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If you are like many readers of this book, you will be scanning these pages looking for some useful advice about the research project that is required for your Research Methods course. In that case, I have some good and bad news for you. It turns out that researching can be a complicated, tricky business. Nonetheless, with a little guidance (and some effort), most students can bring off an acceptable, or even highly graded, project.

Let us begin with a hypothetical case. Imagine that you have ‘innocently’ decided to gather some interview data for a research project. Making use of the accessibility and good nature of your fellow students, you decide to embark on a study of, say, ‘students’ perceptions of their future job prospects’.

Because you have read a bit about research design, you decide to ‘pre-test’ some preliminary questions on a friend to find whether they are easily understood (in the way that you intend). Having sorted out your questions, you find
half a dozen students and interview them. Now, you think, all you have to do is to summarise their answers and you will have a legitimate research report on your chosen topic.

Well, maybe. Perhaps, along the way, you failed to ask yourself a number of questions. These include:

- Why (and in what way) is your chosen research topic significant? Does it relate to any concepts or theories in your chosen discipline? Or is it simply a topic that matters to you and your friends? If so, how, if at all, will your report differ from the kind of story you might find in a newspaper? And why does this matter?
- How far do your topic and findings relate to other research? Have you read the relevant literature or are you in danger of reinventing the wheel? Have you thought laterally, considering, for instance, the variety of contexts in which people's expectations are shaped by a range of institutions (e.g. not just universities but schools, families, churches, peer groups, Internet sites)?
- Why is an interview method appropriate for your topic? Why not simply look at existing records of graduates' first jobs? Maybe this kind of simple quantitative study is the best way of addressing your topic. Or perhaps you should compare such statistics with your interviews?
- Is the size and method of recruitment of your sample appropriate to your topic? Should you be worried by what quantitative researchers tell us about the limits of small, non-random samples?
- Did you audio or video record your interviews? How did you transcribe them (if at all)? How can you convince your professor that you did not simply pick out a few extracts to support your preconceived ideas?
- Did you need to interview your respondents face to face? Why not use e-mail? Or find webpages where students discuss such issues and where employers describe what they have to offer to graduates?
- Did you think about using a focus group where respondents are offered some topic or stimulus material and then encouraged to discuss it among themselves?
- What status will you accord to your data? For instance, are you seeking objective 'facts', subjective 'perceptions' or simply 'narratives'?
- How thoroughly have you analysed your data? For instance, have you just reported a few 'telling' extracts? Or have you worked through all your material searching out examples which do not fit your original suppositions (deviant-case analysis).

Without answers to these questions, your professor may disappoint you with a surprisingly poor grade for your research project. This book will show you
why such questions are important and provide some straightforward ways to answer them.

No doubt you are impatient. Perhaps the submission date for your research plan is approaching and there is little time left to read a whole book. With this in mind, I have set out below a list of common challenges that confront student researchers and offered some simple answers. Since I want you to read more of this book, I do not claim that these answers provide the whole story. But they will give you a rapid take on the issues. These are the challenges:

- selecting a topic
- formulating a researchable question
- fitting your research question into an appropriate theory
- choosing an effective research design
- reviewing the literature effectively.

Two further comments about this chapter. First, I will discuss here the early stages of research design. So very little is said about data analysis. To find out more about how to analyse your data, refer to the relevant chapters of Part Two of this book. Second, the discussion that follows uses terms (like 'methodology' and 'models') that are not necessarily familiar to you. So, at the end of this chapter, I show you what these terms mean and indicate how they relate to one another.

2.1 SELECTING A TOPIC

Let us assume that your course requires you to complete a short research report. Where do you begin?

Some people panic and have no idea where to start. If you fall into this category, you have a ready solution at hand. See if you can find research reports by previous cohorts of students on your course. Then scan the topics they chose and see if that gives you any ideas (if you can, try and find out the grades achieved by the reports which interest you). If you are more ambitious, follow up a piece of published research that interests you and get advice on how you might adapt it as a student project.

However, not everybody panics. Some people have a burning interest in a part of the world around them and are enthusiastic about the opportunity to turn their interest into a research project. The enthusiasm is good but you need to beware of two possible unintended consequences of pursuing it:

- inaccessible data
- framing a topic in terms of common-sense assumptions.
2.1.1 Inaccessible data

Time problems are caused not just by having too much data, but by setting your mind on getting certain kinds of data regardless of their accessibility. There are no ‘brownie points’ given by most disciplines for having gathered your own data. Indeed, by choosing ‘difficult’ situations to gather data (either because nothing ‘relevant’ may happen or, for instance, because background noise may mean you have a poor-quality tape), you may condemn yourself to have less time to engage in the much more important activity of data analysis.

Make data collection as easy as possible and beware of complexity. For instance, although video data are very attractive, they are often very complex to work with. So try to keep data gathering simple. Go for a research topic linked to material that is easy to collect. For instance, the Internet is a wonderful source of material. Do not worry if it only gives you one ‘angle’ on your problem. There are innumerable angles on any topic. So just find one angle on your topic associated with data that are easy to access.

