4

Planning a research project and formulating research questions

Chapter outline

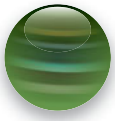
Chapter guide

The goal of this chapter is to provide advice to students on some of the issues that they need to consider if they have to prepare a dissertation based upon a relatively small-scale project. Increasingly, social science students are required to produce such a dissertation as part of the requirements for their degrees. In addition to providing help with the conduct of research, which will be the aim of the chapters that come later in this book, more specific advice on tactics in carrying out and writing up social research for a dissertation can be useful. It is against this background that this chapter has been written. The chapter explores a wide variety of issues, such as:

- advice on timing;
- advice on generating research questions;
- advice on conducting a project;
- advice on writing a research proposal.

Introduction

This chapter has been written to provide some advice for readers who might be carrying out a research project of your own. The chapters that follow in Parts Two, Three, and Four of this book will then provide more detailed information about the choices available to you and how to implement them. But beyond this, how might you go about conducting a small project of your own? I have in mind here the kind of situation that is increasingly common among degree programmes in the social sciences—the requirement to write a dissertation often of around 8,000 to 15,000 words. In particular, I have in mind the needs of undergraduate students, but it may be that students on postgraduate degree programmes will also find some of the observations I make helpful. Also, the advice is really concerned with students conducting projects with a component of empirical research in which they collect new data or perhaps conduct a secondary analysis of existing data.



Getting to know what is expected of you by your institution

Your institution or department will have specific requirements concerning a wide variety of different features that your dissertation should comprise and a range of other matters relating to it. These include such things as: the form of binding; how it is to be presented; whether an abstract is required; how big the page margins should be; the format for referencing; number of words; perhaps the structure of the dissertation; how much advice you can get from your supervisor; whether or not a proposal is required; plagiarism; deadlines; how much (if any) financial assistance you can expect; and so on.

The advice here is simple: *follow the requirements, instructions, and information you are given*. If anything in this book conflicts with your institution's guidelines and requirements, ignore this book! I very much hope this is not something that will occur very much, but if it does, keep to the guidelines your institution gives you.

Thinking about your research area

The chances are that you will be asked to start thinking about what you want to do research on well before you are due to start work on your dissertation. It is worth giving yourself a good deal of time. As you are doing your various modules, begin to think about whether there are any topics that might interest you and that might provide you with a researchable area.

Using your supervisor

Most institutions that require a dissertation or similar component allocate students to supervisors. Institutions vary quite a lot in what can be expected of supervisors; in other words, they vary in terms of what kinds of and how much assistance supervisors will give to students allocated to them. Equally, students vary a great deal in how frequently they see their supervisors and in their use of them. My advice here is simple: use your supervisor to the fullest extent that you are allowed and follow the pointers you are given by him or her. Your supervisor will almost certainly be someone who is well versed in the research process and who will be able to provide you with help and feedback at all stages of your research, subject to your institution's strictures in this regard. If your supervisor is critical of your research questions, your interview schedule, drafts of your dissertation, or whatever, try to respond positively. Follow the suggestions that he or she provides, since the criticisms will invariably be accompanied by reasons for the criticisms and suggestions for revision. It is not a personal attack. Supervisors regularly have to go through the same process themselves when they submit an article to a peer-refereed journal or apply for a research grant or give a conference paper. So respond to criticisms and suggestions positively and be glad that you are being given the opportunity to address deficiencies in your work before it is formally examined.

A further point is that students who get stuck at the start of their dissertations or who get behind with their work sometimes respond to the situation by avoiding their supervisors. They then get caught up in a vicious circle that results in their work being neglected and perhaps rushed at the end. Try to avoid this situation by confronting the fact that you are experiencing difficulties in getting going or are getting behind and seek out your supervisor for advice.

Student experience
Using supervisors

Several students wrote about the role that their supervisors played in their research projects. Isabella Robbins mentions that her supervisor played an important role in relation to her analysis of her qualitative data.

> The emerging themes were strong and in that sense the analysis was not problematic, but I guess the problems came in mapping the analysis onto the theory. My way of dealing with this was to talk about the analysis at supervisions and to incorporate the ideas that came of these discussions.

Cornelius Grebe provided the following advice about relationships with supervisors:

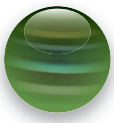
> I have learned to be very clear about my expectations of my supervisors: what kind of professional and personal relationship I thrive in and what form of support exactly I need from them.

To read more about Isabella's and Cornelius's research experiences, go to the Online Resource Centre that accompanies this book at: ***www.oxfordtextbooks.co.uk/orc/brymansrm4e/***

Supervisor experience
How to annoy your dissertation supervisor and cause yourself problems: five easy steps

Supervisors were asked about some of the chief frustrations associated with supervising dissertation students. There were some recurring themes in their responses. Here are some easy ways to annoy your supervisor and create problems for yourself:

1. *Don't turn up to pre-arranged supervision meetings.* Quite aside from the rudeness of doing this, a failure to turn up begins to ring alarm bells about whether the student is veering off course.
2. *Leave the bulk of the work until the last minute.* Supervisors know full well that research must be paced because it requires a great deal of forethought and because things can go wrong. The longer students leave their dissertation work, the more difficult it becomes to do thorough research and to rectify problems.
3. *Ignore what your supervisor advises you to do.* Supervisors are extremely experienced researchers, so that ignoring their advice is irritating and certainly not in a student's interest.
4. *Hand in shoddy drafts as late as possible.* It is not your supervisor's role to write the dissertation for you, so you should hand in work that allows him or her to offer advice and suggestions, not a rewrite of your work. Also, supervisors have several dissertation students as well as other often urgent commitments, so they need to be given a reasonable amount of time to consider your work.
5. *Forget what you were taught in your research methods module or your research training module.* Instruction that you will have received on how to do research was meant to help you with your future research needs; it was not a hurdle for you to jump over and then move on.



