the needs of the reader. Although I don't recommended it unless you are critically short of time, there is way through it, clearly signposted by marked pages, that makes it quite short. In my view, you could do a worthy piece of research by following that route. One aspect, and only one, is absolutely indispensable. Carrying out a real-world research project can harm those involved in some way; hence it is essential that you are aware of this possibility and pay serious attention to the ethical implications of your actions.

Ways of using the book

Recommendations

- If you are following some course, the needs and structure of that course will shape your use. It is likely that the course will prepare you to conduct and complete your own project. To get a full appreciation of the range of issues you'll face, it is best to start at the beginning of the book and work through to the end. My own preference is to start by going through the material at some speed: this way your momentum builds and takes you through any bits that you don't take in fully. From this you get a feel for the lie of the land and can then return at leisure to sections that are important for your needs, or that you found difficult.
- If you want the book to help you to carry out a research project – either by yourself, possibly for a research degree, or as part of a group – you have two main choices. Do the same as suggested earlier and effectively use the book as a self-study course guide, then home into the bits you need.
- Alternatively, you could jump straight in and use it more as a 'how to' cookbook. (It is difficult to understand the denigration of 'methods' cookbooks by some commentators. Obviously some are mere recipe books, but others are much more.) To do this, just use the shaded pages, which are intended to provide an overview of the main stages of the research process and appear at intervals throughout the book.

- If, as I hope, you plan to move from reading about a project to actually doing it, do take care. Research with people can do harm to them as well as to yourself, perhaps magnifying a problem rather than providing a solution. These concerns can be overemphasized. With forethought and good intentions, you may at worst be guilty of no more than wasting people's time; but even that harms the cause of research. These ethical issues can crop up at all stages of planning and executing a real-world project and will be highlighted in all the relevant chapters.
- If you are using this book as a course tutor or to help others to carry out research projects, you are likely to be familiar with much of the material presented in the various chapters, so that a quick glance should locate for you the aspects you wish to recommend to your students. But some of the material differs from the traditional, particularly in the first two parts, and you are recommended to review these sections to get keyed into the line taken.

Using the Internet

I could not have produced this edition of *Real-World Research* without the assistance of that absolutely immense set of resources known as the Internet, which effectively sits inside my computer. Its most obvious element is access to reports of, and discussions about, research relevant to carrying out a real-world research project. Much of this is in the form of articles in e-journals (these can be exclusively electronic or have a print version too, which runs in parallel), but also of conference presentations, reports of various kinds, doctoral and other theses, books and book chapters made available electronically, and so on.

All this can be found by using one or more search engines, of which Google remains the market leader. Google Scholar is particularly useful when searching for journal articles. If you have access to a well-resourced university (or academic) library, full texts from a wide range of journals can be downloaded without charge. However, this provision comes at a substantial cost for their publishers and appears to be at risk. If you encounter problems, either because your library has limitations or because you lack this type of support, do not despair. Google Scholar often comes up with a range of versions of your target article, at least one of which is accessible. And the number of open access journals is growing. These issues, including details of how Google Scholar is used, are discussed in Chapter 3. The Internet provides such amazingly extensive and valuable resources that I would urge any aspiring real-world researcher to gain proficiency in harvesting these resources and to be able to discriminate between the dross and the good stuff (see Chapter 3, p. 00).

Disclaimers

- No single work could hope to cover everything you need to conduct a good research project – particularly one relevant to practical real-world issues. The present book is wide-ranging and tries to give the reader a feel for the issues involved in designing, carrying out, analysing, and reporting on different kinds of study, so that you may appreciate some of the

many possibilities open to you. The intention has been to provide a clear overall structure while seeking to address some of the complexities and controversies in current social research. I am interested in innovative approaches and have selected several, which I consider worth consideration. Each chapter has an online supplement that contains annotated suggestions for further reading. This is particularly important in the case of specific methods and techniques of investigation and analysis, where it is highly likely that you have to go beyond what is provided here.