2.1.2 Common-sense assumptions

One has only to open a newspaper or to watch the TV news to be confronted by a host of social problems. In 2005, the British news media were full of references to the disorderly behaviour of young people on city streets – from fights after binge drinking to assaults on respectable citizens. Politicians responded to these reports by talking about a ‘culture of disrespect’ and by setting a Respect Agenda involving more police on the streets armed with new powers. In the British general election of 2010, some politicians talked about a ‘broken society’, drawing attention to well-publicised crimes despite the fact that most indicators showed that nearly all types of crime had declined in the previous decade.

The stories and the politicians’ speeches have this in common: both assume some sort of moral decline in which families or schools fail to discipline young people. In turn, the way each story is told implies a solution: tightening up ‘discipline’ in order to combat an assumed ‘moral decline’.

However, before we can consider such a ‘cure’, we need to consider carefully the ‘diagnosis’. Has juvenile crime increased or is the apparent increase a reflection of what counts as a ‘good’ story? Alternatively, might any increase be an artefact of what crimes get reported to the police? Take the scare about paedophiles preying on children through Internet chatrooms. In the case study below, Barry Glassner cuts the media hype to ask: how prevalent is this phenomenon?
In a decade when the United States had the highest rates of childhood poverty in the developed world and the lowest rates of spending on social services, American journalists and politicians repeatedly portrayed cyberspace as the scariest place a child can be, more menacing than anything young people face in a nonvirtual world. Parents worried that legions of adults would drool over their children’s photos on MySpace, the social-networking Web site dating to 2003, and gawk at the videos teens post on YouTube, which was inaugurated in 2005.

The reality is that patterns of abuse have not changed over the past decade. The vast majority of crimes against children and adolescents — sexual and otherwise — continue to be perpetrated by parents, relatives, and other adults the child or teen knows. More than four of five victims are abused by a parent, and another 10 percent by a caregiver, according to the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. The incidence of actual abuse as a result of an online connection is “vanishingly small,” as Mike A. Males, a sociologist who has studied the data, noted.

A group of researchers at the University of New Hampshire put it bluntly: “The publicity about online ‘predators’ who prey on naïve children using trickery and violence is largely inaccurate. Internet sex crimes involving adults and juveniles more often fit a model of statutory rape — adult offenders who meet, develop relationships with, and openly seduce underage teenagers — than a model of forcible sexual assault or paedophilic child molesting.”

When adults do solicit minors online, the researchers found, the young person almost invariably knows that the person at the other computer is an adult. Trickery about the perpetrator’s age or intentions is rare. Moreover, as a study in 2009 from Harvard pointed out, youths who are approached and respond are typically teens already at risk because of their own drug abuse or troubled home environments. Many engage willingly with the adult who solicits them.

While adults were being told their kids were endangering their lives online — or at least, wasting them away — studies were finding that the online activities of youths are not only nontoxic, they’re productive. For example, a report in 2008 from the John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation got little attention, but the extensive three-year study showed that youths use online media primarily for self-directed learning and to gain and extend friendships: “The digital world is creating new opportunities for youth to grapple with social norms, explore interests, develop technical skills, and experiment with new forms of self-expression,” the researchers wrote.

It is tempting to allow such people to define a research problem – particularly as there is usually a fat research grant attached to it! However, we must first look at the terms which are being used to define the problem. For instance, many managers will define problems in their organisation as problems of ‘communication’. The role of the researcher is then to work out how people can communicate ‘better’.

This means that formulating a student project in terms of ‘communication problems’ raises many difficulties. For instance, it may deflect attention from the communication ‘skills’ inevitably used in interaction. It may also tend to assume that the solution to any problem is more careful listening, while ignoring power relations present inside and outside patterns of communication. Such relations may also make the characterisation of ‘organisational efficiency’ very problematic. Thus ‘administrative’ problems give no more secure basis for social research than do ‘social’ problems.

Of course, this is not to deny that there are any real problems in society. However, even if we agree about what these problems are, it is not clear that they directly provide a researchable topic.

Let me turn to another issue which has been at the forefront of our attention since the 1980s: the problems of people infected with HIV. Some of these problems are, quite rightly, brought to the attention of the public by the organised activities of groups of people who carry the infection. What social researchers can contribute are the particular theoretical and methodological skills of their discipline. So economists can research how limited health-care resources can be used most effectively in coping with the epidemic in the West and in the Third World. Among sociologists, survey researchers can investigate patterns of sexual behaviour in order to try to promote effective health education, while qualitative methods may be used to study what is involved in the ‘negotiation’ of safer sex or in counselling people about HIV and AIDS.

As these examples demonstrate, the initial impetus for a study may arise from the needs of practitioners and clients. However, researchers from different disciplines will usually give an initial research topic their own theoretical and methodological ‘twist’. For instance, in my research on HIV counselling (Silverman, 1997), the use of tape recordings and detailed transcripts, as well as many technical concepts derived from my interest in conversation analysis (CA).

This example shows that it is usually necessary to refuse to allow our research topics to be totally defined in terms of the conceptions of ‘social problems’ as recognised by either professional or community groups. Ironically, by beginning from a clearly defined social science perspective, we can later address such social problems with, I believe, considerable force and persuasiveness. This issue is discussed in more detail in Chapter 13.
EXERCISE 2.1

Discuss how you might study people who take the law into their own hands ('vigilantes'). Is there any difference between your proposed study and a good TV documentary on the same subject (i.e. differences in the questions you would ask and how you would test your conclusions)?

