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PART

1

Planning your research project

1 So you're going to do a research project

The dominance of research findings in our lives

Look in the pages of your newspaper any day of the week and you will find stories or snippets that draw on the findings of research projects. Some will report the outcome of large-scale controlled experiments into the use of pharmaceutical products and their value for a variety of health conditions; others will present the results of surveys into public opinion; and yet others will be descriptive accounts of what people say or do of the 'Isn't that interesting?' genre.

1. A pint is more popular than the pulpit In a survey carried out by InnSpired, a company that owns more than 1000 pubs, it was found that nearly two-thirds of British adults believe that the pub has more to offer the community than the church. Just 15 per cent have faith that it is the other way round. In answer to the question, 'Why do you go to your local pub?', respondents said:

To get drunk	6%
To socialise and meet friends	62%
To get out of the house	2%
I don't go to pubs	23%
Other	3%

From *The Times*, 10 November 2004, p. 32.

2. For a longer life, look on the bright side Researchers in the Netherlands investigated death rates among people who described themselves as optimists and pessimists. Out of 1000 men and women aged 65 to 85 enrolled into the investigation, those who were highly optimistic lived longer.

From the *Eastern Daily Press*, 2 November 2004, p. 5.

3. Not so super markets A postal survey of 1094 readers carried out by the BBC *Good Food* magazine showed that just 18 per cent enjoyed shopping in supermarkets; 45 per cent said they hated it. The nine worst things about supermarket shopping were identified as:

1. Changes to food and aisle layout
2. Running out of basics
3. When they stop stocking favourite items
4. Long queues
5. Trolleys with dodgy wheels
6. Picking the 'wrong' queue
7. Grumpy till assistants
8. The person in front of the queue running off to get another item
9. Staff who don't know where things are.

From the *Eastern Daily Press*, 6 July 2005, p. 6.

4. Work eats into lunch breaks Workers are taking less than half an hour for lunch because of spiralling pressures and one in five has no meal break at all, new research has revealed. A growing number of office staff eat a sandwich at their desk, but then snack on biscuits and sweets throughout the afternoon. Cake, doughnuts and chocolate are the favourite snacks of many workers, with just seven per cent preferring healthy options such as fruit. The poll of 500 office staff by recruitment firm Jobs@Pertemps showed that time taken for lunch has fallen by a quarter over the past five years. One in 10 people who eat in the afternoon said they were still hungry, while half wanted a 'sweet fix' to give them more energy.

Reported on Yahoo!, 17 November 2004.

5. National variations in happiness There are some very dissatisfied people in Portugal. According to a survey from the pollsters Harris, a far higher proportion of the Portuguese are unhappy with their lives than anywhere else in Europe or the United States. Americans are the most content. While 58 per cent of those questioned in the US said that they were 'very satisfied' with their lives, only 3 per cent of Portuguese were so upbeat. Thirty-three per cent of Britons were 'very satisfied'.

From *The Times*, 23 July 2005, p. 57.

6. Adverts make young adults drink more In a survey of 4000 Americans aged between 15 and 26, Leslie Snyder and a team of researchers at the University of Connecticut found that each additional alcohol advert seen each month was associated with a 1 per cent increase in the average number of drinks consumed. This finding contradicts industry claims that alcohol advertising only encourages brand switching.

From *The Times*, 3 January 2006, p. 15.

7. Why do burglars do what they do? In a Home Office research survey, 70 burglars gave reasons for their first and most recent burglaries:

	<i>The first</i>	<i>The most recent</i>
Influence of friends	25	10
Funding drug use	18	34
Boredom	14	0
Problems with parents	7	0
Buying luxuries	5	2
Funding alcohol use	4	6
Buying essentials	4	3
Saw an easy target	2	0
Coerced by others (not friends)	1	0
Responsibility for children	0	3

From 'Decision making by House Burglars: Offenders' Perspectives', Home Office, October 2004, quoted in *The Times Public Agenda*, 9 November 2004, p. 3.

8. Turning a blind eye to cheating Seven out of ten Britons believe infidelity is forgivable, making them the most laidback Europeans when it comes to affairs. A survey commissioned by the *Wall Street Journal Europe* on attitudes to sex and romance covering 20 European nations found, in contrast, more than half of Swedes believed that having an affair was unforgivable. Overall, women were less accepting of affairs than men.

Eastern Daily Press, 1 July 2005, p. 6.

Many of the studies reported in the media are health-related, partly because of the sheer volume of research that is funded and carried out in clinical settings, but also because almost everybody takes a keen interest in their own fitness and well-being.

