

REAL WORLD RESEARCH

A Resource for Users of Social Research Methods in Applied Settings

Third Edition

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PART IV

Carrying out the project: Arranging the practicalities

Know what you are doing before starting the data collection

Persevering to this stage should have got you fully equipped with a focus for your project and some related research questions, which may be quite specific and concrete but are more likely to be relatively tentative. You will have given thought to the most appropriate research strategy and have sorted out the methods and techniques you need to implement this strategy.

Perhaps. This is the rational, sequential version of the research process. However, there is a 'reconstructed logic' to the process, mirroring that of the scientific paper (Silverman, 1985, p. 4). Buchanan, Boddy and McCalman (1988) emphasize the necessarily opportunistic flavour to much field research. For example,

A friend made a casual enquiry about our research . . . he suggested that we study his own company . . . We then discussed what the company would be prepared to let us do, and the research design was settled over a mixed grill and two pints of beer . . . the following week, after a couple of telephone calls and an exchange of letters, we met the manager responsible . . . It became clear that we should interview the head of the new word-processing section . . . our first interview with him started there and then . . . the manager suggested that as the computer system was to be shut down on Wednesday . . . we could come back tomorrow . . . and interview our first batch of video typists. He also asked if we would like to see the minutes of the working party that had decided to install the system, and he produced from the drawer figures charting the performance of the company's typists since 1975 (pp. 54-5).

They stress that the published account (Buchanan and Boddy, 1982) implies that the research questions were based on a prior assessment of the literature, with the research strategy and methods being selected as most appropriate in this context. In fact there was no opportunity to carry out a formal literature review, explore other possible methods, or design and pilot interview schedules. In other words, real world research is very much the 'art of the possible'. *They were able to carry out the study successfully because of a prior familiarity with the literature and the field, which helped frame the research questions, and their experience in carrying out similar studies.*

There are several classic 'insider accounts' of research projects which make very valuable reading for anyone seeking to carry out a project. These include Bell and Encel (1978), and Bryman (1988). Deem (1996) provides an autobiographical account of her career as a researcher, emphasizing that, as in the progress of a research project: 'What has occurred has frequently been contingent, rarely linear, sometimes accidental and often serendipitous' (p. 6).

Such accounts reveal the fact that *experienced researchers can and do make a variety of mistakes*, including false starts and initial over-ambitiousness requiring substantial refocusing of the study. Novice researchers should take considerable heart from this. Such mistakes do not indicate that you are no good as a researcher; more that you are human. The accounts highlight the 'luck' or 'serendipity' factor (the 'happy knack of making fortunate discoveries'). It is also clear that the move from the traditional distant, uninvolved relationship between researcher and participant which is called for in most qualitative flexible design studies heightens the emotional dynamics of the research relationship, and is likely to generate considerable anxiety in the researcher. The emotional ante is raised for all concerned when sensitive topics are the focus of the study.

This injection of reality into the discussion does not indicate that consideration of the earlier sections of this text is a waste of time. The matters covered need to be internalized before you are in a position to follow this free-form approach. There are similarities to Martin's (1981) 'garbage can' model of research. Here the four elements of research – theory, methods, resources and solutions – swirl about in the garbage can or decision space of the research project. Each influences the others, and the assumption of a sequence of steps in the research process is discarded.

Negotiating access

Much real world research takes place in settings where you require *formal* agreement from someone to gain access. Issues about access vary to a considerable extent with the kind of task you are carrying out and the nature of the organization concerned. Hayes (2005) describes what he calls the 'long and winding road' gaining access to data sources in statutory social work agencies. Lindsay (2005) points out that negotiating access to a sample in a survey research project is an often unacknowledged process but it is crucial to the success of a project. To gain access to young workers in a study examining health risks of their social lives, she 'had to

present the goals of the research to different audiences such as human resource managers, occupational health and safety managers, union officials, supervisors, heads of department, teachers and the young workers themselves. Each of these audiences had to be convinced of the value of the research and the credibility of the researcher' (p. 121). Okumus, Altinay and Roper (2007), reflecting on their experience of case study research in large organizations, conclude that there is 'no single method or piece of advice related to gaining and maintaining access for a long period of time' (p. 22). They stress that while it is important to be organized, self-motivated and persistent before and during the research, many external factors are beyond researchers' control. The implication is that you should remain flexible and learn to develop contingency strategies (see Feldman, Bell and Berger, 2003 for suggestions).