Now consider: (a) whether this matters and (b) what special contribution, if any, social science research can bring to such social problems.

2.2 FORMULATING A RESEARCHABLE QUESTION

Say you have avoided the pitfalls described in the previous section. You have selected a sensible topic. How do you turn it into a researchable question that you can answer within the constraints of time and available resources? Two tips may help:

* narrow down your topic
* give focus to your research.

2.2.1 Narrow down your research topic

One merit of the research project that I considered at the start of this chapter is that it concerned a relatively narrow (and hence manageable) topic. For instance, it has narrowed down the issue of students' perceptions to just one topic. This is praiseworthy because it is quite common for novice researchers to take on what turns out to be an impossibly large research problem.

Let us look at one example. It is important to find the causes of a social problem like homelessness, but such a problem is beyond the scope of a single researcher with limited time and resources. Moreover, by defining the problem so widely, one is usually unable to say anything at great depth about it. Indeed, the issues raised may be unanswerable in the sense that it is difficult to see what data are required to address it or how the data will be obtained (see Punch, 1998: 49). The next case study shows how one research student discovered that narrowing down his topic to perceptions of people in one homeless shelter might still lead him up a blind alley if he kept to the assumption that all homeless people despise the world of work.
At the beginning of my ethnography of a homeless shelter, I wanted to organize my dissertation around the notion that the homeless are "the postmodern heroes of our time." The idea was inspired by interviews with homeless men who had said things like "It sucks to be a citizen" or "I feel sorry for the poor bastards who're enslaved by their work. I'm free to sleep where I want and go where I want." I interpreted such statements as clear rejections of the modern, capitalist premise of productive labor. Chatting in coffee shops with fellow students, I championed the cause of the homeless by quoting their anti-work statements, translating my field notes into political slogans. However, when it came to writing the dissertation, aside from a few broad declarations like "It appears that some homeless people reject conventional notions of work," I had little else to write on the topic.

Fortunately, as my writing and analysis progressed, with the help of my peers and dissertation director, I focused on another idea that seemed more in sync with the empirical evidence and my sociological training. In particular, my data seemed to show that the very notion of "the homeless" was problematic. The men and women on the streets and in shelters viewed their circumstances from many different standpoints. Some thought of their situation as a type of personal freedom whereas others said they were "miserable." This way of analyzing and writing about my fieldwork became the foundation of my research and was further polished as the writing went on. (Marvasti, 2011)

As I tell my students, your aim should be to say 'a lot about a little (problem)'. Do not worry if your topic is too small or too narrow. I have never seen a student project assessed in these terms. This is because your professor will commend you for choosing a small-scale and hence manageable topic.

Avoid the temptation to say 'a little about a lot'. Indeed, the latter path can be something of a 'cop out'. Precisely, because the topic is so wide ranging, one can flit from one aspect to another without being forced to refine and test each piece of analysis (see Silverman, 2010: 86–8, 92–5).

2.2.2 Give focus to your research

I have been arguing that it is often unhelpful for researchers to begin their work on a basis of a 'social problem' identified by either practitioners or managers. It is
a commonplace that such definitions of ‘problems’ often may serve vested interests. My point, however, is that if social science research has anything to offer, its theoretical imperatives drive it in a direction which can offer participants new perspectives on their problems. Paradoxically, by refusing to begin from a common conception of what is ‘wrong’ in a setting, we may be most able to contribute to the identification both of what is going on and, thereby, how it may be modified in the pursuit of desired ends.

The various perspectives of social science provide a sensitivity to many issues neglected by those who define ‘social’ or administrative ‘problems’. Let me distinguish three types of sensitivity:

* historical
* political
* contextual.

I will explain and discuss each of these in turn.

**Historical sensitivity**
Wherever possible, one should examine the relevant historical evidence when setting up a topic to research. For instance, in the 1950s and 1960s it was assumed that the ‘nuclear family’ (parents and children) had replaced the ‘extended family’ (many generations living together in the same household) of pre-industrial societies. Researchers simply seemed to have forgotten that lower life-expectancy may have made the ‘extended family’ pattern relatively rare in the past.

Again, historical sensitivity helps us to understand how we are governed. For instance, until the eighteenth century, the majority of the population were treated as a threatening ‘mob’ to be controlled, where necessary, by the use of force. Today, we are seen as individuals with ‘needs’ and ‘rights’ which must be understood and protected by society (see Foucault, 1977). But, although oppressive force may be used only rarely, we may be controlled in more subtle ways. Think of the knowledge about each of us contained in computerised databanks and the pervasive video cameras which record movements in many city streets. Historical sensitivity thus offers us multiple research topics which evade the trap of thinking that present-day versions of ‘social problems’ are unproblematic.

**Political sensitivity**
Allowing the current media ‘scare’ to determine our research topics is just as fallible as designing research in accordance with administrative or managerial interests. In neither case do we use political sensitivity to detect the vested interests behind this way of formulating a problem. The media, after all, need to attract an audience. Administrators need to be seen to be working efficiently.
So political sensitivity seeks to grasp the politics behind defining topics in particular ways. For instance, if you set out to research crime today, you should bear in mind that the 'law and order' discourse that politicians use is based, at least in the UK, on a simple formula: 'alcohol plus young men equals violent crime' (Noaks and Wincup, 2004: 34).