Managing time and resources

All research is constrained by time and resources. There is no point in working on research questions and plans that cannot be seen through because of time pressure or because of the costs involved. Two points are relevant here.

1. Work out a timetable—preferably in conjunction with your supervisor—detailing the different stages of your research (including the review of the literature and writing up). The timetable should specify the different stages and the calendar points at which you should start and finish them. Some stages are likely to be ongoing—for example, searching the literature for new references (see below)—but that should not prove an obstacle to developing a timetable. Securing access to an organization is sometimes required for student projects, but students typically underestimate the time it can take to do this. For his research on commercial cleaning, Ryan (2009) spent nearly two years trying to secure access to a suitable firm.

Student experience
Managing time

One of the most difficult aspects of doing a research project for many students is managing their time. Sarah Hanson was explicit on this point:

> Never underestimate how long it will take you to complete a large project like a dissertation. Choose a topic you have passion about. The more you enjoy your research the more interesting it will be to read. Be organized: post-it notes, folders, wall planners, anything that keeps you on track from day to day will help you not to be distracted from the purpose of your study.

Both Hannah Creane and Lily Taylor felt that, unless your time is managed well, the analysis phase tends to be squeezed—often with undesirable consequences. Indeed, it is my experience too from supervising students' dissertations that they allow far too little time for data analysis and writing up. Here is what Hannah and Lily respectively wrote in response to a question asking what one single bit of advice they would give to others.

> Get your research done as soon as possible. The process of analysis is pretty much an ongoing one and can take a very long time, so the sooner you have all your data compiled the better. It also means that you have more time to make more extensive analysis rather than just noticing the surface emergent trends.
>
> Make sure you give yourself enough time to carry out the project, don't underestimate the amount of time data analysis can take!

Amy Knight felt she managed her time quite well when preparing an undergraduate dissertation on gender and recycling:

> Effective time management is needed when completing a large research project such as a dissertation. I spent a lot of my summer between my second and third year collecting relevant literature and putting together draft chapters. I would also recommend setting personal targets—for example, aiming to complete the literature review chapter within a month of starting your third year. Setting targets worked well for me as it spread my workload; it also meant that I could get effective feedback from my dissertation supervisor with plenty of time to make adjustments.

Similarly, Rebeccca Barnes wrote that, if she was doing her research again:

> I would also allocate more time for data analysis and writing, as largely because of the long period of time which it took to recruit participants, these phases of my research were subject to considerable time pressures.

To read more about Sarah's, Hannah's, Lily's, Amy's, and Rebecca's research experiences, go to the Online Resource Centre that accompanies this book at: ***www.oxfordtextbooks.co.uk/orc/brymansrm4e/***

2. Find out what, if any, resources can be put at your disposal for carrying out your research. For example, will you receive help from your institution with such things as travel costs, photocopying, secretarial assistance, postage, stationery, and so on? Will the institution be able to loan you hardware such as recording equipment and transcription machines if you need to record and transcribe your interviews? Has it got the software you need, such as **SPSS** or a qualitative data analysis package like **NVivo**? This kind of information will help you to establish how far your research design and methods are financially feasible and practical. The imaginary 'gym study' used in Chapter 15 is an example of an investigation that would be feasible within the kind of time frame usually allocated to undergraduate and postgraduate dissertations. However, it would require such facilities as: typing up the questionnaire, which nowadays students can usually do for themselves with the help of word-processing programs; photocopying covering letters and questionnaires; postage for sending the questionnaires out and for any follow-up letters to non-respondents; return postage for the questionnaires; and the availability of a quantitative data analysis package like SPSS.

Supervisor experience
Allow time to gain access and for ethical scrutiny

One area where students often fail to build in sufficient time when conducting research projects is to do with the tendency to underestimate how much time it can take to gain access to organizations and other settings and to get clearance for their research through an ethics committee. Access issues are mainly covered in Chapter 19 and ethical issues in Chapter 6. Some institutions adopt a relatively light-touch approach over ethics, provided no obvious ethical issues are suggested by a student's proposal. Others submit all proposals to more detailed scrutiny. Supervisor A wrote:

> Criminological subject matter does not lend itself easily to empirical study by dissertation: one often wishes to study illegal and upsetting subjects that raise a range of ethical concerns (**informed consent**; researcher safety; data confidentiality; disclosure), that, combined with access difficulties, mean resolution timescales are often well beyond the time available to students.

It is also clear that many supervisors act as initial ethical advisers and steer students away from ethically questionable topics or approaches. Supervisor C wrote that he intervened in students' choice of topic and/or research methods 'when there is a clear possibility of ethical problems or the proposed timetable is unrealistic or if the methods are incongruent with the research aims'.

Supervisor F wrote: 'Topics are chosen by students—where these raise ethical or practical issues students are encouraged to reflect on their choices and the issues raised.' Supervisor I took a similar view: 'I help to steer them away from topics where there might be problems accessing data, ensuring safety in undertaking data collection (especially qualitative fieldwork) or dealing with ethical issues.' The very fact that your initial ideas about your research may have to be reconsidered because of ethical concerns is likely to slow down your research slightly, so it is worth giving ethical and access issues consideration very early on.