Published accounts of research are often about what we eat and drink, the way we work, how we spend our leisure time, the goods that we buy and the shape and contents of the homes we live in. Research is used by political parties and pressure groups to help further their cause. And if influential organisations find that their researchers have come up with conclusions that conflict with their established interests, the findings may be partially or wholly suppressed – or the resulting press release issued on Christmas Eve.

Becoming a researcher

This book is designed to guide first-time researchers faced with the job of preparing a report or dissertation based on an empirical investigation.

By 'doing research' in your project, you will become, however modestly, a member of the scientific or policy development community – aiming to measure, to understand, perhaps to evaluate. Whether you had realised it or not, this draws you into a circle of professional people with developed expertise and places an obligation upon you to do it to a high standard.

I shall draw on, describe and suggest how you can use research methodologies derived from social science and psychology. Social research (in some contexts, called psychosocial research) is a mature and broad subject area, with its origins and development stretching over more than a century. It embraces the whole of empirical sociology and anthropology, together with the 'social' end of economics, geography and psychology. It has both pure and applied dimensions: some have used research tools to try and explain or understand the nature of human behaviour in its social context; others have sought to deliver findings that will have an impact on political, commercial or administrative practice.

Different disciplines use different research emphases. For example, mainstream psychology relies heavily on often quite complex statistical procedures; in sociology, the student may have to take on board epistemological arguments to the effect, for instance, that 'there is no such thing as facts' – everything is contingent upon who is perceiving it; in management or business studies, sociology and psychology operate alongside economics, account-

ancy and organisation theory, with a particular focus on sales, efficiency and staff relations; and in political science and social administration, policy development and programme evaluation are often the target.

Your subject-specific teachers and your own course reading will have prepared the ground for you to fit your research and its objectives into a relevant framework. Research can be concerned with theory development, the exploration of psychological or social reality, obtaining the answer to a stated question, the provision of policy-related information, or the evaluation or audit of an aspect of current practice. No matter what its aim, the rules governing research design and methodology are much the same, and this book will provide you with a generally applicable guide to the things you need to take into account.

Social research methods are drawn on by academics, managers and practitioners, students and career researchers in many fields of enquiry and employment. Here are twelve examples of the sort of questions to which answers might be sought:

- **Architecture, planning and housing design:** What things do people look for when they are buying a house? What do they like and dislike twelve months after moving in?
- **Childcare:** What are the patterns of (a) violent behaviour and (b) collaborative behaviour in a play group for the under-5s?
- **Consumer attitudes:** What different factors influence men and women in their choice of a car?
- **Crime and the penal system:** To what extent have people in different residential areas been the victims of a crime? To what extent do they admit to having committed a crime?
- **Diversity training:** What is the difference between expressed prejudice, unexpressed prejudice and discriminatory behaviour in any named professional group?
- **The environment:** What factors encourage and discourage people from recycling practices? How do people's practices change over time?

- **Information management:** How do students organise their literature surveys when preparing an essay? If they are given guidance, does this improve their performance?
- **Healthcare:** What do nurses, doctors, therapists and social workers each think about the attitudes and professional practices of the other professions?
- **Political opinion:** How do people's political opinions vary according to their age, gender, employment and financial position?
- **School teaching:** Twelve months after qualifying, what do school teachers say about their first year in post?
- **Sports science:** What kinds of training regimes are preferred by sports players? What kinds of training regimes have the most positive impact on their performance?
- **The travel industry:** What do people most like or dislike about air travel? Or about a named hotel or package holiday?

As we shall see, some of these questions are easier to answer than others. Some are much more difficult than may appear to be the case at first sight. Taken together, they would be likely to involve the use of all the various methods that I shall describe.

The basic rules

Sadly, despite the growing number of students who learn about social research methods and carry out a project under supervision, the quality of the finished product is often a disappointment. Students know, at the end of the process, how much time and effort have gone into it and they find it hard to understand why the project's findings are not all that they had hoped for. This is sometimes caused by the student's own overambitious expectations, but it is also often a result of the researcher not recognising that every part of the research task involves tricks of the trade that have to be learnt and patiently acted upon.

I shall introduce you to some of these as we work through each chapter. Even more fundamentally, though, it is the primary argu-

ment of this book that there are some very basic rules that must be followed if students are to emerge with a high-quality and successful report:

- Above all, **keep it simple**. Too many students are encouraged to believe that the best work involves complex methodological theories. It does not.
- **Don't try and do too much**. Entry-level students often want to explore too many questions at once. Be realistic about the scale of what you can do in the time available and about the conclusions you can draw from the data you have gathered.
- Good research requires an acceptance of the fact that, at every stage, there are good and bad ways of proceeding. **The cardinal virtue is patience**. You can't and mustn't rush it or try to take shortcuts.
- **Planning is crucial**. You must plan each step carefully if you want your project to be carried out to the highest standard of which you are capable.