This shows how political sensitivity helps in suggesting how 'social problems' arise. For instance, Nelson (1984) looked at how 'child abuse' became defined as a recognisable problem in the late 1960s. She shows how the findings of a doctor about 'the battered baby syndrome' were adopted by the conservative Nixon administration through linking social problems to parental 'maladjustment' rather than to the failures of social programmes.

In case I am misunderstood, political sensitivity does not mean that social scientists argue that there are no 'real' problems in society. Instead, it suggests that social science can make an important contribution to society by querying how 'official' definitions of problems arise. To be truthful, however, we should also recognise how social scientists often need tacitly to accept such definitions in order to attract research grants.

**Contextual sensitivity**

This is the least self-explanatory and most contentious category in the present list. By 'contextual' sensitivity, I mean the recognition that apparently uniform institutions like 'the family', 'a tribe' or 'science' take on a variety of meanings in different contexts. Contextual sensitivity is reflected most obviously in Moerman's (1974) study of the Lue tribe in Thailand. Moerman began with the anthropologist's conventional appetite to locate a people in a classificatory scheme. To satisfy this appetite, he started to ask tribespeople questions like 'How do you recognise a member of your tribe?'

He reports that his respondents quickly became adept at providing a whole list of traits which constituted their tribe and distinguished them from their neighbours. At the same time, Moerman realised that such a list was, in purely logical terms, endless. Perhaps if you wanted to understand these people, it was not particularly useful to elicit an abstract account of their characteristics.

So Moerman stopped asking 'Who are the Lue?' Clearly, such ethnic identification devices were not used all the time by these people any more than we use them to refer to ourselves in a Western culture. Instead, Moerman started to examine what went on in everyday situations.

Looked at this way, the issue is no longer who the Lue essentially are, but when, among people living in these Thai villages, ethnic identification labels are invoked and the consequences of invoking them. Curiously enough, Moerman concluded that, when you looked at the matter this way, the apparent differences between the Lue and ourselves were considerably reduced. Only an ethnocentric Westerner might have assumed otherwise, behaving like a tourist craving for out-of-the-way sights.
But it is not only such large-scale collectivities as tribes that are looked at afresh when we use what I have called contextual sensitivity. Other apparently stable social institutions (like the ‘family’) and identities (gender, ethnicity, etc.) may be insufficiently questioned from a social problem perspective.

For instance, commentators say things like ‘the family is under threat’. But where are we to find the unitary form of family assumed in such commentary? And does ‘the family’ not look different in contexts ranging from the household, to the law courts or even the supermarket (see Section 3.4)? Rather than take such arguments at face value, the researcher must make use of the three kinds of sensitivity, to discover how things actually operate in a social world where, as Moerman shows us, people’s practices are inevitably more complex than they might seem.

Try to avoid thinking of social institutions as unitary phenomena. Get in the habit of considering the various contexts in which such institutions become relevant. By choosing to focus on just one such context, you can help to make your research topic more manageable.

One final point. The three kinds of sensitivity we have been considering offer different, sometimes contradictory, ways of generating research topics. I am not suggesting that all should be used at the beginning of any research study. However, if we are not sensitive to any of these issues, then we run the danger of lapsing into a ‘social problem’ based way of defining our research topics.

EXERCISE 2.2

Return to your interpretation of ‘vigilantes’ in Exercise 2.1. Now examine how you could generate different research problems using each of the three kinds of ‘sensitivity’ discussed above:

1. historical
2. political
3. contextual.

2.3 FITTING YOUR RESEARCH QUESTION INTO AN APPROPRIATE THEORY

In some respects, ‘common-sense thinking’ is the enemy of good research. Research topics which mimic the ‘problems’ discussed in Internet chatrooms or
newspapers usually will not work. What I have called ‘sensitivity’ refers to the way in which your academic discipline offers you useful theories and concepts which can help you to generate a good research topic.

However, everything is a matter of balance and I will shortly show how we can be over-influenced by theory. These are the topics that follow:

- thinking theoretically
- under-theorised topics
- over-theorised topics.

### 2.3.1 Thinking theoretically

Some people become qualitative researchers for rather negative reasons. Perhaps they are not very good at statistics (or think they are not) and so are not tempted by quantitative research. Or perhaps they have not shone at library work and hope that they can stimulate their sluggish imagination by getting out into ‘the field’.

Unfortunately, as most scientists and philosophers are agreed, the facts we find in ‘the field’ never speak for themselves but are impregnated by our assumptions. For instance, the initial reports of bystanders in Dallas at the time of the assassination of President Kennedy in 1963 were not of shots but of hearing a car backfiring (Sacks, 1984: 519). Why did people hear it this way?

We all know that people who think they have heard a shot every time a car backfires may be regarded as unstable or even psychotic. So our descriptions are never simple reports of ‘events’ but are structured to depict ourselves as particular kinds of people who are usually ‘reasonable’ and ‘cautious’.

But, you may say, surely social scientists are more objective than that? After all, they have scientific methods for making observations more trustworthy.

