Institute of Education

UCL

Copyright Notice

Staff and students of the Institute of Education are reminded that copyright subsists in this extract and the work from which it is taken. This digital copy has been made under the terms of a CLA licence which allows you to:

- Access and download a copy:
- Print out a copy

This digital copy and any digital or printed copy supplied to or made by you under the terms of this licence are for use in connection with this course of study. You may retain such copies after the end of the course, but strictly for your own personal use.

All copies (including electronic copies) shall include this Copyright Notice and shall be destroyed and/or deleted if and when required by the Institute of Education.

Except as provided for by copyright law, no further copying, storage or distribution (including by email) is permitted without the consent of the copyright holder.

The author (which term includes artists and other visual creators) has moral rights in the work and neither staff nor students may cause, or permit, the distortion, mutilation or other modification of the work, or any other derogatory treatment of it, which would be prejudicial to the honour or reputation of the author.

Course of Study: Qualitative Social Science Research Methods

Name of Designated Person authorising scanning: Andrew Welshman

Robson, C. (2007). ‘Developing your ideas’. In C. Robson, *How to do a research project: a guide for undergraduate students,* (Chapter, 3, pp. 47-69). Oxford and Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing.

3

Developing Your Ideas

Selecting a Topic

The selection of a general topic area tends either to be straightforward and quick, or problematic and likely to eat up a lot of valuable time – unless you are careful. It is easy if you are following up on something you have already been involved with, or if the topic is decided by someone else. The boss says, 'do this', or your supervisor says 'select one from this list'.

In other situations, you need to give topic selection careful thought. Keep your eyes and ears open. Talk to people – colleagues, fellow students and your supervisor. Read voraciously. Dip into recent issues of academic and professional journals, serious newspapers and magazines. Follow tentative ideas up on the internet using Google or a similar search engine (see the section on sources later in the chapter, p. 56).

The topic should fulfil three main criteria:

- ☐ *It interests you* Doing a piece of research can be a very rewarding experience. Many students consider it to be the most valuable and worthwhile part of their whole degree course. However, it can be frustrating. All sorts of things can go wrong and some will. Having a real interest in the topic can keep you going through the inevitable sticky patches.
- ☐ *It will meet course requirements* As a student on a degree or other course, your primary audience is whoever will assess your work. There will be formal requirements about what is expected. These will mainly affect the type of study and how it is to be written up, rather than its focus.
- ☐ *It will be feasible for you to deliver something worthwhile on the topic given the available time and resources* Keep away from 'big' topics such as world peace or global warming. Though if something big really interests you, it may be feasible to focus on a particular small facet which is manageable.

Beware highly sensitive topics. Lacking experience, you may be out of your depth and cause harm. For example, a study of an innovatory scheme for drug users, unless carefully handled, may stimulate opposition and cause its termination.

Advisers may also recommend that you keep away from currently 'hot' topics; i.e. ones where there is much current interest. However, if you can come up with something new and different that fulfils the criteria, and/or you have useful access, consider going for it. Even popular areas like these are rarely fully worked out. The main practical disadvantage is that you will need to get on top of a substantial amount of recently completed, perhaps not very accessible, research.

A fairly common situation is to come up with two possible 'runners' which you can't decide between. Then, when you find out more about the first topic, you begin to appreciate its problems, and so the second topic seems more attractive. And when you find out more about the second topic . . . and so on. Go for the one that interests you more.

Box 3.1 lists a varied set of topics mainly harvested from an hour's surfing on the internet. The last two are derived from Dunbar (2005), who provides a rich source of interesting topics, based on case studies in the evaluation of research designs. While these topics vary tremendously in breadth, they all need substantial further focusing. The next step is to find out more about the topic. With some, there will be an embarrassment of riches – try a Google search on 'Homeless youth'. Here the problem is to see the wood for the trees, but there are usually fairly obvious pointers toward possible facets of the topic that might be more manageable. Perhaps the needs of pre-school homeless, or the effectiveness of compensatory education programmes for homeless school-age children. Similarly, 'Binge drinking' is, at the time of writing, an

Box 3.1 Examples of broad topic areas

Pets in sheltered housing for the elderly
Overcoming computer anxiety
Children and dinosaurs
Nanny care and language development
Homeless youth
Driving while talking on a mobile phone
Influence of TV lifestyle programmes
Educating children with behaviour problems in regular classes
Binge drinking
Graphology and job selection
Effects of video gaming

extremely 'hot' topic, particularly in the context of late night and early hours anti-social behaviour by young drinkers. Changing the focus to excessive drinking at home by senior citizens might be profitable.

A search on other topics – 'children and dinosaurs' for example, may throw up few leads. You may find this more attractive; moving into relatively uncharted waters.

Practitioner researchers can be highly constrained in the choice of a topic. It should not only be something that you consider both feasible and interesting, but also must meet with approval and support within your organization (both formally by management and more informally by colleagues – see the sections on access and 'insider research', chapter 5, p. 100).

Many topics can yield a worthwhile and feasible project with sufficient ingenuity and focusing. But there are topics you should steer clear of – Box 3.2 gives examples.

Box 3.2 Research topics to avoid

1 *Too big* Topics that demand more resources to complete in the time that you have available. Can be rescued by focusing on one aspect only.