Student experience
Devising a timetable for writing up

Lily Taylor found it helpful to have a timetable of deadlines for the different sections of the report she had to write.

> I produced a first draft of my report and made sure that I got it done in plenty of time before the deadline. I was then able to go over my work and make the necessary changes. I made sure that I had a checklist with mini deadlines for each section. This made sure that I kept on top of my work and progressed at a steady rate.

Isabella Robbins writes that she 'devised a writing up timetable with a plan of the thesis'. Cornelius Grebe adopted a similar approach to his writing up. He writes: 'I agreed submission dates for individual draft chapters with my supervisors.'

To read more about Lily's, Isabella's, and Cornelius's research experiences, go to the Online Resource Centre that accompanies this book at: ***www.oxfordtextbooks.co.uk/orc/brymansrm4e/***

Student *and supervisor* experience
Leave enough time for analysis and writing

I have long held the view that a recurring error in students' preparations for their dissertations is that many do not allow sufficient time for the analysis and writing-up stages. This tendency results in both of these stages being rushed, when they actually require a great deal of time for reflection and redrafting. Several of the supervisors reported similar experiences with their students.

Supervisor C wrote that one of the most common problems encountered by dissertation students was not allowing 'sufficient time for re-drafting' and for Supervisor G it was 'leaving the writing until the last minute'. Several of them also commented that they encourage their students to consider issues about analysis *before* the collection of the data. Supervisor D writes that a common refrain is: 'I've collected all this data and I don't know what to do with it!' This supervisor went on to write that he or she encourages students

> to think about their analysis during or shortly after the construction of their research questions. By the time they are thinking about research design they should have a rough idea about what their analysis will look like (i.e. they must do as it will link their research design to their research questions).

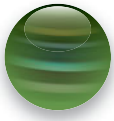
Several of the students made similar observations about their own experiences. For example, Alice Palmer notes of her own experience with writing:

> As long as you have something written, you are on your way to improving it. I aimed to write a couple of hundred words a day, no matter how inspired I was feeling. I wrote more if I felt it was going well, but at least I could steadily move towards a target, which is less stressful than having no idea where you will be in a week's time.

Mark Girvan writes of a group project in which he was involved:

> DO NOT leave things late! Our research project suffered through a lack of urgency, meaning that we did not have as much time as we would have liked to write up our report. Too much was left to the last minute, which meant that what we produced was not of the high quality of which we believe we were capable.

There is a clear message in the material covered in this section: allow sufficient time for the various stages of the research process. Gaining access, analysing data, and writing up findings have been particularly highlighted as areas where students often miscalculate the amount of time required. Another time-related issue is that it can sometimes take a lot longer than you might think to secure clearance from research ethics committees to conduct your investigation. The issue of ethics is given more detailed consideration in Chapter 6. However, one final point needs to be registered: even with a really well-planned project, unexpected problems can throw out your timetable. For example, McDonald, Townsend, and Waterhouse (2009) report that for their research they successfully negotiated access to the Australian organizations that were involved in a number of research projects in which they were engaged. However, changes to personnel meant that those who had agreed to give them access (often called 'gatekeepers' in the research methods literature) left or moved on, so that the researchers had to forge new relationships and effectively had to renegotiate the terms of their investigations, which slowed the progress of their research down considerably. Such disruptions to one's research are impossible to predict. It is important not only to realize that they can occur but also to introduce a little flexibility into your research timetable so that you can reduce their impact.



Formulating suitable research questions

Many students want to conduct research into areas that are of personal interest to them. This is not a bad thing at all and, as I noted in Chapter 2, many social researchers start from this point as well (see also Lofland and Lofland 1995: 11–14). However, you must move on to develop research questions. This recommendation applies to qualitative research as well as quantitative research. As is explained in Chapter 17, qualitative research tends to be more open-ended than quantitative research, and in Chapter 19 I refer to some notable studies that appear not to have been driven by specific research questions. However, very open-ended research is risky and can lead to the collection of too much data and, when it comes to writing up, to confusion about your focus. So, unless your supervisor advises you to the contrary, I would definitely formulate some research questions, even if they turn out to be somewhat less specific than the kinds we often find in quantitative research. In other words, what is it about your area of interest that you want to know?

As noted in Chapter 1, research questions have many uses and you should resist the temptation of not formulating them or delaying their formulation. But do remember that your research questions must have a clear social scientific (for example, sociological) angle.

Thinking deeply 4.1
Marx's sources of research questions

Marx (1997) suggests the following as possible sources of research questions.

- Intellectual puzzles and contradictions.
- The existing literature.
- Replication.
- Structures and functions. For example, if you point to a structure such as a type of organization, you can ask questions about the reasons why there are different types and the implications of the differences.
- Opposition. Marx identifies the sensation of feeling that a certain theoretical perspective or notable piece of work is misguided and of exploring the reasons for your opposition.
- A social problem. But remember that this is just the source of a research question; you still have to identify social scientific (for example, sociological) issues in relation to a social problem.
- 'Gaps between official versions of reality and the facts on the ground' (Marx 1997: 113). An example here is something like Delbridge's (1998) fascinating ethnographic account of company rhetoric about Japanized work practices and how they operate in practice.
- The counter-intuitive. For example, when common sense seems to fly in the face of social scientific truths.
- 'Empirical examples that trigger amazement' (Marx 1997: 114). Marx gives, as examples, deviant cases and atypical events.
- New methods and theories. How might they be applied in new settings?
- 'New social and technical developments and social trends' (Marx 1997: 114).
- Personal experience.
- Sponsors and teachers. But do not expect your teachers to provide you with detailed research questions.