Qualitative and quantitative research methods

No matter what field of study you are working in, if you are carrying out research into people's opinions, feelings, experiences or behaviour, you will be following one of two distinct paths. One owes its identity to the scientific tradition; the second is reflective or experiential in nature. Both paths use some of the same research skills although not always in the same order. Both deliver useful and informative results when they are well done, but each serves a rather different purpose. They are usually referred to as *quantitative research* and *qualitative research*.

Two quotations pinpoint the differences of ethos that characterise the two methodological approaches.

In respect of quantitative research:

The purpose of research is to discover answers to questions through the application of scientific procedures. These procedures have been developed in order to increase the likelihood

that the information gathered will be relevant to the question asked and will be reliable and unbiased. To be sure, there is no guarantee that any given research undertaking actually will produce relevant, reliable and unbiased information. But scientific research procedures are more likely to do so than any other method. (Selltiz et al, 1965, p. 2)

In respect of qualitative research:

Qualitative research is a situated activity that locates the observer in the world. It consists of a set of interpretive, material practices that make the world visible. These practices transform the world. They turn the world into a series of representations, including field notes, interviews, conversations, photographs, recordings and memos to the self. At this level, qualitative research involves an interpretive, naturalistic approach to the world. This means that qualitative researchers study things in their natural settings, attempting to make sense of, or to interpret, phenomena in terms of the meanings people bring to them. (Denzin and Lincoln, 2003, p. 4)

The distinction between quantitative and qualitative methods has been the subject of extensive discussion in academic circles. Some scholars say that it isn't so much a question of the researcher deciding which route to go down, but what kind of knowledge he or she is seeking to make, uncover or construct. Other theorists have suggested that the distinction is misleading and should be avoided. In practice, however, the labels are common currency in most social research circles.

The two approaches differ from each other in their style, language and stated objectives. Both are supported by a large and complex literature employing contrasting systems of terminology and analytical sophistication. Both have inspired the development of dedicated computer software programs. In Parts 2 and 3 of this book I will describe them in some detail.

Deciding which of the two research methods to use in a student project is often partly determined by the ethos of a particular course and the preference of its teacher. Students, too, may have an inclination. Some are drawn to the qualitative research approach by practical considerations: they see it as smaller scale, more manage-

able in a limited time frame, and offering the temptation of 'doing research' without having to 'do sums' or learn about statistics. Ideologically, there is an undeniable tendency for qualitative methods to be perceived as more human and even, perhaps, more in tune with contemporary social thinking.

On the other hand, quantitative research employs the same scientific principles and techniques that have made the modern world what it is, and it offers the tempting idea that its findings have a certain 'definiteness' about them, which make it possible for conclusions to be drawn to a specifiable level of probability. There is a satisfying neatness about quantitatively derived results that allows the author to feel that a rounded task has been completed.

The debate between the respective advocates of the two methodologies mirrors longstanding discussions in philosophy about the nature of knowledge. Is there such a thing as objective truth? Is all knowledge relative to the person through whose eyes it is perceived?

The primary task for the student researcher is to decide which route to go down, and, having chosen it, to be clear what conclusions can and cannot be drawn from the findings obtained. The two routes are not mutually exclusive; mixed methods can be employed, and students are often tempted by the roundedness of such an approach. You should, however, take account of the fact that there are workload and timescale implications in such a choice.

If you asked me to recommend just one book on ...

general research methodology from a sociological perspective

it would be:

Robson, Colin (2002)

Real World Research, 2nd edn, Oxford, Blackwell

Are you ready to be a good project manager?

Managing a research project from start to finish is very different from writing an essay. Even though your first project will probably be modest in scale, it will still have a number of different strands to it, and, for a successful end-result, you will need to handle each

of them competently. It's what experienced researchers mean when they talk about their work being like that of a juggler – keeping several balls in the air at the same time.

It's not that any of the elements present insuperable difficulties. It's just that you need to be clear about each one of them in advance. They overlap in time terms – that's the juggling bit – but they are separately identifiable, and the researcher's skill consists of being able to manage each of them in an efficient and effective manner.

ten steps to get you off to a good start

1. You need a supervisor

Even professional researchers with years of experience find that their work benefits from access to another person who can challenge and encourage their thinking. For students or beginning researchers, the absence of a good supervisor, providing face-to-face, one-to-one feedback is a major handicap. In busy university departments, you may need to use your initiative to secure guidance specific to your needs. Even a 10-minute conversation in the corridor with an experienced researcher can make all the difference – provided you've identified beforehand the issues to focus on.