2 *Too trivial* New researchers, frightened by warnings about limited resources, can go to the opposite extreme. Small can be beautiful. Some high quality projects research a single unit such as a classroom, but there has to be compensating depth and detail. Avoid the trivial. A very specific topic should be defensible as having some kind of wider relevance, to practice, theory, or whatever.

3 *Too difficult* Just because you can isolate an interesting topic, doesn't mean you can say anything worthwhile about it. There are often good reasons why a topic hasn't been previously researched.

4 *Too boring* Avoid a topic that doesn't interest you. Even if you complete it (and you might find it difficult to maintain motivation), others are also likely to find it boring.

5 *Ethically dubious* Steer clear of topics that you can't do without breaching ethical guidelines (e.g. putting participants at risk of harm or where findings might be used to harm or disadvantage someone). See the later section in this chapter, p. 64.

Replication research

A replication of a piece of research is an attempt to repeat it. In social research there is much concern about the replicability of findings from previous research; i.e. whether repeating the research would result in the same findings. A distinction is made between exact replications, which, as the term suggests, seek to repeat the study exactly, and constructive replications in which the original study is modified in one or more respects.

If you are interested in the findings of a piece of research you have come across, or if the findings seem suspect, there is much to be said for attempting a constructive replication of it. Not an exact replication though, as it might be argued that there is not enough of you in the exercise. Also your study probably couldn't be an exact replication anyway, as it necessarily takes place at a different time from the original and is probably in a context which differs in other important aspects. Check that a study of this type is acceptable in your course regulations.

From a Topic to Research Questions

Your first task is to move from the broad topic area to a more focused topic. Think of this as your working title for the project. It is often helpful to have a two part title, e.g. 'Why do children like dinosaurs? An exploratory study at a nursery school'. Or '"I couldn't take my cat": a study of policies in residential homes for the elderly, and their effects'. One part indicates the topic area. The other tells you something about the focus.

The second crucial and difficult task is to formulate the research questions to which your project will try to get answers. Resist the temptation to go out and collect data until you have at least a tentative set of possible questions.

In coming to a decision to go for a topic, and from the reading and discussions you have had along the way, you will probably already have an initial set of questions that you can write down. They are likely to be of different types. Some may be nuts-and-bolts questions of the 'who/what/where/when' kind (some 'why' ones wouldn't come amiss, either). Make a list of any and all questions you can come up with. Splurge – don't censor them for whether or not they are sensible. Box 3.3 gives an example.

This set of 20 questions is typical of most 'splurged' lists in being something of a mess. There are many more questions than one could hope to deal with adequately in a small-scale project; it is very teacher-oriented, and there is considerable overlap between several of the questions. Nevertheless, it is a useful starting point.

Box 3.3 An initial (unedited) set of research questions

1. How do teachers in secondary schools use interactive whiteboards?
2. What training have teachers had in the use of interactive whiteboards?
3. Which teaching subjects are interactive whiteboards most useful for?
4. Which pupil ages are interactive whiteboards most useful for?
5. Which ability groups are interactive whiteboards most useful for?
6. Does the use of interactive whiteboards by teachers vary with the age and experience of the teacher?
7. What do teachers consider to be the advantages of interactive whiteboards?
8. What do teachers consider to be the disadvantages of interactive whiteboards?
9. What factors affect the extent to which teachers use interactive whiteboards?
10. What are the difficulties in using interactive whiteboards?
11. Why are some teachers reluctant to use interactive whiteboards in their classroom?
12. Which teachers make very intensive use of interactive whiteboards?
13. Has the availability of interactive whiteboards changed the teaching style of teachers?
14. Are there factors currently inhibiting the use of interactive whiteboards in the classroom?
15. Which teachers have access to interactive whiteboards?
16. On what basis are teachers chosen to have access to interactive whiteboards?
17. Does the head teacher's attitude to interactive whiteboards influence their implementation in a school?
18. What changes in use of the interactive whiteboards have occurred since their introduction?
19. What views do pupils have about interactive whiteboards?
20. Would the money spent on interactive whiteboards be better spent on other things?

From Research Questions to a Research Design

The general topic of the use of interactive whiteboards (i.e. large screens on which the teacher can not only produce and show written material, but where pictures, DVDs, websites and interactive material can be displayed) in the school classroom, could be approached using many different research designs. The questions provide pointers to the design, and the type and style of the project.

Several of the questions, for example questions 2 to 5 inclusive, and 7 to 10 inclusive, suggest some kind of teacher survey. Question 11 might best be addressed by interviewing teachers. Question 1, and probably questions 12 and 14 to 17 inclusive and question 19, suggest some observational study in schools, coupled with interviews with pupils, teachers and the head teacher. Questions 13 and 18 would ideally call for some type of longitudinal study with researcher involvement in the school(s) for a period before the introduction of whiteboards and over the next year or so after their introduction.

Thinking about your splurged set of research questions helps you to take a step back and consider, not only the broad overall topic, but also what is going to be the purpose of your project. Perhaps you now appreciate that, at this stage at least, you just don't know enough about the situation in schools to do anything other than an exploratory study. This will effectively rule out a fixed design project and push toward flexible-style research.

