



Methods for Change

Facet Methodology

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Facet Methodology: Centring creativity, playfulness, and inventiveness to uncover connections



Facet Methodology is a research approach that centres the creativity, playfulness, and inventiveness of the researcher(s) by imagining the research process as a gemstone and facilitating an exploratory approach to mixing methods and theories. It aims to uncover connections which would not have become visible by using one perspective and one method alone and thereby trouble existing assumptions about a problem or phenomenon.

Facet Methodology allows the researcher to use an interdisciplinary mix of methods in an iterative process, in which both the content of the enquiry and the methods used are adapted over the course of the research. In other words, the researcher adjusts the lines of enquiry and their respective methods according to what they learned from the previous explorations. A big advantage here is the flexibility to revise and refine the research as it progresses, and new insights emerge as well as for participants to play an active role in co-designing the research. Due to its inter-disciplinary orientation, Facet Methodology can be adapted to a wide range of themes and sectors. It does so by exploring how various elements, such as social, economic, environmental, spatial, temporal, biophysical, material, spiritual or others, are both lived and experienced by people and animals, and how all these elements are also multi-dimensional and connected.

In Facet Methodology the research question or phenomenon is imagined as a multifaceted gemstone, whose different sides refract and intensify light, casting patches of light and shadow (Mason, 2011). The role of the researcher is to deliberately carve out the facets of this metaphorical gemstone by combining different theoretical perspectives and methods. Each facet is a mini-investigation into one aspect of your research question: It answers a sub-question or follows one possible line of inquiry by using its own theoretical perspective and method(s). This means that each facet is one way of answering parts of the overall research question. At the same time, the answer your facet provides depends on the method(s) used, since Facet Methodology recognizes that methods are not neutral. Instead, how we choose to investigate a phenomenon through specific methods involves underlying beliefs of how we can come to know and understand a phenomenon. The aim is not to cover as many perspectives or as much data as possible, but rather to find combinations of perspectives and methods that are insightful, uncover hidden connections, and challenge existing assumptions.

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How does Facet Methodology create or contribute to change?

Facet Methodology includes a change in how we justify and visualise both the research process and its findings. A key part of facet methodology is pursuing 'flashes of insight' (you can think of them as 'aha!' moments), instead of focusing on covering as much data as possible or finding one 'right' answer. Insight is gained by exploring selected aspects of a particular problem (the facets) to evoke new forms of understanding. This research process is made more tangible by working with a visual gemstone metaphor.

Depending on the angle of vision and the direction from which the light hits the gemstone, there will be patches of light and shadow, leaving only parts of the gemstone visible. Similarly, research questions can also be approached from different angles depending on the perspective from which a problem is investigated. Reflecting on the choices made in relation to why you decided to explore a problem from a particular angle using certain methods and what this angle with its methods allows you to see is an integral part of Facet Methodology to ensure transparency in the research process. This approach enables different facets of complex problems to be explored via a mix of methods before assembling these multiple layers to present a nuanced argument.

This methodology also enables a set of reflections about the relationships that span living beings and things, such as different forms of inequalities and their interactions with the environment, through a creative and connected analysis. It enables reflections about the importance of creating space for frictions and complexity in how we think about and understand the lived world. While most research aims to tell one coherent and convincing story, Facet Methodology provides space for contradictions, frictions, and multiple forms of 'truth' to coexist simultaneously. It can change taken-for-granted assumptions of why things are a certain way by inviting the researcher to play with different, sometimes seemingly incompatible perspectives on how to think about the world and methods to approach the same phenomenon from multiple angles.

These assumptions can range, for instance, from the socio-political, to the economic, material, temporal, or audible dimensions of the phenomenon that is of interest to the researcher (Mason, 2011, p.79). Because problems and phenomena can be viewed from many different and sometimes contradictory perspectives at once, this can tell us something unexpected and helps us better understand the different connections of the phenomenon under study. These connections, made visibly through different methods, can span times, places, and scales. As such, Facet Methodology changes how we view problems and can help us find more comprehensive and nuanced solutions to problems, and it can help address research problems that grapple with seemingly disparate spheres or elements and uncover how they are connected.

