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COMPLETING YOUR RESEARCH PROJECT

A Guide for the Social Sciences

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Charlotte: For Mum, Dad, Beth and Ben

Jamie: For Rachael, Imogen, Osian, Mum and Dad



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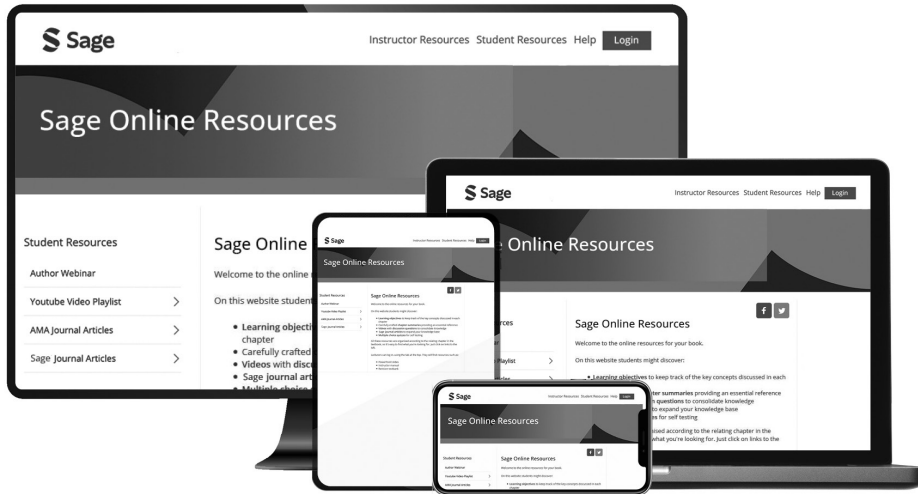
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ONLINE RESOURCES



Completing Your Research Project: A Guide for the Social Sciences is supported by a wealth of resources to support teaching, which can be accessed via: <https://study.sagepub.com/brookfieldlewis1e>.

LECTURER RESOURCES

- **PowerPoint decks** to help teach each chapter.
- A **Teaching Guide** with helpful tips on how to explore the content of each chapter.
- **Checklists** to ensure that students have understood the key concepts of each chapter.



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INTRODUCTION

COMPLETING YOUR SOCIAL SCIENCE RESEARCH PROJECT

If you have chosen to delve into the pages of this book, the chances are that you are either on the verge of beginning a social science research project or you have already taken the initial steps in commencing one. Undertaking a social science research project – often called a dissertation in the United Kingdom (UK) or a capstone or final project in the United States – can be both gratifying and challenging. Whatever your experience, it is often the largest, longest and most demanding assessment that you will have tackled to date, and one in which it is expected that you are self-driven and self-disciplined to complete. The purpose of this book is to serve as your compass, guiding you through the journey of undertaking and writing up your social science research project. We hope that you will find this book, and its accompanying online resources, to be a valuable touchstone to be leant upon alongside the usual sources of institutional support, including supervisors or advisors and module leaders as well as lectures and any accompanying module documentation. Although the book covers the entire journey of conducting a research project, we recognise that some of you may prefer to navigate directly to specific chapters that address certain aspects of the research process or specific questions which you may have. Either approach is perfectly acceptable! It is worth highlighting, though, which there are occasions where we foreshadow a topic before returning to it in more detail in later chapters.

Throughout the book, the terms ‘research project’, ‘dissertation’, and ‘thesis’ are all used interchangeably. However, our preference is to use the term ‘dissertation’, as it is, in our experience, the most common independent research style assignment undergraduate and master’s students are asked to complete. Typically, a dissertation will be the culmination of your degree, bringing together the skills that you have developed in research methods modules with what you have learnt on substantive or conceptual or topic-led modules. This is *your* time to shine! It is your time to formalise a passion that began earlier in your course.

We have written this book with social science students completing a dissertation in mind. However, the messages should be relevant to anybody undertaking a social science research project and may be especially helpful to those with limited experience of

carrying out this type of work. Likewise, although this book draws on examples from the social sciences, much of the content, including tips on time management and approaches to editing long documents are relevant to those in other aligned and cognate disciplines.