Marx (1997) has suggested a wide range of possible sources of research questions (see Thinking deeply 4.1). As this list makes clear, research questions can derive from a wide variety of contexts. Figure 4.1 brings out the main steps in developing research questions. Research questions in quantitative research are sometimes more specific than in qualitative research. Indeed, some qualitative researchers advocate a very open approach with no research questions. This is a very risky approach, because it can result in collecting lots of data without a clear sense of what to observe or what to ask your interviewees. There is a growing tendency for qualitative researchers to advocate a somewhat more focused approach to their craft (e.g. Hammersley and Atkinson 1995: 24–9).

As Figure 4.1 implies, we usually start out with a general research area that interests us. It may derive from any of several sources:

Student experience
Theory as an influence on research questions

Rebecca Barnes's interest in feminist theories relating to patriarchy influenced her selection of woman-to-woman partner abuse as a focus for her enquiries.

> I became interested in the topic of woman-to-woman partner abuse as an undergraduate. My first encounter with this subject area took the form of a theoretical engagement with feminist explanations for domestic violence—primarily emphasizing patriarchy—and the ways in which emerging knowledge about violence and abuse in female same-sex relationships challenges this understanding. It was as a result of this first encounter that I became aware of the scarcity of research in this area, particularly in the UK, where this subject was

virtually uncharted territory. I was at this point interested in pursuing postgraduate study, and thus decided to conduct my own UK-based study of woman-to-woman partner abuse for my Ph.D.

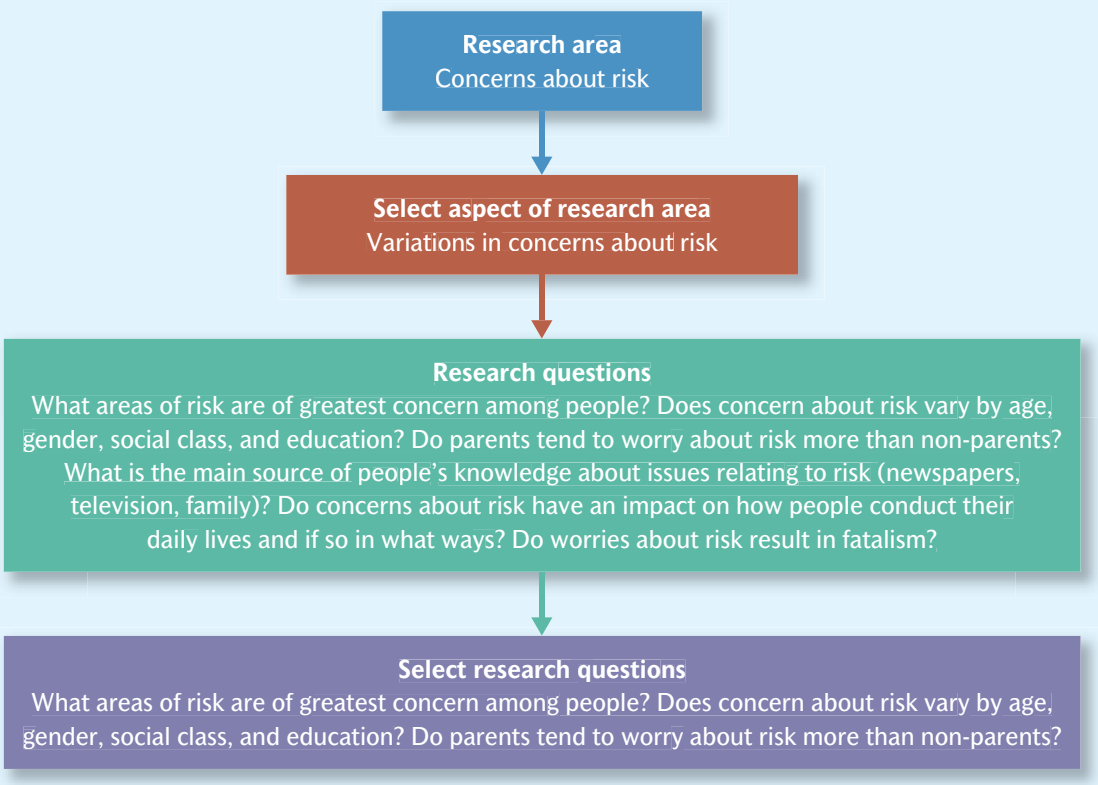
Theoretical ideas stimulated Gareth Matthews's interest in migrant labour. In his case, it was labour process theory that was the focus of his theoretical enquiry.

> Primarily, my interest stems from a more general interest in Marxist labour process theory, which I believe to be highly relevant to an understanding of the content of modern work-forms as well as the claims that are made by academics about these. Since Braverman published *Labour and Monopoly Capital* in 1974, the labour process debate has taken many twists and turns, and the 'core' elements of the theory are now somewhat different from those expounded by Braverman. I do not seek simply to reiterate the importance of Braverman's formulation, but instead have attempted to explore the space between this and more modern theoretical propositions—in the light of real and perceived changes in the world of work and workers. . . . Essentially, my approach stems from the belief that the employment relation cannot simply be 'read off' from analyses of the content of jobs, and that it must instead be examined through an analysis of forces that operate at various levels (i.e. the workplace, the labour market, the state, etc.), and from the interaction between these forces and employers' necessarily contradictory aims and pressures.

