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Introduction

WHY SHOULD YOU READ A BOOK ON RESEARCH QUESTIONS?

If you are a student studying one of the social sciences – subjects such as sociology, criminology, politics, economics, education and health sciences – it is likely that at some point in your studies you will be required to conduct a research project. The scale and focus of this research will vary depending on your level of study, the subject you are studying and the requirements of the course you are taking, but the essence of the activity will remain the same: trying to find answers to particular questions.

The questions that you pose will be central to your research project. They will dictate the kind of data you need and, in turn, the methods of data collection and analysis that are most appropriate. Different types of questions will require different kinds of answers, and some types of questions are much more challenging to answer than others.

You should not underestimate how difficult or time consuming it can be to develop research questions. Students often find this to be one of the most challenging stages of the research process. Generating ideas for research requires considerable imagination and turning those ideas into clearly formulated questions involves disciplined and logical thought. But time spent thinking about your research questions will pay dividends at later stages of the research.

Before you start designing your research or collecting and analysing any data, it is absolutely vital that you are clear about what you are trying to find out. Many methods textbooks emphasize this point but, unfortunately, few provide much concrete advice in this area. And while there are many specialist texts devoted to exploring other

aspects of the research process in considerable detail, there are very few books devoted to the subject of research questions. This book aims to fill that gap and provide useful and practical advice for students and those new to social research.

WHO IS THIS BOOK FOR?

This book is primarily aimed at students and researchers who are conducting small-scale research projects. It caters to a wide audience, from undergraduates, through postgraduates and practitioners, to professional researchers and teachers. It is intended to be sufficiently accessible to be comfortable reading for undergraduate students whilst addressing issues that postgraduates and new career researchers may still find challenging.

Although it focuses primarily on social science research, it provides advice that those in other fields of inquiry such as the humanities, psychology, management and business may also find useful. In fact, anyone conducting an empirical research project will almost certainly find something of use or interest in the following pages. This text can also be used as a resource by those involved in supervising or managing novice researchers.

Because it relates research questions to other aspects of the research process, this book may also be useful to undergraduate and postgraduate students taking research methods courses. However, whilst the early stages of the research process are explored at various points in this book, it is important to point out that research design and the collection and analysis of data are *not* covered in any detail. There are already a large number of texts covering these areas and this book is not intended to replace them. Rather it is intended to *complement* them by providing advice and guidance on a topic that is rarely covered in detail in such texts.

HOW SHOULD I USE THIS BOOK?

How this book is used most profitably will depend on the individual needs of the reader. The chapters are intended to be read in order but readers are invited to skip sections they feel are irrelevant to their

specific needs. As some readers may wish to ‘dip-in’ to particular chapters or sections, each part is written with this in mind and cross-references are included to other relevant discussions.

THE STRUCTURE OF THE BOOK

The first chapter of the book examines the role of research questions in the process of social research. The importance of being genuinely curious about the social world and being prepared to be surprised by what you find out are discussed alongside the consequences of failing to adopt such attitudes. It explores the relationship between new questions and existing knowledge and examines the role of various types of literature in generating and developing research questions. The ways in which ideas for research can be influenced by theory, previous research and policy documents are discussed, and advice on how best to use the various forms of literature is provided. The chapter ends by questioning the extent to which research questions *can* or *should* be ‘original’ and the degree to which they should be influenced by the work of others.

Chapter 2 highlights particular problems that can arise with the form or content of research questions. It identifies mistakes that are commonly made when formulating research questions and provides advice on how these can be avoided. The advantages gained by moving beyond topics and problems to research questions are explained and the special place of hypotheses in scientific investigation is also discussed. The various ways that different writers have categorized research questions is reviewed and the implications of posing different kinds of question are explored, alongside recommendations about how these typologies can be used to help generate and develop research questions.

The issue of what makes a question ‘researchable’ is the focus of Chapter 3. The chapter starts by differentiating questions that are answerable ‘in principle’ from those that are answerable ‘in practice’. It highlights the impact of time and other resources on the kinds of questions that can be addressed in a particular context and emphasizes the importance of being realistic about what can be achieved in a single research project. The ways in which language

can be used to ‘bound’ the limits of your research questions are explored in some detail, as are the ways in which questions can be ordered and structured most effectively. The importance of keeping research questions as brief and precise as possible is also discussed alongside advice on how this can be achieved.

Chapter 4 examines the relationship between research questions, research design and methods of data collection and analysis. The importance of starting with research questions is stressed, and the dangers of ‘methods-led’ research are outlined. Particular attention is paid to the process operationalizing the concepts that are central to your research project and developing and using suitable indicators.

The final chapter looks at *answering* research questions. It examines the structure of arguments used to link evidence to conclusions and introduces the idea of ‘warranting’ claims. The role that a warrant plays in linking evidence and conclusions is explained, as is the way in which a warrant demonstrates the principles of reasoning underlying an argument. The book ends by discussing the importance of considering alternative explanations for your research findings.

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