2. You should expect to talk things over with your peers

This can be done either in an organised class group or informally and it's an excellent way of improving your performance. Some groups of students, enthused by the research process, organise their own get-togethers with each other so that they can share their experiences and offer supportive criticism. Doing this takes you across the divide from 'being a student' into something close to the working world of the professional researcher.

3. Accept that criticisms may be useful

In discussion with your supervisor or with colleagues, you should be prepared to invite, not just appreciative remarks, but tough observations, critical reactions and awkward questions. You may not find it easy to hear negative comments (even when you've invited others to give you an opinion), but such responses may warn you either that your research question isn't

ten steps to get you off to a good start *continued*

as sharp and as focused as it might be or that the design lacks tightness and discipline. At the planning stage, you must learn to tolerate and value bracing remarks and resist being too defensive in response. Of course, you don't *have* to accept or act on what other people suggest, but you should always think carefully about it before you reject their thoughts out of hand.

4. Start out with a clear understanding of resource issues

- How much time are you realistically going to be able to devote to your project?
- Are there likely to be any costs involved, and can you meet them?
- Limitations of time, money and logistics mean that you will be restricted so far as geography is concerned: you must reconcile yourself to the fact that your study will be specific to a particular time and place – and your design and the conclusions you draw will need to take account of that.

5. Don't firm up your project plan too soon

In the very early stages of planning, don't commit yourself precipitately to the nature, shape or title of your project. Before you've even begun, you may well have some ideas of what you want to do. But it is wrong to have *too fixed* a commitment to a particular way forward. It's fine to have an idea (and much better than not having one), but you must leave some flexibility for thinking it through in practice during the planning, preparatory, exploratory and pilot stages.

6. But you do need to settle on a research topic

If you have absolutely no idea what you might do, then you should begin to think about topics that could motivate you. Many students tend to choose subjects either close to their hearts (typically, for example, with gender, age-related or ethnic identity implications) or they look to the course teacher for guidance. That, certainly, is what teachers are there for, and, if you are really stuck, you may need to press your claims for some personal attention. Alternatively, you could set up an informal brainstorming group session with colleagues.

ten steps to get you off to a good start *continued***7. You should pre-plan your working systems**

You can do this gradually while you are settling on your topic and methodology:

- Some researchers advocate the value of keeping a detailed research diary in which to note everything that occurs in chronological order; if you like that idea, you should start it right away.
- Others recommend the use of a flexible wall chart, which maps out the progress of your study so far and outlines the timing of future stages. You can use a blackboard, whiteboard, flip chart or computer file. Again, it is perfectly feasible to start this before you know where you will end up; indeed, it will help your thinking process from the very beginning.
- If your project is going to involve the use of hardware of various kinds – audio recorders with free-standing microphones, video equipment or significant quantities of stationery – you need to be sure that these will be available when you need them.

8. Make sure you stick to the requirements of your course

Different courses employ different styles of research methods teaching. This book tries to cover the full range, but it is important that you aim to plan your research project in such a way that it conforms to the methodological approaches that you have been taught. They may be highly specific, requiring you, for example, to gather data that will require statistical analysis or to deliver detailed transcripts from three focus groups that present problems of linguistic content analysis for you to solve. It would be a brave or foolhardy student who ignored such specific requirements.

9. Stay in touch with your favourite textbooks

Even with the help of this book, there will be times during your project when you will need to refer to other relevant textbooks – either in your discipline or in research methodology. Make sure that you have them easily to hand. They will give

ten steps to get you off to a good start *continued*

you ideas about topic, method and procedure, and they will work creatively with you as you move through the various stages of your project.

10. Plan your timetable

You should draw up a project timetable as soon as possible; you can always adapt it and update it as go along. It should allow for all the various stages that are outlined in this book. It isn't just your own time that you need to take into account. You will find that the process of gaining access and obtaining permission for your work can take far longer than you might initially have anticipated, and those elements should be built in to your timetable.

Are you on message?

Doing research is different from any other kind of student exercise. In order to assume the mantle of a successful researcher, there are certain operational principles that you must embrace.

One of the hardest lessons for you to learn will be that, whatever method you use, you are not going to make a groundbreaking contribution to the subject. Not because you are not clever, but because that isn't how research – whether scientific or reflective – works.

Of course, the work that you do will have originality – partly because of the way you have designed it, and partly because, by definition, the doing of research means that you will be gathering original data. The way that you analyse it and write it up will also be unique.