Well, yes and no. Certainly, social scientists will usually go through a more cautious process of sorting fact from opinion than most of us ever need to do in everyday life (see Chapter 8). However, even scientists only observe ‘facts’ through the use of lenses made up of concepts and theories.

Sacks has a basic example of this:

Suppose you’re an anthropologist or sociologist standing somewhere. You see somebody do some action, and you see it to be some activity. How can you go about formulating who is it that did it, for the purposes of your report? Can you use at least what you might take to be the most conservative formulation — his name? Knowing, of course, that any category you choose would have these kinds of systematic problems: how would you go about selecting a given category from the set that would equally well characterise or identify that person at hand? (Sacks, 1992, I: 467–8)
Sacks shows how you cannot resolve such problems simply ‘by taking the best possible notes at the time and making your decisions afterwards’ (1992, I: 468). Whatever we observe is impregnated by assumptions.

EXERCISE 2.3

Sacks (1992) offers a case where you observe a car coming drawing up near you. A door opens and a teenage woman emerges and runs a few paces. Two other people (one male, one female) get out of the car. They run after the young woman, take her arms and pull her back into the car which now drives off.

Now answer these questions:

1. Without using your social science knowledge, prepare at least two different interpretations of what you have seen. Focus on whether this is something you should report to the police.

2. Examine at least two different interpretations of your behaviour if: (a) you report this matter to the police or (b) you do not report it.

3. Now use any ideas you know from your own discipline to describe and/or explain what you have seen.

4. Consider (a) whether these ideas are likely to give a more ‘accurate’ picture than your description in 1 and (b) to what extent we need to choose between the descriptions in 1 and 3.

In scientific work, these assumptions are usually given the fancy term ‘theories’. But what are ‘theories’? O’Brien (1993) has used the example of a kaleidoscope to answer this question. As he explains:

a kaleidoscope ... (is) the child’s toy consisting of a tube, a number of lenses and fragments of translucent, coloured glass or plastic. When you turn the tube and look down the lens of the kaleidoscope the shapes and colours, visible at the bottom, change. As the tube is turned, different lenses come into play and the combinations of colour and shape shift from one pattern to another. In a similar way, we can see social theory as a sort of kaleidoscope – by shifting theoretical perspective the world under investigation also changes shape. (O’Brien, 1993: 10–11)

How theory works as a kaleidoscope can be seen by taking a concrete, if crude, example. Imagine that a group of social scientists from different disciplines are observing people at a party through a two-way mirror. The sociologist might observe the gender composition of various conversational groups, while the linguist might listen to how ‘small talk’ is managed between speakers. The psychologist might focus on the characteristics of ‘loners’ versus people who are the ‘life
and soul of the party and the geographer might observe how the spatial organisation of the room influenced how people conversed.

The point is that none of these observations are more real or more true than the others. For instance, people are not essentially defined in terms of either their social characteristics (like gender) or their personalities (extrovert or introvert). It all depends on your research question. And research questions are inevitably theoretically informed. So we do need social theories to help us to address even quite basic issues in social research.

2.3.2 Under-theorised topics

Students commonly assume that the strength of qualitative research is its ability to get under the surface in order to understand people’s perceptions and experiences. This particularly applies where the researcher sets out to record faithfully the ‘experiences’ of some, usually disadvantaged, group (e.g. the homeless, battered women, gay men, the unemployed). However, as we saw in our hypothetical student interview project, it can also involve trying to get inside the heads of any group you find around you.

Trying to understand the other’s experiences is very much a feature of the twenty-first century world: not just the topic of (much) student research but also the rationale behind such mass media settings as talk shows and celebrity magazines. However, in a way, this concern with ‘experience’ also goes back to the nineteenth century. This was the time in which people expected that literature, art and music would express the inner world of the artist and engage the emotions of the audience. This movement was called romanticism.

As I argue in Chapter 6, there is more than a hint of this romanticism in some contemporary qualitative research (see also Gubrium and Holstein, 1997a; Atkinson and Silverman, 1997). Yet the romantic approach, although appealing, is also dangerous. It may neglect how ‘experience’ is shaped by cultural forms of representation. For instance, what we think is most personal to us (‘guilt’, ‘responsibility’) may be simply a culturally given way of understanding the world (see my discussion of the mother of a young diabetic person in Section 9.5.2). So it is problematic to justify research in terms of its ‘authentic’ representation of ‘experience’ when what is ‘authentic’ is culturally defined.

This under-theorisation of ‘experience’ can also be seen when a researcher follows an approach to different cultures which is uncritically ‘touristic’. I have in mind the ‘upmarket’ tourist who travels the world in search of encounters with alien cultures. Disdaining package tours and even the label of ‘tourist’, such a person has an insatiable thirst for the ‘new’ and ‘different’. The problem is that there are worrying parallels between the qualitative researcher and this kind of tourist. Such researchers often begin without a hypothesis and, like the tourist, gaze rapaciously at social
scapes for signs of activities and experiences that appear to be new and different. The danger in all this is that 'touristic' researchers may so focus on cultural and 'subcultural' (or group) differences that they fail to recognise similarities between the culture to which they belong and the cultures which they study. For instance, once you switch away from asking 'leading' questions (which assume cultural differences) to observation of what people actually are doing, then you may find certain common features between social patterns in the West and East (see Ryen and Silverman, 2000, and my earlier discussion of Moerman's, 1974, study of a Thai tribe).