For more or less pure researchers, the task agenda is set by their perceptions of what is important in the academic discipline, say, in the development of a theoretical position, or in response to recent research. Thus it is the researcher's agenda that is important, and the access issue is essentially persuading people to let you in. If you are clear about your intentions, perhaps with a pretty tight, pre-structured, design, then the task is probably easier initially in that you can give them a good indication of what they are letting themselves in for. With a looser, more emergent design, there may be difficulties as you are to some extent asking them to sign a 'blank cheque' as it is impossible to specify in advance exactly what you will do.

Studies with a more applied focus simplify some access problems and make others more complex, and more sensitive. If the study looks at 'practice' in some professional, industrial or business situation, there is the considerable advantage that you can legitimately present the study as relating to, and probably arising from, the concerns of practitioners. When you have been asked to do the study by persons from the institution or organization concerned, then at first sight this seems to solve problems of access. However, the investigator might, legitimately or not, be seen as a 'tool of management' supporting the squeezing of more blood out of the workers; or, conversely, as a dangerous agitator upsetting labour relations. In particular, studies with an overt 'change' approach are, almost by definition, disturbing. Even in a 'commissioned' study, you are very likely to want to observe and collect information from persons who were not party to the request for you to be involved.

Lofland *et al.* (2006, pp. 41–7) suggest you are more likely to gain access if you have:

- *Connections.* Use friends, relatives and contacts wherever possible. If you don't have any existing links, identify key gatekeepers or others who might help you get in and try to develop ties.
- *Accounts.* Develop a careful explanation of your proposed research. Avoid jargon. Keep it brief. They want an answer to the question 'Why should I let you in?' Don't identify yourself using off-putting labels. 'I'm a student, (or on the staff) at Bassetshire College', is better than 'I'm a sociologist' (from wherever). 'Honest but vague' is sometimes suggested. Don't lie or misrepresent but something general about your interests is better than an attempt to detail the specifics of procedure, your theoretical rationale, etc. This is particularly important in flexible designs where you may end up doing something differently from your original plans. The form of your account should be tailored to the audience. If you need to

persuade several different groups, the way in which you tell your story must be appropriate for each of the groups. Working in schools with young children, the account given to them (see Chapter 9, p. 212, for the discussion on seeking consent from the children themselves in school-based research) has to be differently expressed to that used with teachers and administrators.

- *Knowledge.* Lofland *et al.* advise that to avoid being perceived as frivolous or stupid, you need to ‘have enough knowledge about the setting or persons you wish to study to appear competent to do so’ (p. 46). If you have a relevant professional or occupational background in a study (e.g. have worked as a midwife, or on a car assembly line, or whatever) it can help. Generally, knowing the ‘lie of the land’ (i.e. acquiring some prior knowledge about a setting and its ways) can help you avoid gaffes, not only in your initial presentations, but throughout your involvement.
- *Courtesy.* You are asking people to do you a favour. Behaving with courtesy and consideration in all your dealings is crucial – and it increases your chances.

The checklist in the box below gives an indication of the things you might consider when negotiating access. Much of this is common sense and simply requires you to be sensitively alert to requirements of the situation. Given that you are inevitably going to trespass upon other people’s time, and are probably giving them extra work to do, for you to be there in good faith you must believe, and do all you can to ensure, that they get something out of it. This can be at many levels. People often derive considerable satisfaction from talking about what they are doing to a disinterested but sympathetic ear.

