

Student experience podcast transcript: William Mason

Could you tell us about your research project? We are particularly interested to hear about the research design and the research methods that you chose.

For my undergraduate dissertation, I focused on lifestyle risk behaviours amongst university students. I was particularly interested in learning about patterns of smoking, alcoholic drinking and dietary choices. I used a survey method and distributed questionnaires to about 100 students during seminar sessions and received a 77% response rate. The questionnaires included both closed and open-ended questions and this approach helped me to identify general patterns across the sample and at the same time pay attention to more qualitative motivational factors in the responses to the open ended questions.

What sparked your interest in the subject you chose to research?

During my second year at university I took a module called 'sociology of health' that I found really engaging. As we began to look at health and lifestyle through a sociological perspective, this prompted me to question some of the behaviours I had previously taken for granted. I then became interested in the culture of smoking, drinking and fast food amongst university students in the face of what appeared to be an increasing level of health promotion problematizing these behaviours.

Did you need to secure access to an organization in order to do your research, and if so, how did you go about it?

I distributed my survey to first-year university students within the sociology department, so issues of access weren't really a problem. I made sure, however, to establish permission from the seminar leaders before arriving at their groups and handing out my questionnaires.

Could you tell us how you came up with those questions?

I settled on these questions with the help of my supervisor. Initially, I remember it became quite difficult to translate what I was interested in, into 'doable' research questions. This process took a bit of time and a few supervision sessions which enabled me to air my ideas, gain an informed opinion (mostly from my supervisor) and come up with some questions that I could realistically work on answering.

How did you go about the literature review? Can you run us through the steps that you took?

I used the focus that had emerged through the process of developing my research questions to guide my literary search. I began by reading some of the key texts on health and risk (as recommended to me by my supervisor), and the reading lists from relevant modules. Within these books I found a number of references to other relevant works which then lead me to some relevant journal articles although they were a little outdated. In order to gain an understanding of what has and hasn't already been written within the field it seemed necessary to search for some more contemporary articles. I used the search tools on relevant journals and subject databases (Web of Science and Google Scholar) to list recent publications and read those that were relevant, again making note of the citations that seemed important within them. When I felt like I had exhausted the literature to the best of my abilities within

the time constraints I then started writing. You could go on reading forever, but at some stage you have to stop reading and start writing!

What prompted you to choose this research design and method?

I chose to use a survey method because it enabled me to access a relatively large sample size within the given timeframe. Designing the survey with a mix of closed and open-ended questions also enabled me to interpret both gendered patterns, and some of the more in-depth motivational factors influencing students' risk behaviours.

What factors influenced your choice of research methods?

My choice of methods was primarily influenced by practical factors. The time and economic constraints imposed by undergraduate deadlines meant that an ethnographic or longitudinal approach would not really have been feasible. I was also interested in maximizing my sample size in order to highlight gendered patterns within the data. Questionnaires were an inexpensive and feasible way of doing this.

How did you choose your sample and what principles guided your sampling?

I chose to distribute my survey to an opportunistic sample of first year undergraduate sociology students. Surveys were handed out during seminars and collected on the seminars' completion. This sample turned out to be slightly problematic. Firstly, due to an uneven gendered split within the sociology students studying at Sheffield University, females were overrepresented within the sample. This made gendered behavioural patterns difficult to interpret. It is also possible that cultures of risk behaviour amongst students studying in different departments might vary (med students might party more frequently than politics students). As a result of this factor, the study lacked some external validity.

It isn't easy to gain a representative sample within the given time frame. Remember, any of the issues that might arise out of this can be written up in your methods chapter or discussion.

Did you encounter any difficulties constructing your research instrument(s)? Please indicate what they were and how you dealt with them.

Building my questionnaire ended up being more difficult and time consuming than I had expected. In order to make sure the questions were in no way leading I had to draft and re-draft a number of times. It was also particularly helpful at this stage to pilot drafts with my friends and housemates. This enabled me to point out any unclear questions or response instructions (picking up where respondents looked confused) and re-write the appropriate sections increasing the overall clarity of the questionnaire.