This discussion of romanticism and tourism has implications for analysing interview data which I discuss fully in Chapter 6. It is a symptom of what I have called 'under-theorisation' not because such research is without a theory but rather because it theorises the world tacitly or unconsciously. Instead, I suggest you try to draw consciously upon the theories and concepts of your discipline.

### 2.3.3 Over-theorised topics

Any apparent solution, when carried too far, can create a new problem. This is very much the case with theory. Just as some research projects are under-theorised, others carry theory beyond its proper limits. Sometimes the topic is so large and speculative that it is difficult to see how the student will ever get out of the library to gather and analyse some data. Sometimes one finds a quite sensible, well-organised research project dressed up in totally inappropriate theoretical clothes.

The other day I listened to a student giving a talk about his MA project. In most respects, this seemed to be an excellent piece of research. The topic was interesting yet manageable and the analysis was thorough. Unusually for such work, it had been published and its clear policy recommendations had started an important public debate.

I had only one complaint about this research. This was about how the student presented his data analysis. He chose to define his work in terms of discourse analysis. As we shall see in Chapter 9, this is a complicated methodology which has a quite specific approach to data. However, it turned out that the student's approach, while thorough, was far less complicated. Basically, he had scanned his interviews without any prior hypotheses and sought to develop a set of categories to illuminate his data. This approach, as we shall see in Chapter 3, is associated with grounded theory.

So here was a highly worthwhile piece of student research which undercut itself by flirting with an inappropriate theoretical approach. But this is only a minor case of over-theorisation. Far worse instances arise when researchers find it necessary to portray their work in terms of general theories of which they have very little grasp and which often bear little relation to their research. I have lost count of the run-of-the-mill qualitative research papers I have come across which find it necessary to define their work in terms of obscure philosophical positions such as phenomenology
or hermeneutics. You will not find either of these terms in the Glossary of this book for one simple reason. In my view, you do not need to understand these terms in order to carry out good qualitative research. Indeed, if you try to understand them, my guess is that you will not emerge from the library for many years!

**TIP**

If you have a simple approach that is working well for you, do not try to dress up your work in fancy terms. Do not over-theorise!

### 2.4 CHOOSING AN EFFECTIVE RESEARCH DESIGN

Let us now assume that you have a workable research topic narrow enough to study and with just the right amount of input from relevant concepts and theories. Now you have to decide how you will study it. This means choosing an effective research design. This revolves around the following issues:

- considering the range of methods of data collection you can use
- making sure that your method is appropriate
- avoiding too many data-collection methods
- making sure you don’t collect too much data.

#### 2.4.1 The range of methods

There are four major methods used by qualitative researchers:

- observation
- analysing texts and documents
- interviews and focus groups
- audio and video recording (and other visual material).

These methods are often combined. For instance, many case studies combine observation with interviewing. Moreover, each method can be used in either qualitative or quantitative research studies. As Table 2.1 shows, the overall nature of the research methodology shapes how each method is used.

Table 2.1 shows that methods are techniques which take on a specific meaning according to the methodology in which they are used. (Do not worry if the distinction between ‘method’ and ‘methodology’ is unclear to you. Later in this chapter I explain these and other terms that we use in research design.)
### TABLE 2.1 Different uses for four methods

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Method</th>
<th>Quantitative research</th>
<th>Qualitative research</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Observation</td>
<td>Preliminary work, e.g. prior to framing questionnaire</td>
<td>Fundamental to understanding another culture</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Textual analysis</td>
<td>Content analysis, i.e. counting in terms of researchers' categories</td>
<td>Understanding participants’ categories</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interviews</td>
<td>Survey research: mainly fixed-choice questions to random samples</td>
<td>‘Open-ended’ questions to small samples</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Audio and video</td>
<td>Used infrequently to check the accuracy of interview records</td>
<td>Understanding the organisation of talk, gaze and body movements</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

In quantitative research, observation is not generally seen as a very important method of data collection. This is because it is difficult to conduct observational studies on large samples. Quantitative researchers also argue that observation is not a very ‘reliable’ data-collection method because different observers may record different observations. If used at all, observation is held to be only appropriate at a preliminary or ‘exploratory’ stage of research.

Conversely, observational studies have been fundamental to much qualitative research. Beginning with the pioneering case studies of non-Western societies by early anthropologists (Malinowski, 1922; Radcliffe-Brown, 1948) and continuing with the work by sociologists in Chicago prior to the Second World War (see Deegan, 2001), the observational method has often been the chosen method to understand another culture (Chapter 5).

These contrasts are also apparent in the treatment of texts and documents. Quantitative researchers try to analyse written material in a way which will produce reliable evidence about a large sample. Their favoured method is content analysis in which the researchers establish a set of categories and then count the number of instances that fall into each category. The crucial requirement is that the categories are sufficiently precise to enable different coders to arrive at the same results when the same body of material (e.g. newspaper headlines) is examined (see Berelson, 1952).