- All the reading in the world won't make you into a skilled researcher. Given the threat of the centipede problem – it never moved again after trying to work out which leg it moved first – there is much to be said for jumping in, doing one or two projects, developing skills through experience, and using this book as a reference along the way. This is in fact an important feature of flexible design research; it is flexible in the sense that the design evolves as a result of your data-gathering experiences. Fixed designs such as experiments and surveys demand considerable pre-planning before the main data collection, but you can (and should) gain experience through pilot work.

Use of language

- The preferred term to refer to people who agree to be involved in social research is 'participants'. Other terms are used in some situations.

The main steps in carrying out a project

As a first step, you are strongly recommended to start your project journal. Then, to complete your project, you need to:

- decide on a focus for the project;
- develop a set of research questions;
- choose a research design;
- select your method(s);
- arrange practicalities for data collection;
- collect the data;
- prepare the data for analysis;
- analyse and interpret the data; and
- report and disseminate your findings.

NOTE If you are engaged in a purely desk-based study, your data are the reports of previous research, and hence you need not worry about data collection issues – or most of them, anyway (see Chapter 5).

The readership for this book

After several years of teaching, at both undergraduate and postgraduate levels, courses that attempt to deliver real-world research skills, I became increasingly involved in assisting, through supervision and consultancy, small groups or individuals who wish to carry out some study, often one directly relevant to the setting in which they work. Such people are teachers, social workers, health service professionals, NGOs, and charities as well as persons who work directly with particular client groups (e.g. clients with learning difficulties, disabilities, or social disadvantages) and professional psychologists and social scientists responsible for providing advice and support to others, in both private and public sectors. As they work on these projects, they usually strive to meet some perceived and often pressing need. I have also become aware, partly through responses to the previous editions of this book, of the increasing call for practitioners and professionals in various fields – accountancy, architecture and design, business and management, criminology, development studies, economics, engineering, environmental studies, film studies, geography, history, hospitality, information sciences, sport sciences, tourism – to deliver empirically based projects.

However, a large section of this book's readership has always consisted of students and academics, which I trust will remain true to the current edition. The book seeks to give advice to students at both undergraduate and postgraduate levels and across a range of disciplines. The focus is on the designing, carrying out, analysing, interpreting and reporting findings, disseminating and applying real-world research. My aim is to help you to produce research that makes an impact – not least by being picked up by policymakers.

In part, this is an attempt to arm anyone who wants to use social research methods, giving them tools and expertise that they can then use for themselves and pass on to others. I also entertain the hope, based on experience, that practitioners in the helping and caring professions along with others who work with people can usefully enquire into their own and others' practice, with a view to understanding, developing, and changing it.

A word to those with a social science background

It is my strong impression that the exact social science background of the potential researcher is not all that important for carrying out real-world research. The approach taken in this book is deliberately promiscuous on this score. Strategies and techniques that have tended to be linked to different disciplines are brought together in this book, in an attempt to give researchers a range of options appropriate to the questions they are asking. Hence it is hoped that researchers from a wide range of social science disciplines will find here material that is both useful and accessible. This book's multidisciplinary approach to methodology in the social sciences becomes more relevant for two reasons. One is the expansion of the range of methods and methodological approaches explored by many fields and areas of work. The other is the encouragement from stakeholders, funding bodies, and research councils to engage in cross-disciplinary research.

A word to those without a social science background

The approaches advocated here are accessible to people without a background or training in the social sciences. The things that social researchers do are not all that different from what is done in a variety of other trades and professions. Northmore (1996), for example, writing for investigative journalists, reveals many such similarities. The research task has been compared with that of the detective: information is gathered; a 'case' is made on the basis of evidence; comparisons are drawn with the modus operandi of suspects; decisions are made about the best explanation, and so on (Scriven, 1976; Smith & Davis, 2012). There are more obvious linkages with the helping professions – for example therapists and counsellors – and with disciplines in the humanities – for example history.