What were your research questions?

A few examples were:

- What is the extent of university students' fruit, vegetable, alcohol and cigarette consumption?

- What are the motivations underlying that behaviour?
- To what extent are these behaviours influenced by current health promotion disseminated via the media (televised campaigns, newspaper articles, magazine articles?)
- Are there gendered patterns in university students' fruit, vegetable and cigarette consumption?
- Are there gendered differences in the impact of health promotion amongst university students?

Did you encounter any difficulties at this stage, and if so, how did you overcome them?

During my literature search, I found it difficult to keep track of what I had read and where I had found it, so I used numbered reference cards to organize my work. On these cards, I included the full reference as well as a summary of the article, alongside any stand-out quotes, which were very handy for documenting the literature search and writing up later on.

Do you have any comments about your relationship with your research project supervisor? What role did they have in the process of doing a research project?

My relationship with my supervisor was hugely important during the dissertation process. Luckily he was always happy to read my draft chapters and meet regularly to convey his feedback. Without this interaction I would have really struggled. Thanks Dr Foster.

What are the main lessons that you have learned from this process? Are there any aspects of the research that you would like to have done differently?

I think I chose my method out of convenience. On analysis, what I was really interested in were the qualitative responses provided in the open-ended questions. If I had the chance to conduct the research again I would adopt a more qualitative approach, using observatory techniques and informal interviews.

If you had one bit of advice to give to students who are about to begin working on their research projects, what would it be?

Choose something you enjoy and make it yours! This is your chance to be self-indulgent with your studies. Your dissertation is probably the longest piece of academic work you will have ever done and it's going to be a real slog if you choose the wrong topic. If you can choose a topic that suits you, you'll enjoy the process and this will almost definitely be reflected in your marks.

How did you go about analyzing the data?

When it came to analyzing the data, I initially used quantitative methods to draw some descriptive statistics from the survey data. This involved coding answers to the closed questions and entering the data into a spreadsheet. This was a useful means of visualizing general patterns and trends within the data. Following this process, responses to the open ended questions were coded thematically (I used a variety of coloured pens for this, but would probably been better off with NVivo). Reading through responses, recognizing the common themes and coding appropriately helped me to organize my data alongside analyzing it. At this stage, it was reliving to see the data split up into manageable themes. Qualitative analysis was approached based as closely as possible to the principles of analytic induction.

This involved taking account of, and theoretically accounting for all the information available, even that which wasn't necessarily in keeping or supportive of the initial hypotheses.

What problems did you encounter at this stage and how did you succeed in overcoming them?

Keeping track of the questionnaire data without using any specialist software was a challenge. It may have been a better idea to make use of the analysis software available through the university.

How did you go about writing up your research project?

Writing up my dissertation was a particularly daunting prospect having never previously tackled anything exceeding 3000 words. I managed this by mentally separating the chapters into essays— Introduction, Literature Review, Theory, Methodology and Method, Findings and Analysis, Discussion, and finally, Conclusion. I researched and wrote the chapters in that order, with the exception of the abstract and introduction. I decided to write these last, that way I minimized the chances of promising anything I might not deliver. The challenge here was making sure I started writing early enough and organized my time appropriately allowing me to write all the chapters and hand drafts to my supervisor in good time. Writing a time plan and sticking to it made this process a lot easier than it could have been!

Did you encounter any problems in the writing process and if so, how did you overcome them?

Overall, writing up was far less painful than I had expected. The only significant problem that arose was my getting somewhat lost in the work. On drafting and re-drafting the same piece of writing it can become a bit difficult to see the wood from the trees. I found it useful during this process to take a weekend off, perhaps moving onto the next chapter following that, and then go back to proofreading the previous one after a week or two of headspace. This is a useful technique, but it is totally dependent on good time planning!