In qualitative research, content analysis is less common (but see Marvasti, 2004: 90–4). The crucial issue is to understand the participants’ categories and to see how these are used in concrete activities like telling stories (Propp, 1968; Sacks, 1974), assembling files (Cicourel, 1968; Gubrium and Buckholdt, 1982) or describing ‘family life’ (Gubrium, 1992). The reliability of the analysis is less frequently addressed. Instead, qualitative researchers make claims about their ability to reveal the local practices through which given ‘end-products’ (stories, files, descriptions) are assembled.

Interviews are commonly used in both methodologies. Quantitative researchers administer interviews or questionnaires to random samples of the population; this is referred to as ‘survey research’. ‘Fixed-choice’ questions (e.g. ‘yes’ or ‘no’) are usually preferred because the answers they produce lend themselves to simple
tabulation, unlike 'open-ended' questions which produce answers which need to be subsequently coded. A central methodological issue for quantitative researchers is the reliability of the interview schedule and the representativeness of the sample.

For instance, after surveys of voting intention did not coincide with the result of the British general election of 1992, survey researchers looked again at their methodology. Assuming that some respondents in the past may have lied to interviewers about their voting intentions, some companies now provide a ballot box into which respondents put mock ballot slips – thereby eliminating the need to reveal one's preferences to the interviewer. Attention was also given to assembling a more representative sample to interview, bearing in mind the expense of a completely random sample of the whole British population. Perhaps as a result of these methodological revisions, pollsters’ final figures of voting intentions fitted much more closely the actual result of subsequent British elections.

'Authenticity' rather than sample size is often the issue in qualitative research. The aim is usually to gather an 'authentic' understanding of people's experiences and it is believed that 'open-ended' questions are the most effective route towards this end. So, for instance, in gathering life-histories or in interviewing parents of handicapped children (Baruch, 1982) people may simply be asked: 'tell me your story'. Qualitative interview studies are often conducted with small samples and the interviewer-interviewee relationship may be defined in political rather than scientific terms (e.g. Finch, 1984).

Finally, audio and video data are rarely used in quantitative research, probably because of the assumption that they are difficult to quantify. Conversely, as we shall see (Chapters 9 and 10), audio and video recordings, as well as other visual images, are an increasingly important part of qualitative research. Transcripts of such recordings, based on standardised conventions, provide an excellent record of 'naturally occurring' interaction. Compared with fieldnotes of observational data, recordings and transcripts can offer a highly reliable record to which researchers can return as they develop new hypotheses.

EXERCISE 2.4

Once more focus on 'vigilantes'. Now suggest what research questions can be addressed by any two of the four methods just discussed. Namely:

- observation
- analysing texts, documents and visual images
- interviews
- recording and transcribing.

Now consider: (a) What are the relative merits of each method in addressing this topic? (b) What, if anything, could be gained by combining both methods (you might like to refer forward to my discussion of 'triangulation' in Section 11.3.2)?
2.4.2 Appropriate methods

Both science and everyday life teach us that there is no 'right' method to proceed. Everything depends on what you are trying to achieve.

Despite this truism, students regularly use methods that are quite inappropriate to their research topic. As I noted about our hypothetical student project, how can we be sure that a qualitative approach was appropriate? On the face of it, if you are interested in something as concrete as people's perceptions of their job prospects, surely a quantitative survey of a larger number of students would be more appropriate than a few ‘intensive’ interviews?

Even if you can convince your professor that a qualitative method is appropriate, are you sure that you have chosen the right method? As I have already suggested, it is possible that many people choose to gather interview data less because they are appropriate to their topic and more because they have unthinkingly assimilated a romantic outlook. Decide the kind of data to use by asking yourself which data are most appropriate to your research problem – for instance, are you more interested in what people are thinking or feeling or in what they are doing? And make an informed choice between the many different kinds of data and methods that are freely available to us in the twenty-first century.

2.4.3 Focus on a single method

Lack of confidence can also manifest itself in an incapacity to choose or to commit oneself. You may be so impressed by the different methods you have learned on your Qualitative Research course that, somehow, you want to use more than one on your student project. Wouldn't it be nice, you ask yourself, to combine your interviews with some observation or, say, a focus group? My response is simple: take this path only if you seriously want to complicate your life and, perhaps, end up having passed the time limit for delivery.

Often the desire to use multiple methods arises because you want to get at many different aspects of a phenomenon. However, this may mean that you have not yet sufficiently narrowed down your topic. Sometimes a better approach is to treat the analysis of different kinds of data as a ‘dry run’ for your main study. As such, it is a useful test of the kind of data which you can most easily gather and analyse.

‘Mapping’ one set of data upon another (or data triangulation) is a more or less complicated task depending on your analytic framework. In particular, if you treat social reality as constructed in different ways in different contexts (or constructionism), then you cannot appeal to a single ‘phenomenon’ which all your data apparently represent.

Research design should involve careful thought rather than seeking the most immediately attractive option. However, none of the points above exclude the
possibility of using multiple means of gathering data. Ultimately, everything will depend on the quality of your data analysis rather than upon the quality of your data. Just make sure you have the time and the ability.

http://www.rscbook.co.uk

A very useful website based on Clive Seale's edited book *Researching Society and Culture* (2004b) is:

2.4.4 Make sure you have just the right amount of data

Lack of confidence can create many of the difficulties I have been discussing. For instance, if you are unsure of yourself, you may think it will impress your professor if you set up a huge problem and perhaps define it in grand theoretical terms. Similarly, collecting vast amounts of data may appear to reassure you that you are making progress on your project.