A problem is that 'you know not what it is that you know not', and you may rush in blindly or blithely without realizing the complexity of the situation. It is important to appreciate the implications of conducting a scientific study. If you do not come from a scientific background, or if you are 'anti-science', try to keep your prejudices in check. The second chapter aims, among other things, to clear away some common misconceptions about the scientific approach. You won't be expected to wear a white coat or to crunch numbers. Associated with the scientific approach is the need for rigour and for rules or principles of procedure. However, as has already been stressed, many real-world studies both permit and require a flexibility in design and continuation that may well appeal to researchers with a background in the arts or humanities. Research designs based on people's accounts or other qualitative data can provide a compelling report. A major theme of this book is how to introduce rigour into all the aspects of research so that we achieve a justified believability and trustworthiness in what we find and write up.

You will be at a disadvantage by comparison with researchers with a social science background, and in two main ways. First, carrying out systematic research calls for a set of skills – for example in observing and interviewing, designing, analysing, interpreting and reporting. The development of these skills requires practice, which takes time. This can and should have taken place during training in most social science subjects. In the absence of these skills, you will have to learn on the job or to sub-contract some or all of the tasks to others, who do have the necessary skills.

Second, the social sciences have a philosophical underpinning – and a disadvantage here is more difficult to remedy. There are theories and models, as well as research findings, that you will generally not be aware of. It is difficult to assess how much of a disadvantage this puts you under. One obvious solution is to work in partnership, or on some kind of consultancy basis, with a professional social researcher. This practice is becoming commonplace, as numerous organizations and individuals link up with universities and academics to develop and conduct mutually beneficial research.

If you are an experienced practitioner or professional trained in the field that constitutes the subject of the research, you will have a set of theories, models, and so on that correspond to the ones that derive from the 'pure' social science disciplines and are possibly more useful. This is not to minimize the importance of theory. I simply make the point that a theoretical or conceptual framework can be acquired by a variety of means, including through interaction with and analysis of the data you have collected. When, as will often be the case, the intention is to assist individuals, groups, or organizations to understand, and possibly to develop or change, some

aspect of themselves and of the situation they find themselves in, staying close to the concepts and language they use is good practice. Unassimilated jargon certainly accentuates the commonly acknowledged theory–practice divide.

The basic claim being made here is that principled enquiry can help you to gain an understanding of the human situation and its manifestations in an office, factory, school, hospital, and so on and in initiating sensible change and development. It is important not to claim too much, however. Common sense, management fiat, hunches, committee meetings, political considerations, and the like are going to continue to form the main precursors to action. As Gerring (2001, p. 254) claims, '[t]he cause of civil rights, for example, was advanced more by visual images – of peaceful protesters being sprayed with water cannons and beaten by police – than by social science'. But getting research on the agenda as something likely to be of assistance if there is an important decision to be made or problem to be dealt with would be a step forward. And if you consult an experienced researcher for advice and support, you may find that your efforts are more effective.

A word to novice researchers

Many students report that carrying out a research project was the best and most interesting part of their degree programme. In the United States it is often referred to as the 'keystone' element of the whole program – presumably because it provides the culmination of all the parts of students' experience, the element that makes it all hold together. It can be a daunting prospect. This may be because it is very different from the taught elements of an undergraduate programme, although mini-project exercises linked to a taught module are a helpful preparation.

Carrying out your first research project is a challenge for anyone. This book seeks to help you to meet that challenge and enjoy it. Quite a few first-time researchers have published an account of the experience, sometimes 'warts and all'. It is probably best to look at these at a later stage, when you know what kind of project you want to do so you can focus on particularly relevant accounts (see Part IV, p. 00). You will also find in other chapters references to the approaches to doing research and using specific methods that novice researchers have written about.

