

A *Guide* from **reason**

Choosing your Method

The method used in your research or evaluation will be informed by your project aims and practical considerations. This *Guide* will help you to identify which method will best help you to answer your research questions. The *Guide* also looks at research methods in relation to Outcomes Based Accountability (OBA).

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Choosing your Method



Choosing your research or evaluation method should form part of the planning process of your project. You need to make sure that the method you choose will help you to answer the questions you have identified as being of interest and importance, and within the time, budget and expertise you have available. Therefore you will need to ask yourself a number of questions:

- What are the aims of my research or evaluation? Which method/s will be most helpful in achieving my aims? (Also see our *Guide* on Defining your Aims).
- What practical considerations have I identified in relation to conducting this piece of research? Which method/s will be most useful and practical based on my considerations? (Also see our *Guide* on Practical Considerations)

reason has produced a number of *Guides* and *Tools* about different research and evaluation methods. Each method has different benefits and limitations, and should be used in different situations, according to your answers to the above questions. The *Guide* for each method explains the benefits and limitations in more detail, however a summary of the methods can be found in the table below.

Method type	When to use	Benefits	Limitations
Quantitative:  Surveys	To find out the views of a big group of people.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Tells you ‘what’ and ‘how many’. • Questions are the same for all respondents so it can provide robust results. • Can indicate the general view of a group. • Opportunities for significance testing. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Does not tell you ‘why’. • Does not provide opportunities to probe responses. • Questions are fixed so cannot be adapted or rephrased (eg, to aid understanding).
Qualitative:  Interviews  Focus Groups	To gather in depth views in relation to a topic with a small group of people.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Tells you ‘what’ and ‘why’. • Helps you to look at an issue in great detail. • Provides opportunities to follow up on answers of particular interest or that need clarification. • Opportunities for case studies and quotes which can bring an issue to life. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Does not tell you ‘how many’. • Cannot be generalised to the population. • Researcher needs to be aware that their preconceptions could influence collection/analysis of data. • In group interviews of focus groups one participant could dominate the group.



Method type	When to use	Benefits	Limitations
 Counting Outputs	To get a picture of how much (or how many) over a period of time.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • It is relatively resource light in terms of collecting the information (or data may already be available). • Can reveal patterns in terms of how people are using a service. • If the data does not include confidential information about individuals there can be fewer ethical issues to consider. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The analysis will not tell you about 'why', 'who' or 'where'. • It will not tell you about the impact or quality of the thing/activity you are counting. • If you are using previously collected data, it can be subject to data protection issues depending on what the data was originally collected for, and what the data is about.
 Literature Reviews	To draw together published research findings on a particular topic.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Allows you to develop detailed knowledge of a topic. • Provides a summary research evidence in the area. • As it is desk-based research is can be relatively quick and inexpensive to carry out. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • It is limited to the research already available. • The amount of search results can be overwhelming. • May require access to online journals which need a paid subscription.

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Triangulating methods

Research methods can be used separately or together to complement each other. This is known as 'triangulating the data'. For example, in larger evaluations interviews and focus groups are sometimes used to supplement or inform a large scale survey.

Example

A project looking at service users' views on the service received from their GP surgery.

If someone wanted to find out the views of service users in relation to the service provided by their GP surgery, they could either:

- 1 —** Run a survey to gather views from a lot of people that use the surgery. This would provide an overview of how services users felt in general. While it would give a good indication of the general feeling, this would only be in relation to the pre-defined questions on the survey and would not provide any additional detail, for example 'Why?'..
- 2 —** Carry out some interviews or focus groups to gather views from a smaller group of people that use the surgery. This would provide more detailed information about their experiences but they would not be able to make assumptions about everyone else's experiences based on the data gathered.
- 3 —** Do a survey *and* some interviews or focus groups. This would provide the best of both worlds – the survey would provide an indication of how people felt about their surgery overall while the interviews or focus groups would supplement the survey findings with examples. If the survey was conducted first, the interviews or focus groups could be used to explore any puzzling or unexpected findings from the survey to try and find the reasons behind them.

You can find more detailed information about specific research and evaluation methods in the evaluation methods section of the **reason** website:

 <http://www.reason-network.org.uk/resources/doing-evaluation/methods/>

Outcomes Based Accountability

You might also find it useful to consider which research method to use in relation to the Mark Friedman Outcomes Based Accountability (OBA) approach (Friedman, 2005). OBA is characterised by a focus on outcomes and specifically on three main questions of interest:

- 1 — How much are we doing?** (*focus on the quantity of the effort put in*)
- 2 — How well are we doing?** (*focus on the quality of the effort put in*)
- 3 — Is anyone better off?** (*focus on the effect of the activity or effort put in*)

Questions 1 and 2 are about monitoring a particular **process or activity** while question 3 addresses whether a **difference has been made** by that process.

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Performance Measurement Categories (Friedman, 2005)

	Quantity	Quality
Effort	How much are we doing?	How well are we doing?
Effect	# Is anyone better off?	%

Examples of how these questions might translate into research or evaluation projects:

1 — *How much we are doing?*

eg, How many family visits have taken place in the last month?

2 — *How well we are doing?*

eg, How satisfied are families with the service they receive?

3 — *Is anyone is better off?*

How many people are better off, and by how much are those people are better off?

eg, For an initiative hoping to improve educational outcomes, then school attendance could be a proxy measure of improvements in educational outcomes

eg, Parental self-reports of confidence in parenting after attending parenting sessions (self-reported impact)

Question 3 is the most difficult to answer, and often the question which is overlooked. It can be hard to isolate and identify whether a particular process or programme is having a specific effect as usually other activities and factors will be in play as well. However, that is not to say that you cannot answer question 3 - you will just need to bear in mind (and if possible try and account for) other factors that might have had a similar impact to the one you are trying to isolate.

You might want to focus on one of these questions, or all three. Evaluating a process or a programme in relation to all three questions would provide the most rounded assessment because it would take into account both the inputs and the outputs. If you only ask the first question – How much are we doing? – you may miss essential information. For example:

— If we only report on **outputs**, eg, *'120 parents attended parenting classes during the year'*

— Some may challenge: *'The parents may have hated your classes and learned very little'*

— If we also report **outcomes**, we have a stronger claim to effectiveness:

'120 parents attended parenting classes during the year. After attending the 3 month programme, 65% of parents reported a 'considerable' improvement in the behaviour of their children. No improvement was noted for the 70 parents on the waiting list that completed the survey.'

Bear in mind that the three questions featured by OBA do not include why something is happening. This can be an important additional area for your research to evaluate because it can provide the reasons behind responses and consequently inform change.

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The following Venn diagram illustrates the types of research methods that can typically help you to answer each of the three questions.



References












Friedman M (2005) *Trying Hard Is Not Good Enough. How to Produce Measurable Improvement for Customers and Communities* Victoria, BC. Canada: Trafford Publishing.

Further information on Friedman's Results-Based Accountability (RBA) and Outcomes-Based Accountability (OBA) can be found here:

 <http://www.raguide.org>



Other associated *Guides* from **reason**:

-  Defining your Aims
-  Practical Considerations
-  Ethical Considerations
-  Surveys
-  Interviews
-  Focus Groups
-  Counting Outputs
-  Literature Reviews
-  Identifying your Key Findings
-  Presenting your Findings
-  Disseminating your Findings

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