However, if you have recent school experience, or find relevant research studies, then a fixed design project such as a survey or some kind of field experiment might well be feasible. Once decisions like this have been made, you can start pruning and generally tailoring your research question list so that it fits in with the focus you have, provisionally, decided on.

You still have more research question work to do. The main task is to decide which is the main research question (or questions). This doesn't stop you retaining some additional subsidiary questions, though you may well find that you have to drop some questions from the list at a later stage because you won't have the time and resources to get answers to them.

Do I really need research questions?

If you are working in a discipline such as psychology where there is a strong expectation that research questions are used (or even that you set up formal hypotheses – see the following section), you omit them at your peril. If you are working in other fields where there is no such strong expectation, it is more of a personal preference for particular ways of working. Some researchers find setting up research questions an unnecessarily constricting way of working. They prefer to decide on a focus of their research, go out and collect data; then see what they can make of what they have. Provided you follow the 'systematically/sceptically/ethically' rubric outlined at the start of chapter 2, p. 19, I wouldn't wish to warn you off following this tack. Certainly, you will find many published accounts of research which are not presented in terms of research questions.

However, I still hold firmly to the belief that the effort of sorting out some research questions, while it may be aversive, pays dividends. Provided you don't regard them as set in stone, where you have to stick with an initial set

of questions, they can be adapted to virtually all styles of research from rigidly pre-specified designs to very flexible ones.

Don't forget that the purpose of the exercise is not just to get some research questions, but also to seek answers to them. It is not unknown for a report to list the questions, but not get round to providing an explicit discussion of the answers obtained as a result of doing the research.

Hypotheses

In some areas of research, there are strong traditions of talking in terms of hypotheses. In a general sense, 'having a hypothesis' about something means having a provisional, or tentative, explanation of what is going on. Thinking in this way can do nothing but good. It gives direction to your research and helps to suggest research questions.

However, there is a more restricted use of the term within the so-called hypothetico-deductive approach. Here the notion is that you start with a theory from which one or more hypotheses are derived. The central purpose of the research is to test the hypotheses. There can be a whole apparatus of null hypotheses and alternative hypotheses, often linked to an elaborate statistical technology for deciding between them. As I have already indicated, my own preference is to regard the research task as one of getting answers to questions rather than testing hypotheses. It has the advantage of applying to virtually all approaches to research, without straitjacketing you into one particular view of the nature of research.

It may be that you are researching in an area, or following an approach, where this hypothesis approach rules supreme. Your preparatory reading, particularly of journals, will reveal this – and if you are on a course, your supervisor will no doubt make this clear. If so, you had better go with the flow. Many standard texts give the rules (e.g. Coolican, 2004).

Developing the Design

Let's assume that, as a result of your preliminary reading and discussion with others (not least your supervisor), you have a pretty clear idea of the topic and focus of your project, of the approach you want to take, and that you have initial thoughts about research questions.

At this stage, the priority is to find out as much as you can about what others have already established, through research and review, relevant to your proposed project. This task forms the basis for the next section on finding and using sources. Be warned. It is not unknown for students to get so absorbed in searching for sources that they leave themselves insufficient time for actually carrying out the research, let alone writing it up.

You also need to give serious attention at this stage to the possible ethical implications of the proposed project. This is covered in the section following that on sources.

Finding and Using Sources

'Sources' are materials and people that can help you with your research project. The main concern here is to use such sources to give you ideas about how you should design your study. Has someone done a study that you can use as a model? Are there problems you haven't thought of? Or do you come across a study that leads to you thinking about the whole topic differently?

This isn't the only function of sources when doing a research project. For example, you will need them to provide backing for the claims you make when interpreting your data. Sources should inform every phase of the project and every aspect of your final report.

You are not alone when doing research, even though it may sometimes feel like that. The shadow army of all those who have done research and written about it is at your disposal. The trick is in finding relevant material. Your supervisor should help to get you going. Supervisors are, of course, themselves potentially very useful sources in their own right. This is particularly so if you are following a topic that they have suggested, and which links into their research interests. They should then be able to provide you with a set of key references that can save you much time and trouble.

The 'literature review' is often an expected part of a research report. It provides an account of previous research that has been carried out, together with attempts that have been made to provide frameworks within which the research can be placed and understood. All too often such reviews degenerate into an ill-digested listing of an inordinate number of references, which simply demonstrates that many more or less relevant sources have been unearthed by the writer. (The section on 'research arguments' in chapter 7, p. 142, makes suggestions about how you can structure the review.)

For my money, less can be more. In other words, there is greater value in homing in on a relatively small number of really key references and giving a full account of what they contribute and why it is relevant to your own study. However, if the powers that be insist on a review stuffed with many references, give them what they want! You should still ensure that you give sufficient space to do justice to what you consider to be the key references.

You will already have done some reading around when deciding on the topic of your research. If you are lucky, there might be one reference, perhaps a section in a book, or a review article on a particular field, or a journal account of a piece of research, which seems spot on.

Planning the search for sources

How do you start? Your efforts in deciding on a focus for the research will have thrown up an initial set of sources, whether suggested by your supervisor, or from books, research reviews, journal articles, newspapers or other media, or whatever. To take this further, there are two main avenues: the internet and libraries. You can get away with just using one of these if you have to. However, although the internet is an amazingly rich resource, I still find it easier to browse on the shelves of a library. Serendipity ('the happy knack of making fortunate discoveries') is a wonderful thing – the next book along on the shelf, or another paper in the journal rather than the one you were seeking, can prove to be a key source.