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ABOUT THE COMPANION WEBSITE

This book is accompanied by a companion website.

www.wiley.com/go/robson/realworldresearch5e

This website includes:

- Instructor Slides
- Glossary
- Chapter Resources

PART I

Setting the scene

This book aims to help those who are interested in designing and carrying out a real-world research project. Readers are likely to be at different stages in that journey. Initially some may have little idea as to the kind of project. Others may have a particular project in mind. Perhaps it is on a topic chosen from a list of possibilities drawn by their tutor, or from a task handed to them by a team leader worried that head office expects her to sort out a problem that has cropped up.

Before leaping on to a project, you need to have an idea of what you are letting yourself in for. Real-world research, as will be explained at the beginning of Chapter 1, is often an 'away fixture' that takes place on someone else's territory. False moves can inoculate a firm, a school, or wherever against future involvements – not only with you but with other potential researchers – and possibly against the whole idea of systematic enquiry as an approach to dealing with problems or understanding situations. Practitioners such as nurses, teachers, or social workers, when getting involved in research, commonly wish to research some aspect of the situation in which they work or are already involved. Here you will have to live with any mess you make.

This is not to argue for getting things cut and dried before you start. Any proposals you make for carrying out a project will benefit from discussing your ideas with others, including stakeholders – that is, people who are likely to have an interest in the research, either because it may bring some additional efforts or trouble for them or because they may be affected by the findings. Indeed, there is much to be said in favour of collaborative ventures where the client and all those involved have a substantial say in the enterprise.

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Companion website: www.wiley.com/go/robson/realworldresearch5e

Keeping a project diary

If you have a specific project in mind when using this book, you are strongly recommended to keep a project diary. Or perhaps you are in a situation where you know that you will have to carry out a satisfactory project in order to complete a course, or that your job, actual or prospective, involves doing projects and writing reports. Here the project diary will help you to keep a record of the journey you take to come up with a specific project, and also of your progress in designing that journey and carrying it out.

It is good practice to keep a full record of all the various activities you get involved in in connection with a project. Some people limit this record keeping to the stages of collecting the data. A diary is certainly invaluable then, as it helps to keep in one place details of appointments and meetings, records of what data were actually collected, where, when, and so on. However, there is much to be said for starting the diary on day one of planning the project. It can take a variety of formats, but an obvious one is a large-size diary with at least one page for each day (they come very cheaply from about March each year!). Keeping it on your computer is attractive, provided that you have good computer housekeeping habits.

The kinds of things that might be entered include:

- Notes on things you have read; references – get into good habits of taking full references (see Chapter 3): the effort you make now will save you pain later, when you need to chase up the missing references. I often find that I get an idea about A when working on B; if you don't make a note of such ideas, they may get lost.
- Any thoughts relevant to the project, particularly when you decide to modify earlier intentions; reminders to yourself of things to be done; people to be chased up, and so on.
- Appointments made and kept, together with an aide-mémoire of where you have put anything arising from the meeting (one strategy is to include everything in this category in the diary).
- Taking stock of where you are in relation to each phase of the project; short interim reports of progress, problems, and worries; suggestions as to what may be done.

The diary can be very valuable when you get to the stage of putting together your findings and writing any reports. In particular, a research diary is indispensable with some styles of research, where it is expected that you produce an audit trail (i.e. a full record of your activities during the research) or a reflexive journal (i.e. an account where you reflect on the process of researching).

Lamb (2013)[1] refers to what I have called a project diary as a 'research journal'. He regards it as an underused yet valuable tool. Vinjamuri, Warde, and Kolb (2017) write for social work students but make points applicable to all the situations where there is a concern for relating one's research to one's professional practice. The diary or journal is not only a means of documenting the journey of completing a research project; it also makes us appreciate the value of a *reflexive* approach to research more generally (Chapter 10). Bassot (2016) covers both aspects in an engaging text.

[1] This paragraph provides three examples of something that occurs frequently in this book: references. They are mainly to journal articles; some are to reports, theses, and the like; and a few are to books. These items give you more detail on your topic. You can skip them without losing the main thread, perhaps when you dash through the book for the first time or are under severe time pressure. If you have access to an academic library at a university or college, you should be able to open and read much of the non-book material via the Internet (see Chapter 3 for details).