Principally, the aim of the book is to assist and accompany you in the successful completion of your project. Here, at the beginning of this book, it is important to remind readers that embarking on any type of research project is a significant undertaking. Throughout the book, then, we strongly encourage you to take some basic steps, such as keeping in touch with your supervisor or advisor and allowing yourself sufficient time for editing and formatting as well as other administrative tasks such as creating timetables. This will give you the best chance of enjoying the experience and making the most out of doing a research project whilst minimising stress, especially later down the line. Please do not leave everything to the last minute. Working on your dissertation should be seen as a 'gradual' journey. We wish you the very best of luck and hope you find the world of social science research as rewarding and exciting as we do!

WHY HAVE WE WRITTEN THIS BOOK?

We have co-convened a large social science undergraduate dissertation module for the past five years. This module provides students with the opportunity to explore a social science topic of their choice, in detail, by conducting a small scale but substantial piece of independent research. Running across two semesters, we deliver weekly two-hour lectures, which are supported by fortnightly supervisory meetings. The module assessment is a written dissertation of between 8,000 to 10,000 words, worth 80% of the module mark. Students are also asked to produce a 15-minute presentation, followed by a five-minute question-and-answer session, which is worth the remaining 20% of the module mark. The dissertation module attracts undergraduate students undertaking degree programmes in sociology, social analytics, social science, criminology, social psychology, education and social policy. Additionally, joint honours students studying one of these subjects alongside history, politics, Welsh and journalism can also study the module. Together, we have also produced dissertation resources for postgraduate students on master's programmes in the areas of education, social policy, and criminology. With such an eclectic cohort that have various (though admittedly, connected) disciplinary hinterlands, it might come as little surprise that we read research project proposals covering a broad spectrum of social issues and problems. In that spirit, there is extraordinarily little restriction on the topics that students can research. Indeed, we encourage their social science imagination to run wild. However, of course, there are some restrictions on the way they go about studying the topic and we deal with this specifically in Chapter 4 (*Being an Ethical Researcher*). To take an extreme example, while the topic of female killers' representation in the media is not off limits for criminology students, the approach to studying it might be restricted to the content analysis of newspaper articles or news broadcasts. It would not include interviewing female prisoners to ask them how

they feel they have been represented. Such a project would need a much more experienced hand and various levels of (ethical) clearance from both the university and the prison service.

The reason we include this here at the beginning of the book is to stress the elasticity of social science as a broad disciplinary area that has a wide range of substantive topics to offer students, a diversity reflected in the array of methods which can be used to study them. Social science is undeniably promiscuous and this, we maintain, is the reason this book is so important. Equally it is the reason why writing such a book is so challenging. We will pause here to state emphatically that there are already some excellent dissertation and research project books on the market. Our personal favourites include Gary Thomas (2023a) *How to Do Your Research Project: A Guide for Students*, 4th edition and Clark et al. (2019) *How to Do Your Social Research Project or Dissertation*. However, as dissertation module convenors, we constantly field two main questions from students: (1) What stage should I be at in my research project? and (2) What does a completed research dissertation look like? Both questions are reasonable, and understandable, but, as you will learn as you work your way through this book, there is no straightforward answer to either query. That said, these two questions have driven the production of this book, and we hope you find reassurance and guidance in the detail we provide. At its core, then, this book does two things. Chiefly, it functions as your companion and guide suggesting a logical order in which to complete the stages of your research project. Think of it too as a security blanket. Our hope is that it will boost confidence, empower you, and provide you comfort when required. Many students we have taught come away from lectures or supervisory meetings with a purpose and renewed confidence, only to begin to lose that belief after a few days. The intention behind writing this book is that it can act as a stopgap between those teaching activities and therefore help keep your confidence levels high. We also acknowledge and appreciate that when you begin this journey, it can often feel overwhelming. Where do I begin? How do I begin? How can I show progress? Am I on track? How much time should I be dedicating to the project? These questions reverberate across the lecture hall year after year. This book sets you tangible tasks to complete from the outset, enabling you to show supervisors and lecturers your nascent ideas and the processes through which they are maturing and developing coherence. Thinking of your research project as a process or a journey helps you determine where you are in the project, what you have done, and what needs to be done to move forward.