Facet Methodology can change the way participants engage in research, through giving them the opportunity to influence the research process by suggesting facets the researcher might not otherwise have thought of. Both researcher and participants can co-design potential facets together in a process of dialogue as well as revisit facets that have already been identified to reflect on them from a different angle and with different methods. Where in many other social science methods the research stages and methods are defined from the outset, a researcher using Facet Methodology keeps returning to these throughout the research whenever new insights have emerged in order to adjust and refine the facets. This can be done in a participatory process, reallocating more power to participants throughout the research process and facilitating the co-creation of knowledge. It may also include identifying together possible areas and questions that need to be further explored and decisions on what methods to use. As such, this approach is useful for various groups and organisations that want to meaningfully co-design research, consider a multitude of perspectives, and mitigate uneven power dynamics both between participants and between researchers and researched.

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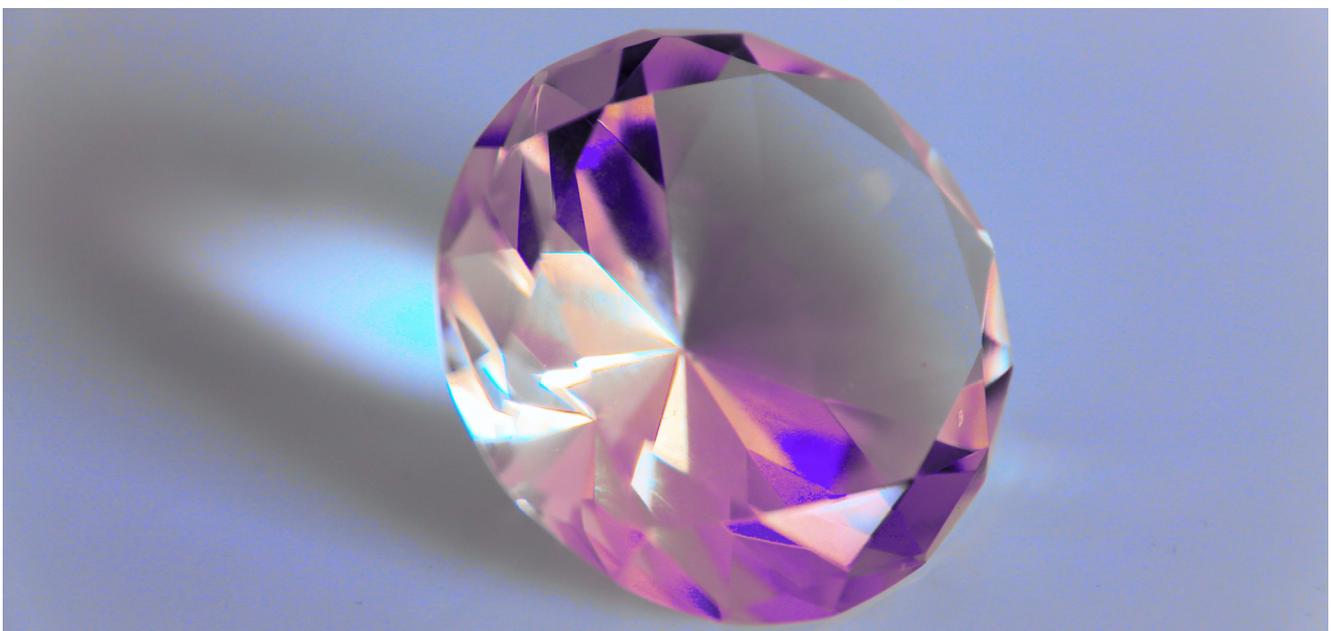
What ideas or concepts influence Facet Methodology?

Facet Methodology was developed by sociologist Jennifer Mason (2011, 2018) and colleagues at the Morgan Centre at the University of Manchester. Interested in the multi-dimensionality of lived experiences, Mason's methodology has been particularly taken up by researchers to provide nuanced, in-depth understanding of the complexity of everyday life and lived experiences and to work across different disciplines.

This approach recognizes that methods are not neutral. Instead, methods always entail assumptions and beliefs of what the world is and how we can get to know the world. Rather than seeing this as a flaw, Facet Methodology utilises this by allowing the researcher to bring together different perspectives and their methodological tools to develop nuanced arguments. While doing so, the feminist tools of positionality and reflexivity are very important: the former encapsulates an understanding of how differences in a researcher's personal views, values, and location influence their understanding of the world and their access to power. The latter involves questioning one's taken-for-granted views, values, and assumptions.

Facet Methodology has a strong trans- and even post-disciplinary inclination, which follows connections and arguments wherever they lead, rather than remaining within disciplinary boundaries and their respective ideas, analytical tools, and methods. It encourages researchers to read widely, beyond their subject area, and to move beyond taken-for-granted connections and explanations. The research process is iterative, meaning any new insight unveiled by a facet needs to be considered alongside other facets, and if necessary, their focus and approach need to be adjusted.