The aim of the exercise is to enable you to demonstrate that:

1. You've learnt how to plan a research project
2. You've organised it from beginning to end
3. You've successfully gathered data
4. You've analysed that data
5. You've produced a good quality report based on your data.

That is what 'doing research' requires and if you do it all in style, your teacher will give you a good mark.

Often students are disappointed at what they think is the 'obviousness' of their findings. They have lived with their work for three, six or twelve months, and they feel that their conclusions don't measure up proportionately to the effort they have put into it. But if you absorb the lessons taught in this book, you will become mentally tuned in to the idea that a successful research project is equivalent to a single brick in the wall of knowledge and understanding. As long as the brick is the right shape, contains all the right ingredients, has been properly baked and expertly laid, you should feel, not disappointment, but pride in a job well done.

Like most people, I was an overambitious researcher when I began, and, because of that, my early work was not as good as it should have been. I was reminded of this when, recently, a student doing a university Business Management course complained that 'Nobody told me how much trouble I would have with a five-stage research project, incorporating three methods (focus groups, interviews and mail questionnaires) and with a three-month deadline'. The end result was submission of the report 18 months late, a very poor quality piece of work and a deep sense of disappointment for the student.

How could she have avoided that? There are two linked imperatives that I think would have helped my student friend in the planning stage and while doing the main body of work:

- **Aim for specificity of focus:** Research is not about the totality of life. It requires you to detach one element from reality, gather evidence about it (whether scientifically or reflectively) and describe what you have found. When you first identify a topic, you will find that your mind goes off in all directions. That's entirely natural and is initially helpful, but, once you are embarked on your project, you need to aim for a clear-cut sense of direction. In a single, time-limited project, you can't cover all aspects of everything. Keep the focus tight. Don't let it drift. Get a clear idea of where the evidence is leading you.
- **Ask a good question:** One of the best ways of achieving specificity of focus is to ask a good question. In scientific research,

you should organise things so that you get to the starting block with 'a good question' clearly in your mind; in a reflective or exploratory study, the 'good question' that you start with may evolve and take on a different shape in the course of your project.

The nature of research

A true understanding of the nature of research can only come from *doing* it. Research is like playing a musical instrument or being a plumber or making a speech: you can't really get good at it just by reading books.

Definitions of research are legion, but three can be employed to embrace most projects that will involve student researchers:

- Research is a process of gathering data in a strictly organised manner. It is roughly equivalent to a newspaper editor saying to a journalist, 'Go away and research it'. The end-product of the data-gathering process may vary along a continuum from simple description to reflection and interpretation. The emphasis is on structured investigation, exploration or discovery. In some contexts, theoretical constructs mean that the process is far from simple.
- Research is a process of testing a stated idea or assertion (the hypothesis) to see if the evidence supports it or not. This may involve putting in place experimental practices and comparing them with other controlled or current practices, but it can also employ simple data-gathering procedures.
- Research is a process of engaging in planned or unplanned interactions with or interventions in parts of the real world, and reporting on what happens and what they seem to mean. Field trials are one example of this approach; 'action research' is another.

One of these definitions should match what you expect to be doing. If you can link your chosen approach with a commitment to specificity of focus and the identification of a good question, then you will be well on your way to success. Because research is incre-

mental, it only works – or only works successfully – if the researcher thinks clearly about the task being embarked upon, engages in relevant prior reading and makes a commitment to careful planning.

exercise

The approach outlined in this book will encourage you at the outset to think about and acknowledge the complexity of even the simplest of questions, such as:

- Why do people like to drive cars?
- Why do vegetarians become vegetarians?
- Why do people spray walls with graffiti?
- When (and why) do people decide to move home/have a baby/change jobs/emigrate?
- How often do people have sex?

Questions like these are all inherently interesting, but they are fraught with methodological problems. If, right now, you pause and think about those problems and how, or whether, you could overcome them, you will learn valuable lessons relevant to your own research planning task.

Often, in organisational settings, a senior manager will ask a professional researcher to come up with the answer to questions like:

- Why is this product not selling?
- Do people look at (or read) this advertising leaflet?
- Are the workers in this office happy?
- Are they efficient?
- Why are people filling in this form badly?

The researcher's task is to recast such questions into a format that leads to useful answers.

Your aim, as an aspirant researcher venturing forth in pursuit of a successful project report, must be to settle upon a question that is realistically answerable and will enable you to make a modest contribution to your discipline's knowledge base. You will have learnt a valuable lesson about the incremental nature of research activity, and, no less important, you will have passed an important part of your course with flying colours.

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