Key word searching Develop a set of key words to help you organize the search. Most journal articles include them. For example, an interview study on teachers' knowledge about adolescents (Adamson and Meister, 2005) included the following key words – adolescents, identity, teacher interviews, experiential knowledge, theoretical knowledge, teacher training, and school system. A case study of bullying at work (Matthiesen et al., 2003) included workplace bullying, work harassment, victimization, emotional abuse, interpersonal conflict, case study, conflict escalation model, and social support.

Using key words which seem obvious from the title of your project, together with ones that you glean from some relevant articles, should get you an initial set which you refine and modify as you go about your search. Many of the resources available via library catalogues or the internet make use of key word searching and you should make sure you can do this efficiently (there is usually a 'help' button which gives the rules).

A very basic rule which usually applies is that if you get too few 'hits' when using individual search terms, then try one key word '*or*' a second key word; if too many then a key word '*and*' a second one. If you find that a search returns many items of a particular type that you don't want, then use '*not*' to exclude them.

When you do come across relevant sources, do make sure that you get a full reference for them (e.g. for a journal reference you need the list of all authors and initials, title, journal name, year of publication, volume number and page numbers). A common style, used in psychology and several other disciplines and applied areas, is known as APA (American Psychological Association). The website gives details, together with details of, and references to, the styles used in other disciplines.

Partial references (e.g. where you have left out authors' initials or page numbers for a journal reference) are a pain when you are writing up. Just a few of them can cause you hours of work finding the missing details.

Internet searching

The business of getting hold of sources has been revolutionized in the last few years by the development of the internet. You can search for sources by traditional means using resources physically present in academic libraries. This kind of search still has a place, as discussed in the following section. However, it is perverse not to take advantage of the vast range of material now easily accessible via the internet.

It would be similarly perverse of me to devote many pages in this short text to giving suggestions on how to use the internet for research purposes, when excellent resources exist on the net itself to achieve this aim. For example, Intute (www.intute.ac.uk) provides a free service that guides you to peer-reviewed internet resources suitable for academic research. Simply browse the subject hierarchy to find a list of the key sources in your subject area. Intute: Social Sciences (formerly known as the Social Sciences Internet Gateway or SOSIG) is the social science branch of Intute and although United Kingdom based, it is not restricted to UK organizations or students, and includes links to US and other non-UK material.

A particularly valuable feature is the Intute Virtual Training Suite (www.vts.intute.ac.uk), a set of free online tutorials through which you can teach yourself essential internet research skills. There are over 60 tutorials covering social science subjects (including anthropology, business, development studies, economics, geography, government, law, psychology, social policy, social work, sociology, town and country studies and women's studies), health and life sciences (including agriculture, food and forestry, medicine, nursing, midwifery and health visiting, pharmacy, and veterinary studies), and the humanities (including English studies, history, religious studies and theology).

The tutorials cover not only key websites for each subject but also the best internet search tools and techniques. They provide training to deal with what is acknowledged to be the major problem in using the Web for research purposes – evaluating the quality of material from websites. One tutorial is devoted to social research methods and provides a valuable general resource for this text. Box 3.4 shows, as an example, some of the types of material covered. There is corresponding material in the other tutorials.

The box only covers three of nine categories of material dealt with in the tutorial. The tutorials also help you to evaluate for yourself other material you might find on the Web. Hence you should have the skills of discernment required when using a general search-engine such as Google (www.google.com). The 'academic' Google Scholar (www.scholar.google.com) can often turn up items not available in other searches including unpublished reports, conference proceedings and theses. These can contain the kind of detail on procedures not found in journal articles, which are particularly useful when designing a project. They need to be carefully evaluated from a quality point of

Box 3.4 Examples of material from the Intute Virtual Training Suite 'Internet for Social Research Methods' (www.vts.intute.ac.uk/tutorial/social-research-methods)

Directories and Gateways

Gateways, directories and portals, all offer a structured entry point to a range of resources relating to a particular subject or field of interest.

Unlike search engines, which automatically collate a list of sites that match your search criteria, directories and gateways can provide a more fruitful search for your chosen topic. They have three main advantages:

- ☐ They have been put together by academic and library experts who have devoted much time to scanning the Web for items of interest.
- ☐ They have been arranged in structured and useful ways so that you can access the resources more easily.
- ☐ They are usually kept up to date on a regular basis

It is nice to know that there are easier ways to access information than random searches! The *discover* section will cover ways of searching on the internet in much more detail.

Gateways are an excellent place to go to find high quality internet sites that can support academic work.

- ☐ Intute: Social Sciences (formerly SOSIG), is the major UK gateway to internet resources in the social sciences. It has links to online papers, departments' and organizations' own Web pages, discussion lists, courses and more. There is a section devoted to Research Tools and Methods, featuring quantitative and qualitative resources. Furthermore, other discipline headings, such as psychology and anthropology, also have specific sections on research methods and methodology.
- ☐ Sociosite: Research Methodology and Statistics is a sociological information system based at the University of Amsterdam that gives access to a comprehensive and international listing of sociology related resources on the internet and has a special section devoted to research methodology and statistics.
- ☐ Social Science WWW Virtual Library which keeps track of online social science information as part of the World Wide Web Virtual Library.