To read more about Rebecca's and Gareth's research experiences, go to the Online Resource Centre that accompanies this book at: ***www.oxfordtextbooks.co.uk/orc/brymansrm4e/***

Figure 4.1

Steps in selecting research questions



- *Personal interest/experience*. As I pointed out in Chapters 1 and 2, my interest in theme parks can be traced back to a visit to Disney World in Orlando in 1991 and my interest in the representation of social science research in the mass media to a difficult encounter with the press referred to in Chapters 1 and 2.
- *Theory*. Someone might be interested in testing or exploring aspects of labour process theory or in the theory of the risk society or the implications of Actor Network Theory for the use of technologies in everyday life.
- *The research literature*. Studies relating to a research area like modern consumerism might stimulate an interest in the nature of the shopping experience in contemporary society. Writing about the field of organization studies, Sandberg and Alvesson (2011) note that spotting gaps in the literature is the chief way of identifying research questions. The chief strategies for doing this are: spotting overlooked or under-researched areas and identifying areas of research that have not been previously examined using a particular theory or perspective.
- *Puzzles*. An interesting example of this can be found in a research article by Hodson (2004) in which he employs data from the Workplace Ethnography Project (see Research in focus 13.4). In this article he notes that writings on modern work imply two rather inconsistent views concerning the extent to which workplaces today are a source of social fulfilment. Some writers construe modern workplaces as intrinsically attractive environments to which people are drawn; others writers view people's commitment to social life at the workplace as stemming from job and career insecurities. Hodson set up these two different points of view explicitly as essentially rival hypotheses. Similarly, Wright et al. (2006) collected semi-structured interview data on street robbers in the UK to shed light on two different views of the motivation for engaging in this crime. One view, which draws on rational choice theory, depicts street robbery as motivated by a trade-off between the desire for financial gain against the necessity to reduce the likelihood of detection. The other view of street robbery portrays it as a cultural activity from which perpetrators derived an emotional thrill and which helped to sustain a particular lifestyle.
- *New developments in society*. Examples might include the rise of the Internet and the diffusion of new models of organization—for example, call centres.
- *Social problem*. An example might be the impact of asylum-seekers being viewed as a social problem by some sectors of society. This seems to have been one of the main factors behind the work of Lynn and Lea (2003), who examined the discourses surrounding the notion of the asylum-seeker in the UK (see Research in focus 22.7).

These sources of interest are not mutually exclusive. For example, the investigation reported in Research in focus 2.1 was motivated by at least two of the above sources: an interest in exploring the concept of social capital (theory) and understanding the process of gentrification (a new development in society).

As these types of source suggest, in research we often start out with a general research area that interests us. This research area has to be narrowed down so that we

Student experience

New developments in society as a spur to research questions

Lily Taylor was interested in the role of debt on the student experience. What, in other words, is the impact of top-up fees on students' experiences of higher education?

> Increasingly today more students are put off university because of the amount of debt most students will leave with. Particularly with the topical debate at the time over the tuition fee system and top-up fees, I believed it was an interesting area to look at. Students are supposed to be concerned and worried about essay deadlines and attending lectures and seminars, yet finance today seems to be the main anxiety for most university students.

To read more about Lily's research experiences, go to the Online Resource Centre that accompanies this book at: ***www.oxfordtextbooks.co.uk/orc/brymansrm4e/***

can develop a tighter focus, out of which research questions can be developed. We can depict the process of generating research questions as a series of steps that are suggested in Figure 4.1. The series of stages is meant to indicate that, when developing research questions, the researcher is involved in a process of progressive focusing down so that he or she moves from a general research area down to specific research questions. In making this movement, we have to recognize that:

- We cannot answer all the research questions that occur to us. This is not just to do with issues of time and the cost of doing research. It is very much to do with the fact that we must keep a clear focus, so that our research questions must relate to each other and form a coherent set of issues.
- We therefore have to select from the possible research questions that we arrive at.

Student experience
The nature of research questions

Some of the students worked with quite explicit and narrowly formulated research questions. For example, Rebecca Barnes writes:

> My research questions were: What forms and dynamics of abuse do women experience in same-sex relationships? What opportunities and challenges do women experience with respect to seeking support for woman-to-woman partner abuse? What impacts does being abused by a female partner have upon women's identities and biographies? How are women's accounts of woman-to-woman partner abuse similar to and different from heterosexual women's accounts of partner abuse?

Isabella Robbins was similarly explicit about her research questions:

1. How do mothers frame their decisions regarding childhood vaccination? In particular, do they present this as a matter of moral obligation (to their child/to the community)?
2. Do mothers consider they have a choice regarding childhood vaccination? If so, in what sense do they see this as a choice and what, if any, constraints do they identify as they seek to exercise that choice?
3. How do women place themselves and their decisions about childhood vaccination, in terms of the discourse of risk, responsibility, autonomy, and expertise?
4. What role do women accord to partners, mothers, siblings, and professionals in their decision-making about childhood vaccination?

Others opted for research questions that were somewhat more general and wider in focus. Erin Sanders writes of her research questions for her study:

> What are the policy goals of women's NGOs in Thailand? How do these goals relate to the needs of women in the sex industry?

In a similar vein, Gareth Matthews writes:

> My research questions were quite general. (i) What is the role of migrant workers in the UK's hospitality sector? (ii) What can this tell us about the relevance and usefulness of Marxist labour process theory?

