

Vignettes

Below are a few hypothetical scenarios about students who are doing research projects. They serve to illustrate some of the common problems you may come up against when conducting your own research. As a brainstorming exercise, read through these stories and discuss them with your classmates in small groups. Try to work out what issues the student has encountered and why, as well as how they might overcome the issue and find success with their research project. If you are experiencing difficulties with your own research that are similar to any of these, you might find it helpful to take a copy of the relevant vignette to discuss with your supervisor.

1. Lack of focus

Priyanka wants to do her undergraduate sociology project on race and ethnicity in relation to the local police force. She has a passionate interest in this topic and cannot wait to get started. However, when she goes to see her supervisor, he suggests that she should narrow her focus and determine exactly what it is that she wants to find out. He wants her to come back when she has thought more about her research question, aims, and possible design. Priyanka leaves feeling deflated. How can she improve her plans for the research?

2. Too much to read

Andrew is just beginning a literature review for his project on professional gardeners in stately homes. He thought that this was a fairly esoteric subject and that he would be able to skim through the limited literature on the topic in a couple of days. However, when Andrew gets to the library and types a few keywords—“gardening,” “social class,” and “home”—into an Internet search engine, it comes up with 200,000 hits. Andrew is not sure what to do or where to start with the literature review, so he abandons the computer and begins walking around the library shelves, pulling books off at random and flipping through them. Everything he picks up seems to be related in some way to his topic, and he begins to panic that he will have to read all of these books. What can Andrew do to search the literature more efficiently?

3. Supervisor problems

Cassidy is worried that her supervisor does not understand her interests or her research project. She wants to do a case study analysis of a nineteenth century farmhand based on some old documents and letters that she found in her grandmother's attic. Her supervisor thinks that this is not "adequate" research because it does not follow the scientific method or involve rigorous statistical analysis. He has little patience with Cassidy when they meet and keeps cancelling appointments with her, stating that he has more important things to do. Meanwhile, Cassidy knows that time is passing and her deadline is only six months away. What can she do to resolve this conflict with her supervisor?

4. Methodological dilemma

Dominic has been working hard on his study of gay men's experiences of stigma and discrimination in higher education. He realized that this could be a sensitive issue for people to discuss face-to-face, so he designed a self-administered questionnaire that he handed out at relevant organizations, including local businesses, the Students' Union, and the local community health centre. However, Dominic has only received 20 responses to the 300 questionnaires he handed out. He knows that this sample size is not sufficient for the quantitative analysis he has planned, and that it will not be possible to generalize his findings. He remembers that he asked his respondents to provide some identifying information about themselves (age, discipline, degree type, etc.) and thinks this might have made potential respondents wary of sending the questionnaire back. With seven months left to go on the project, should Dominic redesign his survey and try again, or abandon it in favour of a different method, such as in-depth interviewing?

5. Negotiating access/ethics and responsibility

Chen wants to do her project on the working conditions of employees at a factory that manufactures chocolate and confectionery. She is under the impression that these employees are being exploited by low pay, long hours, and a failure to implement health and safety regulations. She wrote to the managing director of the company to ask whether she could interview some of the employees about these issues, but did not receive an answer. Chen phoned the company's secretary to ask to speak with the managing director, but was told that they were in a meeting all day. A similar response greeted her when she tried to contact others at the company, all of whom seemed very reluctant to

talk to her. Her aunt, who works at the factory, suggests that she could help Chen get a job there in order to observe “undercover.” Chen knows this can be a dangerous and ethically questionable method to use, but thinks it may be the only way of getting her data. What should she do?

6. Ethics in cyberspace

Caleb spends a lot of time talking to people in Internet chat rooms and forums about magic, religion, and the supernatural. He began his research into contemporary forms of Wicca because of a personal interest in this belief system, and has set up his own website about it with a discussion board and collective online journal. Plenty of young people have found the site and regularly post there, sharing their life stories and comparing their religious experiences. The trouble is, Caleb now feels way out of his comfort zone. The average age of the online participants seems to be 15 years, and he is worried that this might mean that the informed consent they gave is not ethically—or legally—acceptable. Furthermore, these young people are disclosing a lot of very personal, sensitive information: they keep telling him how pleased they are to have found a “safe” place online where they can share their experiences, but Caleb worries that they may come to regret what they have said in the future. He certainly didn’t expect the discussions to get this intense and, with his project deadline looming, he knows he will have to close down the website soon. What can Caleb do to protect his participants and to make “leaving the field” less of a blow to them?

7. Writer’s block

Amelie is starting to panic. Her thesis is due in six weeks and she has not even begun to write it. The research itself went very well. Amelie conducted 18 in-depth interviews with care assistants in a residential home for children with intellectual difficulties, which resulted in a lot of interesting data. She analyzed the data using NVivo, creating a coding tree to map out the relations between the key themes: alternative models of the family, beliefs about “normal” childhood experiences, and emotion work. Amelie spent six months living and working full time in the home as an overt participant observer, and so found herself too busy to prepare drafts of her written work or keep a research diary. She cannot remember how exactly she negotiated access to the research setting or devised her sample of interviewees, and in retrospect the whole research process seems a bit “messy.” She wonders how she will ever be able to write a coherent Methods chapter. She read widely before going into the field, but has not had time to organize her notes for the Literature Review. Now her super-

visor is asking to see a draft of her thesis chapters or a summary report, and she does not know where to start. Every time she sits down to write, she just stares at her blank computer screen and feels sick. She tries to write one section, then another, but gets confused about how all the sections fit together and where her description of the data should go. What can Amelie do to break through this wall of panic and get on with her writing?