

## Research Methods: Lessons learned from the Joint Fund for Poverty Alleviation Research

**A Synthesis of Evidence from the Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC) and UK Department for International Development (DFID) Joint Fund for Poverty Alleviation Research**

Pauline Rose, Research for Equitable Access and Learning Centre, University of Cambridge

This guide is intended to help researchers in their choice of research methods. It is not intended to be a definitive resource but a practical summary of lessons learned from the methodologies that have been used across 122 research projects funded by the ESRC-DFID Joint Fund for Poverty Alleviation Research over the period 2005 to 2014.

The analysis is based on a thematic analysis across all of the grants, and of the impact pathways in the 15 impact reports completed 12 months after the end of the project. It is based on the Evidence Synthesis Research Award (ESRA) for Research Methods by Laura Camfield, Maren Duvendack and Will Monteith.

### **Will my discipline shape my choice of method?**

This depends. Research methods tend to be linked with the disciplinary perspective of researchers, although this mixing of methods is increasingly common across the disciplines. The types of research methods adopted were associated with the disciplinary background of the researchers. Of the 122 research projects, economists led the largest number of projects (28%) and adopted either quantitative or mixed methods approaches. The next largest groups were anthropologists and geographers, none of whom did purely quantitative work. Sociologists were most varied in their approaches – including quantitative, mixed and qualitative approaches in their research.

### **Should I use secondary data?**

Secondary data analysis can be important for framing research projects and can also reduce the need to collect additional data for projects. Around half of both the quantitative and qualitative studies used relevant secondary data collected by others for their analysis. Most projects used this in conjunction with primary data collection. Most of the projects using secondary data adopted quantitative or mixed methods research designs, although around one-third were qualitative. To take [one example, one project used data from a national health survey](#) to contextualize material collected from ethnographic work inside organisations in the pharmaceutical industry.

### **What does methodological innovation look like?**

Methodological innovation is both an important outcome of research in its own right, and also can help to provide new insights into international development problems and solutions. Such innovation was evident in both quantitative and qualitative projects. For example, a primarily quantitative [project on human development and poverty reduction in developing countries](#) was particularly rich in the diversity of methodological approaches drawn upon, with high relevance to both research and policy communities. The project used both secondary and primary data sources, adopting randomised experiments and quasi-experimental designs. It was particularly innovative in adopting approaches aimed at measuring unmeasurable concepts (such as social capital, empowerment and expectations) through experimental games, and in using structural models to simulate policy choices.

## Should I take a mixed methods approach in my research design?

Mixed methods approaches offers the potential for achieving greater impact. Over the 10 year period of the Joint Fund, there has been increased emphasis on mixed methods, increasing from 43% to 64% between the first and second phases, and remaining at 57% in the third phase. One example is a [project on HIV in Africa](#) that enabled demographers and economists to share concepts and techniques that they would not otherwise have learnt. This research is reported to have contributed to the mainstreaming of HIV and AIDS issues across the South African government following a period of relative neglect.

With increasing use of mixed methods, and the potential effectiveness of the approach for impact, a next step will be to promote greater innovation in mixing methods. Guidance on how research can mix methods in new and exciting ways will result in even greater impact of projects in the future.

One innovative example of mixing methods is a [study looking at wellbeing and poverty pathways](#) using qualitative and quantitative data collection in Zambia and India.

The project used psychometric methods which are rarely used in development research to validate a multi-dimensional model of well-being. The model was piloted in Zambia to make sure it was appropriate for participants with low literacy and had high face validity. Qualitative and quantitative data collection was undertaken with 700 respondents over a two year interval to ensure the validity of the model and refine it through numerous psychometric iterations, resulting in changes to the methodology – for example, some items were redrafted to make them less abstract (replacing a list of declarative statements with an agree-disagree scale format). Mixing of methods through triangulation in the analysis showed, for example, that gender significantly affects well-being scores (through the quantitative analysis) as well as people’s constructions of well-being (through the qualitative analysis).