Gareth went on to write:

> These questions stem from my theoretical concerns, and a desire for the thesis to be guided by the findings and theoretical developments in relation to these findings during the course of the research. I did not want to begin with a specific hypothesis, and then to proceed by attempting to 'prove' or 'disprove' this, but sought instead to start with a general theoretical belief about work, and then to remain open-minded so as to allow the direction of research to be guided by the qualitative findings as they unfolded.

To read more about Rebecca's, Isabella's, Erin's, and Gareth's research experiences, go to the Online Resource Centre that accompanies this book at: ***www.oxfordtextbooks.co.uk/orc/brymansrm4e/***

- In making our selection, we should be guided by the principle that the research questions we choose should be related to one another. If they are not, our research will probably lack focus and we may not make as clear a contribution to understanding as would be the case if research questions were connected. Thus, in the example in Figure 4.1, the research questions relating to risk are closely connected.

In the section on 'Criteria for evaluating research questions' below some suggestions are presented about the kinds of considerations that should be taken into account when developing your own research questions.

Criteria for evaluating research questions

Research questions for a dissertation or project exhibit the following characteristics.

- They should be *clear*, in the sense of being intelligible.
- They should be *researchable*—that is, they should allow you to do research in relation to them. This means that they should not be formulated in terms that are so abstract that they cannot be converted into researchable terms.
- They should have some *connection(s) with established theory and research*. This means that there should be a literature on which you can draw to help illuminate how your research questions should be approached. Even if you find a topic that has been scarcely addressed by social scientists, it is unlikely that there will be no relevant literature (for example, on related or parallel topics).
- Your research questions should be *linked* to each other. Unrelated research questions are unlikely to be acceptable, since you should be developing an argument in your dissertation. You could not very readily construct a single argument in relation to unrelated research questions.
- They should at the very least hold out the prospect of being able to make an *original contribution*—however small—to the topic.
- The research questions should be *neither too broad* (so that you would need a massive grant to study them) *nor too narrow* (so that you cannot make a reasonably significant contribution to your area of study).

If you are stuck about how to formulate research questions (or indeed other phases of your research), it is always a good idea to look at journal articles or research monographs to see how other researchers have formulated them. Also, look at past dissertations for ideas as well. Marx (1997) has suggested a wide range of sources of research questions (see Thinking deeply 4.1). What should also become clear is that it is crucial for research questions to be justified. They should not be free floating. You need to show how your research questions came about and why they are important. Marx's list of sources of research questions in Thinking Deeply 4.1 is helpful, but you have to demonstrate the link between your research questions and those sources. As noted in the third point in the list of bullet points that precedes this paragraph, it is recommended that research questions 'should have some connection(s) with established theory and research', but in addition to the questions *having* a connection, that connection has to be *demonstrated*. As an example we can examine the study from Research in focus 1.1 (see also Table 1.1). The researchers begin by noting the results of research showing that the British power elite is dominated by Oxford and Cambridge undergraduates, which leads Zimdars et al. (2009) to propose that admissions tutors at these universities act as gatekeepers to entry into the elite. They also note the potential significance for understanding this process of social reproduction of Bourdieu's theory of cultural reproduction, which 'seeks to explain the link between social class of origin and social class of destination in terms of the impact of cultural capital on educational attainment' (Zimdars et al. 2009: 650). In a section with the heading 'Research Questions', the authors go on to write that they 'aim to assess whether cultural capital is linked to success in gaining admission to Oxford University for those who apply' (Zimdars et al. 2009: 653). Following a set of reflections on the issue, they outline their five research questions, which can be found in Research in focus 1.1. Thus, the authors justify and demonstrate the significance of their research questions through identifying a social problem and the literature relating to it and then proposing the use of an established theoretical perspective (Bourdieu's theory of cultural capital and its role in social and cultural reproduction) as a plausible account of the process of social and cultural reproduction. Thus, the authors take the reader through the rationale and justification for their research questions by forging several links with a social problem, the research literature relating to it, and a theoretical tradition.

Supervisor experience
The problem of research questions

Several of the supervisors were contacted for their views on the experiences of students doing small projects, dissertations, and theses. They were asked whether they felt it is important for students to formulate research questions; all nine felt it is crucial. Some of them identified problems with the identification and formulation of research questions as a difficult area for many students. When asked the three most common problems encountered by dissertation students, Supervisor A replied 'vague research questions', while Supervisor D presented the issue as a drama:

Me 'What are your research questions?'
Student 'I want to do something on [topic x]?'
Me 'But what do you want to find out?'
Student '[silence]'

Supervisors also came up with some helpful advice to students. Supervisor A said: 'Draft your research questions and tentative methods: make it [the research] realistic and doable in three months.' Supervisor I said: 'Keep your research questions focused and don't be over ambitious in terms of the scope of your study'. Supervisor H says he encourages students 'to return to the research questions and their proposal to see if it is still appropriate. Ask them to think about what they are actually trying to find out.'

Supervisor D also wrote about the problem that he often encounters of students choosing research methods before formulating research questions. Similarly, Supervisor I wrote: 'Although we teach them that they should choose methods and methodologies on the basis of the nature of the research question, I feel some students choose the method and then decide on the research question.' In other words, students decide what method they intend to use and then think about possible research questions. To some extent, this is not surprising, because, although teachers of research methods and writers of textbooks like the present one observe that the choice of method should be shaped by the research question(s) being asked, researchers do not always follow this practice (Bryman 2006*b*).