Checklist on negotiating access

1. Establish points of contact and individuals from whom it is necessary to get permission.
2. Clear any necessary official channels by formally requesting permission to carry out the study. Permission may be needed at various ‘levels’.
3. Prepare an outline of the study suitable for discussion with ‘gatekeepers’ (e.g. manager, head teacher).
4. Discuss the study with these gatekeepers. Go through study outline (purposes, conditions – including consent and participation). Attempt to anticipate potentially sensitive issues and areas.
5. Prepare an outline of the study suitable for discussion with likely participants.
6. Discuss the study with these likely participants. Go through study outline, emphasizing aspects of likely interest or concern to them. May be with a group or with individuals, depending on circumstances.

Be prepared to modify the study in the light of these discussions (e.g. in respect of timing, treatment of sensitive issues).

Contract research involves a formal contract being drawn up between yourself (or the organization where you work) and whoever is providing the funding. Research organizations and funding bodies typically have contracts with pre-defined contents although some flexibility is usual. Grinyer (1999, p. 3) suggests that the contract should cover the following issues:

- What happens if the research focus changes?
- Are there limitations on the type of data to be collected and its subsequent use?
- Who approves any publications?
- Who controls dissemination of the findings?
- Does the client see material before publication?
- Who owns the intellectual property right?
- Can the client use the researcher's name and institution?
- What are the ethical implications and issues?
- How will the project be evaluated?
- Will the parties involved be continuously informed of the progress of the research?

Such questions arise in most real world research and are not exclusive to 'contract' research.

There is a distinction between what is *formally* necessary to gain access, and what may be necessary over and above this to gain support and acceptance. The 'system' may not require you to get formal approval from a deputy head in a school, but if she is hostile to the study, it is not difficult for her to subvert it by, say, changing the timetabling arrangements. Formalities are necessary, not only to get you in, but also to refer back to if something goes wrong. People forget what they have agreed to, particularly if they had not thought through some of its implications. It can help to remind them of their agreed conditions, although they should be able to withdraw from the study if they wish.

There is evidence from studies in school settings that the reduction in sample size which may result from this procedure has little or no biasing effect on the findings (Dent, Sussman and Stacy, 1997). The option of withdrawing from the study at a later time, without prejudice, is particularly necessary when relatively loose, emergent, designs are used. In these circumstances it may not be possible to foretell all that is involved when the respondent is first approached for consent (see the consent form and example, Chapter 9, p. 200).

A note on access and the 'insider'. It is increasingly common for researchers to carry out a study directly concerned with the setting in which they work. Teachers look at their own local authority, school or even classroom, social workers or 'health' personnel seek to evaluate or otherwise study some aspect of the service they are providing. The personnel department of a firm investigates its own interviewing procedures.

There are clear practical advantages to this kind of 'insider' research. You won't have to travel far. Generally you will have an intimate knowledge of the context of the study, both as it is at present and in a historical or developmental perspective. You should know the politics of the institution, not only of the formal hierarchy but

also how it ‘really works’ (or, at least, an unexamined common-sense view of this). You will know how best to approach people. You should have ‘street credibility’ as someone who will understand what the job entails and what its stresses and strains are. In general, you will already have in your head a great deal of information which it takes an outsider a long time to acquire.

The disadvantages are, however, also pretty substantial. Adding the role of researcher to that of colleague is difficult both for yourself and for your colleagues. Interviewing colleagues can be an uncomfortable business, particularly so in hierarchical organizations if they are higher in status to yourself. Suppose that you obtain confidential information, appropriately enough within the conditions of confidentiality of the research? Is this going to affect your working relationship with colleagues? If you make mistakes during the study, you are going to have to live with them afterwards. More fundamentally, how are you going to maintain objectivity, given your previous and present close contact with the institution and your colleagues?

Grady and Wallston (1988, pp. 29–31) discuss these issues in the context of healthcare settings, but their principles are general:

- *Try to foresee likely conflicts.* For example, collecting data about drug and alcohol abuse by pregnant teenagers called for a non-reactive researcher; the same person as ‘helping professional’ appreciated the consequences of the abuse.
- *Make a plan to deal with them.* In the abuse example, non-reaction might be construed as acknowledgement that the behaviour was not harmful, or that no help was available, and so a procedure was developed to provide appropriate referrals at the end of the interview session when baseline data had been collected.
- *Record your responses.* It helps to have a full log with notes made after each session so that they can be subsequently scrutinized for possible contaminating effects on the research.
- *Where possible get the collaboration of researcher colleagues from outside the situation.* They will help you to maintain the researcher stance.