Unfortunately, as generations of PhD students could tell you, until you have analysed your data you have achieved precisely nothing. If depth rather than breadth is the aim of experienced qualitative researchers, how much more so for the beginner!

To make your analysis effective, it is imperative to have a limited body of data with which to work. So, while it may be useful initially to explore different kinds of data, this should usually only be done to establish the data set with which you can most effectively work within the timescale open to you. And do not worry if this means that you will not be able to compare different cases. The comparative method is indeed worthwhile, but it can be used *within* very small data sets.

2.5 AN EFFECTIVE LITERATURE REVIEW

Most people know that research reports should contain a section on the relevant literature. The danger is that you will treat such a literature review as an academic duty rather than as something really relevant to your research project. It is relevant because:

- good research frames its aims in the context of earlier work
- without reading the literature you are in danger of trying to answer questions about research design that have already been answered for you (so you will be trying 'to reinvent the wheel')
- when you write your conclusions, it is important to relate your findings to other studies.
A good discussion of the literature in your area presupposes the sensible recording of what you read. So I will ask first: what is the best way to record your reading?

### 2.5.1 Recording your reading

During your academic studies, I hope that you will have learned the habit of keeping your reading notes in a word-processed file, organised in terms of (emerging) topics. I stress 'reading notes' because it is important from the start that you do not simply collate books or photocopies of articles for 'later' reading but read as you go. Equally, your notes should not just consist of chunks of written or scanned extracts from the original sources but represent your ideas on the relevance of what you are reading for your (emerging) research problem. Table 2.2 offers suggestions for sensible note-taking.

#### TABLE 2.2  Reading and note-taking

<p>| | |</p>
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Never pick up and put down an article without doing something with it</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Highlight key points, write notes in the margins and summaries elsewhere</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Transfer notes and summaries to where you will use them in your dissertation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>Ensure that each note will stand alone without you needing to go back to the original</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: adapted from Phelps et al., 2007: 175–6

The notes and highlighting mentioned in Table 2.2 should involve your reflections on the material's relevance (to your topic) and on how convincing you find it. This is what is meant by a critical reading of the literature. Never just copy chunks of material.

It goes without saying that you should use a consistent system for referencing authors and other details of the material you are reading. The Harvard method of referencing is usually the system chosen. This involves entering an author's surname, followed by date of publication and any page reference in your main text as below:

Abrams (1984: 2); Agar (1986: 84)

By using this method, you can save footnotes for substantial asides rather than for (boring) references. Detailed references are then appended in a bibliography with the form set out below:


I now turn to some practical questions about writing a literature review:

- What should it contain?
- Where will you find what you need to read?
- How should you read?

2.5.2 What should a literature review contain?

In part, a literature review should be used to display your scholarly skills and credentials. In this sense, you should use it:

To demonstrate skills in library searching; to show command of the subject area and understanding of the problem; to justify the research topic, design and methodology. (Hart, 1998: 13)

Such justification also means that any literature review connected with a piece of research has as much to do with good research design as with displaying your academic credentials.

This involves addressing the questions set out in Table 2.3.

**TABLE 2.3 Contents of a literature review**

- What do we already know about the topic?
- What do you have to say critically about what is already known?
- Has anyone else ever done anything exactly the same?
- Has anyone else done anything that is related?
- Where does your work fit in with what has gone before?
- Why is your research worth doing in the light of what has already been done?

*Source: adapted from Murcott, 1997*

Once you start to see your literature review as dialogic rather than a mere replication of other people's writing, you are going in the right direction. Conceived as an answer to a set of questions, your reading can immediately become more directed and your writing more engaging and relevant. Exercise 2.5 gives you an opportunity to test out your skills in using the existing literature to help you in your own research. It emphasises that we should never read such literature without having formulated some prior set of questions.

**EXERCISE 2.5**

Select what you regard as the two or three most relevant pieces of literature. Now:

1. Make notes on each, attempting to use each one to answer the questions found in Table 2.3.
2.5.3 Where will I find the literature?

As Hart (2001: 24) points out, it helps to do some preliminary thinking about what you are doing before you begin the search itself. Below are some issues to think about (drawn from Hart, 2001: 24):

- What discipline(s) relate to my main topic?
- How can I focus my topic to make my search more precise?
- What are main indexes and abstracts relevant to my topic?
- What means of recording will be most efficient for many tasks such as cross-referencing? Hart points out that index cards are useful.

Once you are prepared, it is time to review the many potential sources of information about what literature you need to read and where to find it:

- your supervisor
- the subject librarian in your university library
- bibliographies in the literature you read
- online searches on the World Wide Web
- the Social Sciences Citation Index
- news groups on the Internet
- your fellow students (past and present).

Excellent discussions of using the Web for literature searches are provided by Phelps et al. (2007: 129-65) and O'Dochartaigh (2007).

For a template for recording literature searches, go to:

www.sagepub.co.uk/phelps

In literature searches, there is no need to worry about admitting your lack of knowledge. Indeed the American sociologist Gary Marx recommends taking