Importantly, Facet Methodology is underpinned by the concept of relationality which refers to a wide range of worldviews where no living being or thing exist in isolation. There are many different relational ways of thinking, but through Facet Methodology the researcher can combine multiple, even seemingly incompatible perspectives or worldviews, as long as they are relational at their core.



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Why might I want to use Facet Methodology?

Facet Methodology draws on your pre-existing knowledge, but also challenges any assumptions you may have by encouraging you to read more widely, and engage with wider audiences, and different methods.

In utilising your creativity and inventiveness, Facet Methodology enables you to 'play around' with different perspectives and methods to help uncover underlying connections and to facilitate better understanding of a problem. It allows you to approach a problem from many different, often contradictory perspectives. In doing so, you can challenge taken-for-granted beliefs and better understand the many elements of a problem and how they are connected. This facilitates a more nuanced understanding and aids the development of solutions for complex problems.

This approach allows you to adjust the scope and orientation of the research including the content of and methodological approach to individual facets, throughout the duration of the project. As such, it is a flexible and adaptable methodology. Since this approach does not ask for specific methods, nor rules out any data sets, you can combine a wide range of methods to find new connections and to better understand different dimensions of a problem.

Facet Methodology accommodates inter-, trans-, and even post-disciplinary research and as such, is well suited to collaborative projects. It also lends itself to collaborations with participants, who can bring in their own experiences, knowledges, and insights. Rather than seeing different perspectives or viewpoints as challenges, Facet Methodology values the insights that are generated when aspects of a phenomenon are looked at from different angles.

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Step by step guide to using Facet Methodology:

The following steps outline some basic elements or questions to ask yourself when using Facet Methodology. Since this is a creative research orientation that follows an iterative process that is developed in relation to a specific problem or puzzle, there is no clear blueprint for using this approach, as with many approaches using more than one method.

- 1. Outlining the gemstone:** Identify the overarching research problem or question you want to explore - metaphorically speaking, what will become your gemstone. At this point you might want to bring in: collaborators, stakeholders, project partners, and participants, to help define and explore the shape of the gemstone.
- 2. Designing the first facets:** Decide what the most important aspects of this problem are and then begin to carve out some facets, based on your existing theoretical and empirical knowledge, as well as your imagination. These facets will be related to your overarching research question and are there to guide you in your first engagement with the data you generate. You need to choose and, ideally, visually map out the method(s) you will use for each facet. Keep in mind that your gemstone can have as many or as few facets as necessary, and these can be of different scope and length. Mapping out your facets and methods in this way helps with planning and gauging whether your research project is feasible or needs scaling down.
- 3. Researching the facets:** Now that you have chosen your initial facets and their respective methods, you need to begin collecting and analysing your data. Whilst doing so, any decisions made, as well as ideas, reflections, or subsequent questions should be noted down. This will be important in for the next steps.
- 4. Pause, reflect, and revisit the facets:** Think about the insights you have gained by using different combinations of perspectives and methods. Based on this, you may need to adjust, or change your mini-investigations as necessary. Allow room for new theories, perspectives, and lines of enquiry that will perhaps require their own method(s) instead of rigorously sticking to your initial ideas and plan.
- 5. Read widely and engage with researchers across disciplines, fields, and sectors to address any gaps in knowledge.** Sometimes an insight from one facet might steer you in an unexpected direction and you might have to learn about a topic or concept you have not come across before. Keep in mind that the idea is to engage widely in the search for sparks of insight, not to present a comprehensive description of something.

Is there more to your research problem or the phenomenon you need to understand? If that is the case, repeat the steps 2 – 5 for as long and often as you need. Make sure to keep an open mind for unexpected directions that your research might take you. At the same time, you should keep in mind that you are working towards assembling a gemstone – don't let an individual facet take over your whole project. Don't lose sight of the gemstone for all its shiny facets!

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- 6. Make your choices transparent:** How did you choose and re-/design your facets and why? Keep a record of your choices made throughout the research process, including reflections on emerging questions, how and where new insights emerged, or when you might have an 'aha!' moment. This can also include any gaps in your knowledge you noticed. These moments can help you identify what the important insights are.
- 7. Connecting the facets:** Writing about the ways in which facets connect and intertwine can be the most challenging part of this approach. You will need to show the decisions you made about each facet, how they are all connected (cross-referencing between sections will be very useful here!), and clearly demonstrate the theoretical perspectives that underpinned them and subsequently produced 'flashes of insight'.
- 8. Creating change:** To what areas of your work and how are the insights and connections you uncovered relevant? For example, this could be that you need to develop training for staff or partners on how to take this multi-dimensionality into account in their activities or that you adjust your organisation's or programme's theory of change to better reflect these connected elements. Facet Methodology might have also helped you to identify elements or components that are connected and relevant to your work which you have not previously addressed because these connections were hidden.



