

# Conducting a Research Project

## Chapter Summary

### Introduction

So far we have considered what social research is and how to conduct it using different methods. We have also discussed what the finished research project should look like as a research paper or an article for publication. Now it is the time to address practical issues in project implementation, from formulating the research question to writing a final report.

This chapter considers practical issues in conducting a research project, such as planning the research, communicating with your supervisor, formulating the research question, writing a literature review, preparing the research, implementing it, and practical advice on writing. These stages should be well planned and focused in order for the project to be completed successfully. Most of our comments refer to the small course projects such as honours theses or a course assignment, but the logic of research also applies to larger projects, such as Master's papers or PhD theses.

### Know What Is Expected by Your Institution

The scale of your research, its duration, and the final output will depend on its goal: is it research for a course project, for a Masters' paper, or a Ph.D. thesis? All of these papers will have different requirements, different scope, and different outputs, and they have to be discussed with your course instructor or your supervisor. These people can give you the best advice as to what is required, how to proceed, and how to be efficient.

The course instructor, for example, will probably have specific guidelines if you are working on a course project, while the Masters' or the Ph.D. thesis supervisor will tell you about all the requirements associated with the program and the final research paper (e.g., length of project, ethical protocols, format, deadlines, etc.).

### Using a Supervisor

It is important to recognize the value of your supervisor as a conduit to your institution and academia as a whole. The supervisor will instruct you not only on how to complete your research project, but also how to navigate your institution and academia, and how to achieve your broader professional goals. For this reason, it is useful to consult with your thesis supervisor or course instructor *earlier* rather than *later*. He or she can offer advice during your work on the project, suggest a way out if you get stuck, or provide a feedback on any written piece. Remember that feedback is help that improves your work, not a personal attack. Discuss your project even if you are not aware of any problems.

## Managing Time and Resources

The next step in a research project is to work out a specific timetable. Your supervisor/instructor will be the best guide for this. Find out what resources are available for your research (e.g., library, computer facilities, software, photocopying, etc.). Know ahead of time what you have to work with and what you will have to purchase so you can plan and budget accordingly.

The timetable you settle on will be different for every type of project. In a PhD project, you might take an entire semester to formulate your research question, while in a course project, the whole research and write up will take only a couple of months. It is important to account for time and resource limitation when you work out your schedule. In general, any research project will include *a review of the literature, elaborating a research question, collecting evidence* (most often in a survey, ethnography, or qualitative interviews), and *writing up* the results. The timetable you develop should account for all these stages.

## Searching the Existing Literature

Very soon after deciding on an area to study, you will begin to read the literature on the topic and start writing a literature review. You can consult a number of online databases for finding academic literature:

- Sociological Abstracts
- Social Sciences Citation Index (NOTE: this database lists later articles that cite an original publication, so you can see how popular is the original article)
- Canadian Periodicals Index Quarterly
- Race Relations Abstracts
- LGBT Life with Full Text
- Women's Studies Abstracts
- Family & Society Studies Worldwide
- Google Scholar (this database includes many non-peer-reviewed sources; it also lists later articles that cite the original publication)
- University library catalogue

You normally search for the peer-reviewed articles in these databases, since peer-reviewed sources go through academic evaluation process before being published and represent a good standard of research.

When searching for literature, it is helpful to save all potential sources so that you can access them later. Be sure to use plenty of variation in your search words: use the narrower and broader keywords that describe the problem you study, mix the keywords, replace with synonyms, and so on. Don't get discouraged when you don't find many hits on your keywords; this usually means that you cast your search terms too narrowly. Rethink your search terms and start again. As you conduct a good number of searches on multiple combinations, you will reach a point when the same items keep appearing in the search, known as a *saturation point*. Stop searching when this happens. Be sure to record full citations, mark electronic records and email them to yourself or save them in your online library. As you collect sources, be sure to identify major references first, read them, and then work outwards to the less important ones. It is useful to make notes on the articles and their main arguments.

Reviewing the literature is a time-consuming process, so spend your time wisely and seek guidance from librarians and your supervisor. They have already walked the road on which you are now travelling, and can help you search for sources and construct the arguments in the literature review. The supervisor might also advise you on important sources you might have omitted and estimate whether the literature you reviewed is sufficient for the purposes of your project.

## Preparing for Research

In preparing for research, you need to consider a number of important issues:

- Consider the possible *ethical implications* that may arise during the research as well as from your findings. You must protect the identities of your research participants and decide what you will do to prevent possible ethical violations.
- Develop *data collection techniques* (methods) that are appropriate for answering the research questions that you formulated.
- Conduct a *pilot study*, if it is possible to do. A pilot study is a test of your survey questionnaire or a qualitative interview schedule on a small number of respondents. A pilot can help identify weaknesses in your methodology and interview questions and allow you to correct them before going headlong into a flawed process.
- Think about *gaining access*. Gaining access to particular research sites, especially closed organizations, may require negotiations with stakeholders (gatekeepers). This can take a considerable time. Do it early.
- Consider *sampling issues*. Who do you need to study to answer your research questions? Is any sampling frame available for your study? Which sampling technique will you choose (probability, quota, theoretical, convenience)? What you are seeking to do is very much linked to what you have access to.