Article Reference and Abstracts Database

Whether you are a teacher, student or researcher, you will often need to keep abreast of the latest publications in your field. The internet offers ways

to find out about these publications via online catalogues of references and abstracts, some of which are freely available.

The following databases provide a good starting point for identifying publications about social research methods. They are also regularly updated.

However, please note that online access to some of these is through a higher educational institution only, for example, via ATHENS authentication. You should always consult your own library to see which ones they subscribe to and, where necessary, to obtain a password.

- ☐ The ISI Web of Knowledge Service for UK Education contains a number of useful reference products including: the Social Sciences Citation Index (SSCI) from the Web of Science which indexes around 5,000 journals spanning 50 social science disciplines that cover social research methods. You can access cited references and author abstracts going back to 1981; the 1945–1980 Back files for Web of Science cover cited references for the previous thirty years; the Journal Citation Reports (JCR) Social Sciences Edition contains data from roughly 1,500 multidisciplinary and international journals in the social sciences and the ISI Proceedings Social Science and Humanities edition (SSHP) that indexes the published literature of the most significant conferences and workshops across a wide range of disciplines from 1990.
- ☐ Z-Electronic Table of Contents (ZETOC) is a searchable database of the British Library's Electronic Table of Contents (ETOC). This includes around 20,000 current journals and around 16,000 conference proceedings published per year dating back to 1993, and is updated on a daily basis. It includes an e-mail alerting service.
- ☐ International Bibliography of the Social Sciences (IBSS) provides access to over 2 million bibliographic references to journal articles and to books, reviews and selected chapters dating back to 1951. Abstracts and full text are also increasingly being provided.
- ☐ CSA Sociological Abstracts – abstracts and indexes journal articles, book review citations, dissertations and conference papers since 1963 drawn from over 1,800 international serials publications across the social and behavioural sciences. There is a section on methodology and research technology. Access to CSA Sociological Abstracts also includes: ASSIA: Applied Social Sciences Index and Abstracts; Recent References Related to the Social Sciences/Humanities; and Web Resources Related to the Social Sciences/Humanities.
- ☐ FirstSearch offers electronic access to a range of databases and full-text and full-image articles, based on the WorldCat database. Included are Social Sciences Abstracts, Social Sciences Index, and the SIRS Researcher, covering records for articles selected from international newspapers, magazines, journals, and government publications.

Online Journals and Texts (part only)

The availability of online text allows quick and easy access to documents for which you would otherwise have to make a visit to the library and photocopy or request directly from the author or publisher.

The kinds of documents available on the internet include official and unofficial reports, publications, essays, reviews, on-going debates and press articles.

Online journals

Most journals in the social sciences have websites. Depending on the title of the electronic journal, you may be able to

- ☐ read the current full text online
- ☐ read the backdated full text online
- ☐ read tables of contents and/or abstracts only (current and backdated).

However, the catch is that for the majority of journals, gaining access to the full electronic text requires your institution to subscribe to the journal. You therefore need a username and password, such as ATHENS.

Below are some examples of online journals covering social research methods, but also note that many of the abstract services described earlier are also increasingly offering online text access.

Freely accessible full text peer-reviewed journals include:

- ☐ *Sociological Research Online* is an online journal that publishes high quality applied sociology articles, focusing on theoretical, empirical and methodological discussions.
- ☐ *Social Research Update* is a quarterly electronic journal that covers new developments in social research. Each issue covers a different research methods topic spanning qualitative and quantitative methods and it is pitched at a level that can be appreciated by both novice and expert reader.
- ☐ *The Qualitative Report* is an online journal dedicated to qualitative research and critical inquiry and which serves as a forum and sounding board for researchers, scholars and practitioners.
- ☐ *Forum for Qualitative Social Research* (FQS) is a free multilingual online journal for qualitative research that aims to promote discussion and

co-operation between qualitative researchers from different countries and social science disciplines.

You can check which journals and periodicals covering social research methods are available online by visiting:

- ☐ *Directories of Electronic Journals* provides links to Directories and Lists of Electronic Journals and Newsletters across the world.
- ☐ *The Journal and Article Locators in Psychology and the Social Sciences* which indexes more than 2,000 psychology and social science journals on the web and provides links to their home pages.
- ☐ *The Scholarly Journal Archive* (JSTOR) provides a full-text archive of scholarly journals starting with their first issues, and covers most of the social science disciplines. The collection covers materials from the 1880s up to a 'moving wall' of between 2 and 5 years.
- ☐ *Sociology*: A SAGE Full-Text Collections includes online access to over 125 SAGE journals, 40,000 articles, book reviews, and editorials, with original graphics and tables. Social research methods is well represented, dating back some 30 years.