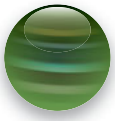
Supervisor experience
Research questions provide guidance

Research questions can provide students with important guidance when they may have difficulty 'seeing the wood for the trees'. Students sometimes feel overwhelmed by the data they have collected. Returning to the original research questions can be instructive, as Supervisor I helpfully advises:

> Students can sometimes be overwhelmed by the amount of data they have collected and experience difficulty organizing the final dissertation. Everything seems to be relevant to them. I encourage them to answer the research questions they set themselves at the beginning of the exercise and nothing but the research questions. I tell them to write the key research questions (usually no more than three) on a postcard or post-it and place it at eye level just above the computer screen.

Supervisor D advises students to consider analysis issues early and in relation to the research questions they are asking:

> I try to encourage them to think about their analysis during or shortly after the construction of their research questions. By the time they are thinking about research design, they should have a rough idea about what their analysis will look like (i.e. they must do, as it will link their research design to their research questions).



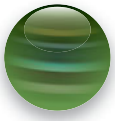
Writing your research proposal

In preparation for your dissertation, you may be required to write a short proposal or plan outlining what your research project will be about and how you intend to go about it. This is a useful way of preparing for your research and it will encourage you to think about many of the issues that are covered in the next section. In addition to outlining your proposed research design and methods, the topic area in which your study is going to be located, and the research questions that you intend to address, the proposal will ask you to demonstrate some knowledge of the literature in your chosen field—for example, by identifying several key authors or important research studies. This information may be used as the basis for allocating a supervisor who is knowledgeable in your area of research interest or who has experience with your proposed research approach. The proposal is also a useful basis for discussion of your research project with your supervisor, and, if it includes a timetable for the project, this can provide a basis for planning regular meetings with your supervisor to review your progress. Developing a timetable can be very important in making you think about aspects of the overall research process such as the different stages of your research and their timing and in giving you a series of ongoing goals to aim for. Even if you are not required to produce a research proposal, it is worthwhile constructing a timetable for your research and asking your supervisor to look at it, so that you can assess how (un)realistic your goals are and whether you are allowing enough time for each of the components of the research process.

When writing a research proposal, there are a number of issues that you will probably need to cover.

- What is your research topic or, alternatively, what are your research objectives?
- Why is your research topic (or why are those research objectives) important?
- What is your research question or what are your research questions?
- What does the literature have to say about your research topic/objectives and research question(s)?
- How are you going to go about collecting data relevant to your research question(s)? In other words, what research methods are you intending to use?
- Why are the research methods/sources you have selected the appropriate ones for your research question(s)?
- What resources will you need to conduct your research (for example, postage, travel costs, software) and how will those resources be funded?
- What is your timetable for the different stages of the project?
- What problems do you anticipate in doing the research (for example, access to organizations)?
- What are the possible ethical problems associated with your research?
- How will you analyse your data?

Writing a proposal is therefore useful in getting you started on your research project and encouraging you to set realistic objectives for your research project. In some higher education institutions, the research proposal may form part (albeit a small one) of the overall assessment of the dissertation or report that is produced out of the project. While the research proposal is a working document and the ideas that you set out in it can be refined and developed as your research progresses, it is important to bear in mind that, if you keep changing your mind about your area of research interest and research design, you will be using up valuable time needed to complete the dissertation within the deadline.



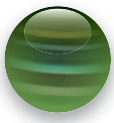
Preparing for your research

Do not begin your data collection until you have identified your research questions reasonably clearly. Develop your data-collection instruments with these research questions at the forefront of your thinking. If you do not do this, there is the risk that your results will not allow you to illuminate the research questions. If at all possible, conduct a small pilot study to determine how well your research instruments work.

You will also need to think about access and sampling issues. If your research requires you to gain access to or the cooperation of one or more closed settings like an organization, you need to confirm at the earliest opportunity that you have the necessary permission to conduct your work. You also need to consider how you will go about gaining access to people. These issues lead you into sampling considerations, such as the following.

- Who do you need to study in order to investigate your research questions?
- How easily can you gain access to a **sampling frame**?
- What kind of sampling strategy will you employ (for example, **probability sampling**, **quota sampling**, **theoretical sampling**, **convenience sampling**)?
- Can you justify your choice of sampling method?

Also, while preparing for your data collection, you should consider whether there are any possible ethical problems associated with your research methods or your approach to contacting people (see Chapter 6).



Doing your research and analysing your results

Since doing your research and analysing your results are what the bulk of this book will be about, it is not necessary at this stage to go into detail, but here are some useful hints about practicalities.

- Keep good records of what you do. A research **diary** can be helpful here, but there are several other things to bear in mind. For example, if you are doing a survey by postal questionnaire, keep good records of who has replied, so that you know who should be sent reminders. If participant observation is a component of your research, remember to keep good field notes and not to rely on your memory.
- Make sure that you are thoroughly familiar with any hardware you are using in collecting your data, such as tape recorders for interviewing, and make sure it is in good working order (for example, batteries that are not flat or close to being flat).
- Do not wait until all your data have been collected to begin coding. This recommendation applies to both quantitative and qualitative research. If you are conducting a questionnaire survey, begin coding your data and entering them into SPSS or whatever package you are using after you have put together a reasonably sized batch of completed questionnaires. In the case of qualitative data, such as interview transcripts, the same point applies, and, indeed, it is a specific recommendation of the proponents of grounded theory that data collection and analysis should be intertwined.
- Remember that the transcription of recorded interviews takes a long time. Allow at least six hours' transcription for every one hour of recorded interview talk, at least in the early stages of transcription.
- Become familiar with any data analysis packages as soon as possible. This familiarity will help you to establish whether you definitely need them and will ensure that you do not need to learn everything about them at the very time you need to use them for your analysis.
- Do not at any time take risks with your personal safety (see Tips and skills 'Safety in research').