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Example(s) of facet methodology in social science research:

Towards an intersectional analysis of human-nature relations,

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The aim of my doctoral research project was to develop a methodological framework that facilitates open-endedness and frictions in thinking when analysing and addressing environmental and social issues. Facet Methodology allowed me to use two seemingly oppositional research perspectives (called 'intersectionality' and 'assemblage') to better understand different forms of inequalities and their interactions, while considering what people commonly call 'the environment'.

In practice, I focused on a 1-minute video taken on a mobile phone during the Covid-19 pandemic circulated online. The video showed an altercation between white police officers and a Black father in front of his son at a petrol station in the UK. While this video does not seem an obvious example of how both inequalities between humans and between humans and 'the environment' intersect, Facet Methodology allowed me to bring these connections to the fore from two different perspectives. Overall, it helped me to explore the links between the Covid-19 pandemic, fossil fuels, different forms of social inequalities, and space/place through a mix of theoretical and empirical methods, for example, thick description, theoretical analysis, content analysis of newspapers and social media posts, and video analysis. After repeatedly watching the video, I had originally carved out close to thirty facets based on my pre-existing knowledge. I then created preliminary clusters of facets, meaning I organised the facets into broad themes.

One example of how this looked in practice was a cluster of facets called 'Race, Auto-/ Mobility, Violence'. In this cluster, one facet was called 'Cars' and through theoretical and secondary data analysis, this facet explored the role of car cultures in the English North-West, in particular their gendered, racialised, and classed dimensions. By contrast, another facet explored the role of matter. Drawing on thick description as a method, this facet analysed the role of materiality, haptic, and sound, such as the metal of the car and the fumes of petroleum. In total, this cluster linked together six facets which provided different perspectives on the role of mobility, social difference, and power relations in the video.

By combining seemingly incompatible perspectives and using different methods for different facets, Facet Methodology allowed me to draw out patterns and connections that would have otherwise remained hidden. Rather than approaching fossil fuels, racialized violence, and policing during the UK Covid-19 national lockdowns as separate, for instance, the individual mini-investigations brought to the fore the connections and entwinements of material and symbolic regimes. This methodology also allowed me to take seriously the particularity of the video (the specific place, time, socioeconomic historical background), while bridging it to the more general (such as England's imperial history in the Middle East, white masculinities, and car cultures). While doing so, Facet Methodology's process facilitated self-reflection when drawing on my background knowledge while encouraging me to learn about different disciplines, theoretical perspectives, and methods.

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Where else could Facet Methodology be used?

Facet Methodology is a useful research approach or orientation for anyone who wants to understand complexity, explore previously unseen connections, and/or work across different disciplines or sectors. As such, it is very well suited to researching 21st century challenges and problems requiring innovative and creative ways of exploration. Since it facilitates multiple perspectives and disciplines, it has potential for research engaging with the many dimensions of climate change and environmental degradation, since these span sectors, places, and scales. By facilitating bridges between diverse disciplines, themes, perspectives, and methods, Facet Methodology can provide insights into how the social, economic, political, material, climatic, and physical dimensions of climate change intersect in a particular place or sector. For example, it could be used to design accessible climate mitigation and adaptation instruments by bringing together social and climate justice perspectives (e.g. using participatory action research or [militant methods](#)) with quantitative spatial approaches (e.g. [critical spatial data science](#)). In doing so, it provides an approach to better understanding and addressing the underlying connections of such complex phenomena and issues.

Top tips

- Read widely and take notes whenever you have an 'aha!' moment. Sometimes insight might come from the most unexpected places.
- Don't look for perfect or complete answers, rather, be strategic in pursuing insights. Keep the overarching puzzle, question, or phenomenon in view. Keep asking yourself what a facet allows you to see regarding the overarching phenomenon you want to better understand.
- Be willing to challenge your views and assumptions. Allow yourself to engage with perspectives, data sets, and methods you have not encountered before or may have dismissed and instead ask yourself what they could bring to the research.
- Facets don't need to be the same size – some can be very small and short, some very long and detailed, but their size or length does not determine the depth of insight they

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Further reading

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