Examples of journals of interest for social research methods which allow you to browse tables of contents and/or abstracts online are:

- ☐ *Sociological Methodology* is an annual volume on methods of research in the social sciences. Sponsored by the American Sociological Association, it publishes material that advances empirical research in sociology and related disciplines.
- ☐ *Qualitative Research* provides a forum for the discussion of research methods, in particular qualitative research, across the social sciences and cultural studies.
- ☐ *International Journal of Social Research Methodology* (IJSRM) is a new journal covering a mix of academic and theoretically slanted methodological articles and articles relating to research practice in professional and service settings.
- ☐ *Public Opinion Quarterly* (POQ) is the official publication of the American Association for Public Opinion Research (AAPOR) and focuses on theories and methods underlying opinion research such as survey validity, questionnaire construction, interviewing and interviewers, sampling and analytic approaches.
- ☐ *Quality & Quantity*: International Journal of Methodology provides an interdisciplinary forum for discussion on instruments of methodology for more rigorous scientific results in the social sciences. Issues covered include causal analysis and classification, mathematical models, and the logic of empirical research.

Online texts

There are many sites now which provide electronic versions of text of interest to researchers. Examples are working paper series, conference proceedings, and media news. The texts are not necessarily peer reviewed or edited and the REVIEW section of the tutorial will address essential issues about the quality and reliability of these kinds of electronic sources.

Some sites publish full texts of academic papers on their websites:

- ☐ *Education Online: Electronic Texts in Education and Training* has an archive of full texts of papers given at educational research conferences.
- ☐ *The Centre for Microdata Methods and Practice* (cemmap) at the Institute for Fiscal Studies and the Department of Economics at University College London. Cemmap publishes working papers online that are freely downloadable.

Other organizations post up key documents such as ethical guidelines for research:

- ☐ *Medical Research Council* (MRC) *Ethics Series* which offers full texts of very detailed guidelines on ethics relating to medical research, including social research with patients.

view and are sometimes early drafts that have subsequently been modified on publication (search to see whether a published version exists).

Web-based discussion groups (sometimes referred to as listservs) are available for a vast number of research related areas. Many are freely accessible to all interested in the topic and members will often respond to requests for help in finding relevant material for a project. If you access 'Intute' mentioned above you will find a long list.

Library searching

One great thing that libraries have in their favour is librarians. They can lead you to the range of resources (including internet resources) available in and through the libraries. Subject librarians in academic libraries are often mines of information that will help you in your searches. Take advantage of any training courses going. Pick up leaflets on the different resources such as data-

bases (e.g. BIDS, Web of Science, ERIC) including citation indices (e.g. SSCI – the Social Science Citation Index). Citation indices, available in print and in electronic versions, are useful in helping you to move forward. A reference you think is key to your project may well have been cited by others following its publication. A citation index lets you check this.

Books and print journals remain an important library resource. Keyword searches through the library catalogue will help you to find where relevant books are located. Inter-library loans will get you texts not in your own library, but can take time to come through. There is a multitude of journal article subject bibliographies through which you can search. There will probably be a small number of journals where many of the articles from your searches will be found. Have a good browse through the last few years' issues and particularly the 'current parts' which are often in a different part of a library. Revisit them when you are writing up as you may well find that something new has just been published that you should know about.

Asking the author

If you are finding it difficult to get access to a key reference from a journal or elsewhere, you can always try contacting the author. Use this tactic sparingly and don't just ask for lists of references. Affiliations of authors (i.e. where they are based) are usually provided in journals. If e-mail addresses are not given it is often not difficult to find them through an institution's website.

Dealing with the sources

Once you have found some sources (books, journal articles or whatever) which look promising, the next task is to sort them out in some way.

One approach is to sort them into three piles (either real or virtual piles depending on whether you are dealing with paper or electronic sources) – 'key', 'useful', and 'useless'.

Key sources are ones that are central to your topic and research questions. Perhaps ones that you can use as a model for your own efforts, or which suggest a next step. In my experience, you will be lucky to come up with more than half a dozen of these.

Useful sources are ones that you may want to take note of in some way, perhaps in the design of your project, or simply by referring to them in your report.

Useless sources are ones that on first glance looked relevant but further reading reveals that they aren't. Don't throw them away; your project might change and develop in ways that make them relevant. Keep them separately so that they don't clutter up your active set of sources.

Sorting a long list of 'possibles' can take a long time. Good reading skills

help. If you are a slow reader, consider spending some time to increase your speed. (A Web search for 'speed reading' will throw up many possible approaches). Useful reading techniques include:

Skimming A rapid dash through the source to try to get an impression of whether there are any ideas or information you might use and to decide if it is relevant.

Scanning Another rapid dash but this time looking for a specific item. Does it have anything about X? You ignore everything else. (However I often find that something I wasn't looking for attracts my attention – and turns out to be valuable!)

Reading for understanding Once you have made the decision that a source is likely to be useful, possibly a key source, then you need to study it in some detail to ensure that you understand it. This study might be limited to a short passage, or a chapter in a book, or the whole of a journal article or book. For anything longer than a short passage, it helps to focus initially on what Booth et al. (2003; p. 106) call the geography of the source. For a book this means:

- ☐ reading the preface
- ☐ checking the contents table
- ☐ reading any introductions to chapters and chapter summaries (if there aren't any, skim through each chapter, noting the major sections it is divided into).

For a journal article this means:

- ☐ reading the abstract
- ☐ reading the introductory and concluding sections
- ☐ noting the major sections.