## Writing up Research

Some general advice applies to your writing process. Start writing as early as possible. This provides time to grasp issues and integrate your research with current literature. The final report needs to be an illustrative and persuasive piece of social science literature discussing the life of communities and social interactions; it is not a mechanical report. Get feedback on your writing as you progress from your supervisor, instructors, anyone else who can potentially provide useful comments. Make special effort to avoid sexist, racist, and other prejudicial language.

A research report of 10,000–15,000 words would typically have the following structure:

- *Title page*
  - Your name, instructor's name, course name, date, title. Your institution might have special instructions about the theses or the MA papers, find out what these are.
- *Acknowledgements*
  - Mention those who helped you: gatekeepers, advisors, readers of your project, others.
- *Table of contents*
  - If applicable; there might be special requirements from your institution about the content pages of theses or longer research papers.
- *Abstract*
  - A brief, maximum one-page summary of your work. Include it if required. Journal articles and theses generally require an abstract in a specific format.
- *Introduction*
  - Spells out what you are writing about and why it is important.
  - Describe in general terms the theoretical perspective you took and outline your research questions.
  - Give readers a quick and clear introduction of what will be presented.
- *Literature review*
  - Critical review of relevant literature only. Show why your questions are important.
  - Justify why you think there is not enough research on your topic, or demonstrate competing positions in the literature on the issue.
  - Locate your study within a tradition of related research.

- Remember that the literature review is a place to develop your argument, so do not clutter it with irrelevant details.
- You would revisit and adjust your literature review after the data collection and when writing the conclusion. An early literature review is almost always provisional.
- *Research methods*
  - Provide an overview of how the data were collected, discuss procedures for analysis, and justify the chosen methods.
  - Discuss your overall research design and sampling method, and how the access was achieved (if relevant).
  - Provide your questionnaire, an observation schedule or other documents; they may be placed in an appendix.
  - If appropriate, discuss your procedure for note-taking and data analysis.
  - In writing about your methods, justify the choices you made.
- *Results*
  - Present your main findings.
  - If you have a separate discussion section, present the results here with little commentary and without discussing how they relate to the literature.
  - Discuss your findings not simply by describing (e.g., a graph or a table), but direct the reader to results that are particularly striking or relevant with regard to your research questions.
  - Present only the results that relate directly to your research questions.
- *Discussion*
  - Discuss the implications of your findings for your research questions.
  - Link your findings to literature and deal with any inconsistencies or unexpected results. Speculate as to why they have appeared.
- *Conclusion*
  - Briefly recap your main arguments.
  - Hammer on significance of your research.
  - Discuss the limitations to the research that you encountered.
  - Suggest avenues for future research.
  - Avoid extensive speculations or introducing new ideas.
- *Appendices*
  - Place the materials that are too detailed to be included in the main paper into the appendix.
- *References*
  - List all cited sources.
  - Follow the format suggested by your instructor or the institution.

### **After the Project**

Fulfill all the obligations you have made, e.g., provide copies of the final paper to those to whom you have promised. Maintain confidentiality and anonymity for all participants. Be sure to secure and destroy all primary data after the project is completed.

## Learning Objectives

In this chapter, you should learn to do the following:

- Understand the steps in conducting an actual empirical research project, the complexity of the process, and the time and resources needed to complete the research
- Know how to formulate research questions
- Plan a small research project of their own and write a timetable of research stages
- Write a literature review on research questions of their interest
- Appreciate the challenges of writing a research report

## Media Resources

### Writing the Literature Review (Part One): Step-by-Step Tutorial for Graduate Students

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2IUZWZX4OGI>

- How is the literature review different from an essay, thesis, or paper?
- How broad is a literature review?
- What is included in a review of a source?
- What is reason for doing a literature review?

### Choosing and Narrowing Research Topics for APA & MLA Essays

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jSHXb83Xtsk>

- What is the significance of setting a narrow research topic?
- What are the three tests for ensuring a valid workable topic?
- What is the significance of personal interest in the research topic?
- What are the filters to apply to the chosen research topic?
- What is the significance of the title?

Nilan, P. (2002). "Dangerous fieldwork" re-examined: The question of researcher subject position. *Qualitative Research*, 2(3): 363–386.

<http://www.utsoc.utoronto.ca/~kmacd/IDSC10/Readings/Positionality/reflexivity.pdf>

Williams, T., Dunlap, E., Johnson, B.D., and Hamid, A. (1992). Personal safety in dangerous places. *Journal of Contemporary Ethnography*, 21(3): 343–374.

<http://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC2757080>

- Why is fieldwork considered dangerous work?
- Where does assault stand on the risk-of-harm scale relative to family problems?
- How might identifying potential dangers impact the specific research project being considered?
- What are the issues of writing ethnography from dangerous settings?