Get yourself organized

As soon as is feasible, you need to work out schedules for the arrangement and timing of sessions for observation, interviewing, etc. The extent to which this is pre-plannable depends very much on the style of your enquiry but even with a flexible design, you are likely to be pressed for time and need (flexible) plans. Use calendars or wall charts to draw up timed and sequenced activity lists or flow charts. Sharp, Peters, and Howard (2002, Chapter 3) suggest techniques useful for complex projects, including network analysis and control charts.

Pilot if at all possible

The first stage of any data gathering should, if at all possible, be a ‘dummy run’ – a pilot study. This helps you to throw up some of the inevitable problems of converting your design into reality. Some methods and techniques necessarily involve piloting in their use (e.g. in the development of a structured questionnaire or a direct observation instrument). An experiment or survey should be piloted on a small scale in virtually all circumstances. Most flexible designs can incorporate piloting within the study itself. The effort needed in gaining access and building up acceptance and trust is often such that one would be reluctant to regard a case study or ethnographic study simply as a pilot. Of course, if things go seriously wrong for whatever reason or it appears that the situation is not going to deliver in relation to your research questions, then it is better to cut it short and transfer your efforts elsewhere.

Work on your relationships

Formal approval from the boss may get you in but you then need informal agreement and acceptance from informants, respondents or participants in order to gather worthwhile data. This is largely a matter of relationships. You have to establish that you can be relied on to keep promises about confidentiality, etc. It is assumed that you are not proposing to deceive them and so you can share with them the general aims of your study and genuinely get over the message that you are there because you feel they can contribute. Maxwell (2005, pp. 82–7) discusses these issues in some detail. He emphasizes that they are not simply practical concerns but also raise design issues:

You will need to reflect on the particular decisions (conscious or unconscious) that you make about your relationships, as well as on the relationship issues that you will face in doing the study, and the effects these can have on your research (pp. 83–4).

Maxwell gives a good range of examples of accounts of relationship issues by qualitative researchers.

Don't just disappear at the end

It helps you, and everybody concerned, if your initial negotiations set a period for your involvement and a date for your departure. It can be difficult to leave,

particularly when things have gone well and you are an accepted part of the scene. There will almost always be more data than it would be desirable to collect. However, in real world research, cutting your coat to fit a fixed length of cloth is often part of the reality, and it helps to concentrate your efforts.

Make sure that people know that you are going. Honour your commitments. Keep your bridges in good order so that you can return if necessary – and so that you haven't spoiled things for later researchers. Morse (1997) has useful advice if you have problems in bringing a project to an end.

Don't expect it to work out as you planned

Trouble awaits those unwary souls who believe that research flows smoothly and naturally from questions to answers via a well organized data collection system (Hodgson and Rollnick, 1995, p. 3). It is as well to appreciate this from the start in real world research or you will be in for a dispiriting shock. Measles may play havoc with your carefully planned school sessions or unseasonal snow cut you off. Strikes shut down the plant or, even more frustrating, a 'work to rule' or 'withdrawal of goodwill' closes it to you. Communication channels do not function. The hospital you phoned yesterday to confirm an appointment denies your very existence. Hodgson and Rollnick provide a serious set of suggestions on 'how to survive in research' in a jocular manner. This includes a list of aphorisms well worth taking on board ('Getting started will take at least as long as the data collection'; 'a research project will change twice in the middle'; etc.) and a set of maxims for keeping going, based on the practices of Alcoholics Anonymous (e.g. 'one day at a time'; don't be overwhelmed by the size of the task; focus on smaller goals).

Having some flexibility built in and a 'forgiving' design (where it is possible to substitute one case or activity for another) helps. Experimental designs, sabotaged by breakdowns in sampling procedures or some other reason, can be sometimes patched up as quasi-experimental equivalents. Hakim (2000, pp. 150–2) provides a very useful section on 'trading down to a cheaper design' to cope with reductions in resources or time available.