Now you have a feeling for the lie of the land, the hard work starts. While the source may not have actually set explicit research questions, an approach I find helpful is to ask what are the questions (or problems) they are trying to address? And what are the answers (or solutions) they have come up with? Some sources focus on a single main question, but there will typically be several subsidiary questions lurking around.

Note making You need to have a record of each source that you are likely to make use of. At a minimum, this involves the information to be included in the bibliography or reference list at the end of your report (see chapter 7, p. 147). *Make sure that you record and store this information for each source that you are likely to use, immediately that you decide it may be useful.* As already stressed, it can be a

major pain, and cost much time and effort, to search for missing references when completing your report.

There is specialized bibliographic software (also known as 'reference managers'), such as EndNote or ProCite, which can be very helpful if you have to deal with a lot of references. They can capture electronically the reference details (and often the abstracts as well) of journal articles in e-journals, which can save much fiddly typing.

Making additional notes about a source is very much a personal decision. Some people feel that they never understand something unless and until they have expressed it in their own words. Others spend many happy, though probably largely pointless, hours highlighting or underlining large chunks of the source. This is mainly an issue with your small set of key references. You do need to know them well and undoubtedly you demonstrate this understanding to yourself and others by writing your own account. Such an understanding may be central to the way you design and carry out your project. However, it is in the report of the research that you have to incorporate discussion of the various sources and their relevance to your project, and you may be making better use of your precious time by writing drafts of parts of the report.

Ethical Considerations

Carrying out any form of research can have an effect on people in a wide variety of ways. Indeed, it might be argued that there is little point to research if it doesn't have the potential to affect someone in some way. Researchers are more likely to see the potential for good in their efforts, whether through increased understanding, more effective or efficient products, or some other positive contribution. However, even with entirely benign intentions, actual consequences can be negative, and possibly harmful, for those taking part in the research, or for those whose lives are affected by the results of the research. Unleashing the power of nuclear energy, or developing genetically modified crops, are commonly cited examples where researchers face difficult dilemmas.

While much social research does not generate such sharply polarized debate, the fact that it necessarily involves people, often in a very direct way as participants in the research, inevitably raises ethical issues. Have their rights, autonomy and sensitivities been respected? Is it possible that they will come to harm in some way as a result of their involvement? Do they know what they are letting themselves in for – in the jargon, have they given informed consent? Even just holding confidential information about another person has ethical implications.

It is, of course, not only the direct participants who might be affected by your research. Suppose your findings are used to justify the closure of a service or facility. Clients may suffer as a result. Or perhaps the findings are seen as justifying a new approach, which may be fine if you have shown its benefits, but less so if its attraction is primarily because it is cheap.

Possible ethical issues arising from your project should be discussed with your supervisor at an early stage. For example, what are you going to do if a participant becomes distressed in an interview? Sensitive topics where distress is likely should be avoided by novice researchers. However, apparently innocuous topics might turn out to be sensitive to some, and you need to be prepared (perhaps to stop the interview with an offer to talk it through if they would like to, or offer post-interview follow up).

It is good practice for there to be an 'ethics approval document' which has to be agreed with your supervisor, either making out the case for there being no ethical issues raised by the study, or giving details of the issues that are raised. In the UK it is likely to include a section on how you plan to meet the requirements of the Data Protection Act. Any ethical issues must then be thought through and the decision to proceed only made after it can be demonstrated that every effort has been made to reduce any likely harmful effects to a minimal level. These negative effects are likely to be outweighed by the potential benefits of the study. Who makes this decision? Certainly not you. Nor should this be a decision made by researchers on their research proposals, even if they are vastly more experienced than you are. The website gives examples of documents used in relation to ethical approval, including checklists covering the issues that need to be addressed in relation to the Data Protection Act.

Ethics committees

It is increasingly common for there to be a formal committee set up with this responsibility, possibly combining this with more general powers of approval for the research proposal. Your supervisor should know the set-up and give advice about what is needed. Some types of proposal will need the approval of more than one ethics committee (e.g. if you are working for an award at an academic institution but carrying out the research in a hospital or other health-related setting). This can be a pain if different committees have different requirements, or if a committee has little experience of small-scale undergraduate projects. Your supervisor should seek to sort this out and to establish where it goes first.

If you are working under your own steam, or are carrying out the research as part of your job in an organization, you need to get support. Certainly consult relevant sets of ethical guidelines (see below) to ensure that you appreciate the issues involved. You then need to check out your proposals with potential participants and other stakeholders, such as management, unions, clients of a

service and, if at all possible, someone, perhaps in a college, with experience of evaluating ethical concerns. In a work setting, you need to satisfy yourself that the sponsors of the study wish this to be carried out for ethically reputable reasons and are not using you to legitimize something disreputable.

Ethical guidelines

Almost all disciplines and fields of study have approved sets of ethical guidelines. In the UK, examples include those developed by the British Association of Social Workers, the British Educational Research Association, the British Psychological Society, the British Sociological Association, the Medical Research Council, the Royal College of Nursing and the Social Research Association. Other countries have similar sets of guidelines. You should consult the relevant one – links to several examples are provided on the website. Particular types of research are likely to raise specific ethical issues (for example, insider research where you are already a member of the institution or organization which forms the focus of your project can pose difficult ethical dilemmas – see chapter 5, p. 104).