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## What are the benefits to doing multi-country research?

Multi-country research can offer greater potential for comparative research. Around half of the projects included more than one country, offering the potential for learning lessons in other contexts. One example is a primarily [qualitative study that looks at shame, social exclusion and the effectiveness of anti-poverty programmes](#) across seven diverse countries (rural Uganda, and India, urban China, Pakistan, Korea and the United Kingdom). The study sought to strike a careful balance between standardization and conceptual equivalence. The research involved critical discursive analysis of creative writing from secondary school syllabuses in each country, complemented by 50-60 interviews in each country with adults and children experiencing poverty (defined by local standards). It identified that shame was linked explicitly to poverty across the diverse settings. The research focused on the importance of reducing poverty-associated stigma, and more specifically influenced the inclusion of an International Labour Organisation Recommendation that governments should have ‘respect for the rights and dignity of people covered by the social security guarantees’.

## The importance of ethics

Good quality projects report on the ethics of their research, as recognized in the expectation of reporting to research councils. While the synthesis noted a lack of explicit consideration of these in both reports and papers of many of the projects, one positive example is [a study on well-being in India and Zambia](#) that had a specific paper discussing the ethical dimensions of its work. Learning from this, more could be done in other projects in relation to identifying the ethical aspects in research outputs.

## Data as a global public good: archiving data

Data archiving is both an indicator of quality in itself - well-organised projects produce archival quality data sets – and a way of verifying quality by re-running quantitative analysis, and checking the interpretation of qualitative data. Around one in five of the projects have archived their data – given that this was requested of all projects, more needs to be done to support archiving.

## How is the quality of research associated with different methodological approaches?

Research quality is often assessed by the journal it is published in, although this is a fairly crude metric. At the time of reporting for the projects, 67 of 250 reported articles were published in the top 20% journals according to the [Norwegian Research Council publication classification](#), which could be perceived as an indication that the research funded under the ESRC-DFID strategic partnership has been achieving high-quality outputs. These outputs were concentrated within 33 of the projects (partly reflecting the timespan of those that are completed), of which 10 were quantitative, 14 were qualitative and nine mixed methods, demonstrating that quality is achievable across a range of research designs. Across the 159 research outputs that were analysed in the synthesis, 39 were explicitly methodological, indicating a growing interest within development in how evidence is generated.

Another possible indicator of the quality and academic impact of research is the amount of citations. Analysis of a selection of outputs using google scholar identified that quantitative research reached around 15 citations on average, with around nine for the qualitative and mixed methods outputs, which may reflect different publishing and citation strategies.

## How can Southern researchers be engaged in research uptake?

The engagement of Southern partners in research uptake is key to achieving impact at the local, national and international levels. This is best achieved through early and focused stakeholder engagement, recognizing the different needs and interests of different groups of stakeholders and the opportunity to tailor forms of communication creatively to their interests. Interesting examples of this include a project that fed information into the [storylines of television dramas](#) or developing learning resources.

### Key readings

ESRC-DFID Joint Fund for Poverty Alleviation Research Evidence 'Synthesis Research Award (ESRA) for Research Methods', Report, International Development: University of East Anglia



The Impact Initiative for International Development Research exists to increase the uptake and impact of two programmes of research funded through the ESRC-DFID Strategic Partnership. These are: (i) The Joint Fund for Poverty Alleviation Research, and (ii) The Raising Learning Outcomes in Education Systems programme. The Initiative helps identify synergies between these programmes and their grant holders, and supports them to exploit influencing and engagement opportunities and facilitates mutual learning. The Impact Initiative is a collaboration between the Institute of Development Studies (IDS) and the University of Cambridge's Research for Equitable Access and Learning (REAL) Centre.

[theimpactinitiative.net](http://theimpactinitiative.net)

### Key contacts

Pauline Rose, [pmr43@cam.ac.uk](mailto:pmr43@cam.ac.uk)

Kelly Shephard, [k.shephard@ids.ac.uk](mailto:k.shephard@ids.ac.uk)



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