Tips and skills
Safety in research

In the middle of December 2002, a 19-year-old female student who had just started a degree course in sociology and community studies at Manchester Metropolitan University went missing. It was believed that, in order to complete a coursework assignment, she had gone to conduct a life history interview with a person aged over 50. Since she was interested in the homeless, it was thought that she had gone to interview a homeless person. Because of concerns about her safety, her tutor had advised her to take a friend and to conduct the interview in a public place. In fact, she had not gone to conduct the interview and to everyone's relief turned up in Dublin. There is an important lesson in this incident. You must bear in mind that social research may on occasions place

you in potentially dangerous situations. You should avoid taking personal risks at all costs and you should resist any attempts to place yourself in situations where personal harm is a real possibility. Just as you should ensure that no harm comes to research participants (as prescribed in the discussion of ethical principles in Chapter 6), individuals involved in directing others' research should not place students and researchers in situations in which they might come to harm. Equally, lone researchers should avoid such situations. Sometimes, as with the interviews with the homeless, there is some possibility of being in a hazardous situation, in which case, if the researcher feels confident about going ahead with the interview, he or she needs to take precautions before going ahead with the interview. The advice given by the student's tutor—to take someone with her and to conduct the interview in a public place—was very sensible for a potentially dangerous interview. If you have a mobile telephone, keep it with you and keep it switched on. Personal attack alarms may also be useful. You should also make sure that, if your interviews or your periods of observation are part of a programme of work, you establish a routine whereby you keep in regular contact with others. However, there are situations in which there is no obvious reason to think that a situation may be dangerous, but where the researcher is faced with a sudden outburst of abuse or threatening behaviour. This can arise when people react relatively unpredictably to an interview question or to being observed. If there are signs that such behaviour is imminent (for example, through body language), begin a withdrawal from the research situation. Further guidelines on these issues can be found in Craig et al. (2000).

Lee (2004) draws an important distinction between two kinds of danger in fieldwork: ambient and situational. The former refers to situations that are avoidable and in which danger is an ingredient of the context. Fieldwork in conflict situations of the kind encountered by the researcher who took on the role of a bouncer (Hobbs et al. 2003) would be an example of this kind of danger. Situational danger occurs 'when the researcher's presence or activities evoke aggression, hostility or violence from those within the setting' (Lee 2004: 1285). While problems surrounding safety may be easier to anticipate in the case of ambient danger, they are less easy to foresee in connection with situational danger. However, that is not to say that ambient danger is entirely predictable. It was only some time after she had begun her research in a hospital laboratory that Lankshear (2000) realized that there was a possibility of her being exposed to dangerous pathogens.

Sources: P. Barkham and R. Jenkins, 'Fears for Fresher who Vanished on Mission to talk to the Homeless', *The Times*, 13 Dec. 2002; S. McIntyre, 'How did Vicky Vanish?', *Daily Mail*, 13 Dec. 2002; R. Jenkins, 'Wasteland Search for Missing Student', *The Times*, 14 Dec. 2002.

Checklist

Planning a research project

- ○ Do you know what the requirements for your dissertation are, as set out by your university or department?
- ○ Have you made contact with your supervisor?
- ○ Have you allowed enough time for planning, doing, and writing up your research project?
- ○ Do you have a clear timetable for your research project with clearly identifiable milestones for the achievement of specific tasks?
- ○ Have you got sufficient financial and practical resources (for example, money to enable travel to research site, recording device) to enable you to carry out your research project?
- ○ Have you formulated some research questions and discussed these with your supervisor?

- ○ Are the research questions you have identified capable of being answered through your research project?
- ○ Do you have the access that you require in order to carry out your research?
- ○ Are you familiar with the data analysis software that you will be using to analyse your data?
- ○ Have you allowed others to comment on your work so far and responded to their feedback?
- ○ Have you checked out whether there are likely to be any ethical issues that might be raised in connection with your research?
- ○ Have you allowed enough time for getting clearance through an ethics committee, if that is required for your research?

Key points

- Follow the dissertation guidelines provided by your institution.
- Thinking about your research subject can be time consuming, so allow plenty of time for this aspect of the dissertation process.
- Use your supervisor to the fullest extent allowed and follow the advice offered by him or her.
- Plan your time carefully and be realistic about what you can achieve in the time available.
- Formulate some research questions to express what it is about your area of interest that you want to know.
- Writing a research proposal is a good way of getting started on your research project and encouraging you to set realistic objectives.
- Consider access and sampling issues at an early stage and consider testing your research methods by conducting a pilot study.
- Keep good records of what you do in your research as you go along and don't wait until all your data have been collected before you start coding.

Questions for review

Managing time and resources

- Why is it important to devise a timetable for your research project?

Formulating suitable research questions

- Why are research questions necessary?
- What are the main sources of research questions?
- What are the main steps involved in developing research questions?
- What criteria can be used to evaluate research questions?

Writing your research proposal

- What is the purpose of the research proposal and how can it be useful?

Online Resource Centre

www.oxfordtextbooks.co.uk/orc/brymansrm4e/

Visit the Online Resource Centre that accompanies this book to enrich your understanding of planning a research project and formulating research questions. Consult web links, test yourself using multiple choice questions, and gain further guidance and inspiration from the Student Researcher's Toolkit.