Avoiding the unethical

Things that might be considered dubious on ethical grounds include:

- ☐ involving people without their knowledge, or without their explicit and informed consent
- ☐ exerting pressure to become involved in the research
- ☐ using deception about the purpose of the research, or what taking part involves
- ☐ exposing participants to ridicule or embarrassment, or otherwise injuring their self-esteem
- ☐ putting participants under physical or mental stress
- ☐ invading privacy or not respecting participants' autonomy, e.g. when seeking to change behaviour, attitudes, etc.
- ☐ giving benefits or rewards to some but not others
- ☐ treating people unfairly, or with lack of consideration or respect.

It is, however, difficult to sustain the argument that each of these practices should always be avoided. There are public situations where it is not feasible to ask for consent, nor to ensure that people even know that they are being focused on in a study (for example, in studies of car driver behaviour at traffic lights, or in the vicinity of speed cameras). Is the pressure exerted on students in some psychology degree courses to act as participants in departmental research projects, unethical? Or is it legitimized as a social commitment appropriate for members of that department?

In some fields, notably social psychology, deception as to the purposes of the research is used. The argument put forward is that knowing the real purpose would preclude study of the phenomenon researched. Outright deception to the extent of lying is rarely proposed in current research. A softer and more acceptable line involving 'honest but vague on details' is now more commonly taken. For example, a study focusing on which students talk in 'quiet' areas of a university library might be advised to present the project as 'interested in student use of the library' when conducting interviews. (This would be quite tricky to design. Do you observe first, then interview? Do you interview 'talkers' and 'non-talkers'? How do you define them? Where and when do you interview – presumably not in the quiet area?) More generally, there is a welcome change of climate where what might be termed 'participants' rights' are taken more seriously. This is particularly so in research involving vulnerable groups such as children and persons with disabilities. However, horror stories still occur and there is a continuing need for vigilance

The website provides links covering issues to be considered when doing an ethical health-check on your proposed research. There are also links to examples of informed consent letters and suggestions for the procedures that might be followed to ensure that there is 'true' informed consent rather than just jumping through a procedural hoop.

Confirming Your Choices

Reading the material from the sources you have obtained, together with more thinking and discussion, should help you to firm up the likely detailed focus of your project. Does it look as if you will have to do an exploratory study because little relevant research appears to be available? There is nothing wrong with doing this type of study, but is it something that you would feel comfortable with? If not, you will need to rethink and refocus on an area where there is previous work that you can build on.

Has the reading confirmed what you thought were your main research question(s) or do you now consider something rather different would be more appropriate? As discussed earlier in the chapter (p. 51), the form of these questions provides pointers to the design.

Further Reading

Andrews, R. (2003) *Research Questions*. London and New York: Continuum. Short but informative guide to developing research questions.

Blaikie, N. (2000) *Designing Social Research: The logic of anticipation*. Cambridge:

Polity Press. Emphasis on the formulation of research questions and selection of appropriate approach to research.

Gregory, I. (2003) *Ethics and Research*. London and New York: Continuum. Reviews the ethical concerns that underlie all aspects of carrying out a research project.

Smith, M. and Williamson, E. (2004) *Researchers and Their Subjects*. Bristol: The Policy Press. Case studies of proposals where ethical issues were central. Covers a wide range of disciplines.

Van Den Hoonaarch, W. C. (2002) *Walking the Tightrope: Ethical issues for qualitative researchers*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press. Focus on ethical issues specific to qualitative research.

Zeni, J. (2001) *Ethical Issues in Practitioner Research*. New York: Teachers College Press. Ethical problems in action research and insider studies.

Chapter 3 Tasks

Following discussions with your supervisor, with colleagues (in the group if you've managed to set one up) and your initial reading:

1. *Firm up your choice of topic for the project.* You can still change it if, after further reading and thought, you don't think it will work out. But beware of wasting time over this.
2. *Write down a 'long list' of possible research questions.* Think of as many as you can in, say, half an hour. Invite suggestions and comments.
3. *Consider what kind of approach (case study, survey, etc.) might be appropriate for the different questions.* You should be able to group together questions that would call for the same approach.
4. *Decide, provisionally, on the main research question or questions.* Choose something which can be tackled by an approach you feel comfortable with, which will be feasible within your time and resource constraints, and which you find interesting.
5. *Find out as much as you can relevant to the topic and the research question(s).* Chase up relevant sources via the library and internet. The purpose of this search is to get ideas for the design of the project and to assess whether the provisional decisions you have made about focus and research questions need modifying. *Set a time limit of a few days for this search* (there's a danger that this gets so involving that you do not want to stop – don't forget that you actually have to carry out the project and write it up as well).
6. *Revisit your earlier decisions in the light of the search, and come up with a working title.*
7. *Review ethical issues.* Write down the possible issues (using a pro-forma if available) and discuss them with your supervisor. Take advice about the need for formal ethical approval procedures.
8. *Consider whether it will be necessary to obtain access to do the research.* Take advice from your supervisor on this and on how access is to be requested. As obtaining agreement for access can be a lengthy process, start it as soon as possible (see chapter 5, p. 100).