Secondly, and unlike most textbooks of this ilk, it discusses, in detail, how you might go about structuring each chapter of your dissertation. Writing is a significant part of doing social science research, transforming your project from a process you are engaged in to one that you have completed. Converting those thoughts and ideas that you are processing internally into words on the paper or computer screen is the vehicle for sharing your thoughts. The aim is to convince others (including markers) through cogent argumentation and clear presentation. This book, then, helps you complete a *social science* research project by also showing you how to write one.

But just as you will all develop your own style, we have ours too. Others would have written a textbook like this with a different focus, a different argumentation and presented it differently too. However, we feel strongly that the research dissertation or thesis has a general, typical, structure – silhouette, if you will – that students would do well to follow. The various chapters of a research dissertation should act as standalone parts of a coherent whole. Different sections should come together to form a structured and cohesive piece of work that can be read (and marked) by others. That is, a dissertation should have a clear throughline running throughout the document. The order in which this is presented on paper (or on your screen), though, is unlikely to reflect the order in which you complete these tasks. This is another area where we feel this book can help: highlighting how conducting social science research is often circular and not a linear process as is suggested in the finished written product.

The book then is a deep dive into the magic circle of undertaking a social science research project. In the chapters that follow we reveal the tricks social science researchers use to produce a final written product that makes sense to an interested reader, and crucially a reader *not* involved in the undertaking of the research. Alongside these tricks, we also provide tips on how to go about conducting and writing up the research. The book is aimed at final year undergraduate students as well as master's students doing a social science research project. We root the book in our own experiences, from our position as both social science educators and researchers in the field. Consequently, you will see several examples from our own research. Importantly, we also include examples from the projects of students we have supervised through the various chapters as well as questions which they have posed to us, students just like you. We also include sections on both qualitative and quantitative social science projects as well as shorter sections on mixed method approaches.

Jamie is an experienced qualitative researcher, with expertise in observational, documentary, and interview-based research methods. He is a sociologist whose research straddles the relatively porous boundaries between the Sociology of Science or Science and Technology Studies (STS), the Public Understanding of Science (PUS) and the Sociology of Mystery. His interests extend from developments in qualitative research to the boundaries between science, pseudo-science, and non-science. Jamie has also researched and studied the public understanding of risk, science activism, and the practical accomplishment of scientific facts, spending time interviewing scientists and observing their work in laboratories. You will see reference to Jamie's current work examining the community of Bigfooting throughout the book.

Charlotte is an experienced quantitative researcher in the field of education studies. She teaches across social analytics and quantitative methods programmes. Charlotte's specific interest is in the crisis of 'number' in the social sciences. Consequently, her research has explored different approaches to engaging students with quantitative methods. This research informs Charlotte's teaching practice and drives her ambition to develop innovative approaches to inspire interest and engagement in quantitative methodologies amongst students. You will read examples of Charlotte's work on mathematics teaching and learning in various chapters in the book.

Importantly, both of us have been in your position. Both of us have had to undertake a dissertation as part of our degrees. Jamie was a joint honours undergraduate studying psychology and sociology. In his final year he was tasked with producing an 8,000-word dissertation on *empathic accuracy*, also known in some quarters as ‘mindreading’. This involved showing participants a set of videos in which couples were talking about their life. Participants were asked to complete a questionnaire, from which, dependent on their responses, they were categorised as either individualistic, pro-social, or competitive. Participants were then asked to infer what each person in the video was thinking. The hypothesis was that pro-social participants would be more empathically accurate than participants categorised as individualistic.

Jamie then went on to do an MSc in Social Science Research Methods where he undertook a 20,000-word dissertation considering the everyday coping strategies that people living with irritable bowel syndrome (IBS) employed. This drew from a qualitative questionnaire that he administered to members of an IBS support group. He produced a temporal analysis of the routines and rituals that people adopted, locating the work in medical sociology but with a strong influence from those theorising about time. Finally, his PhD concerned the ways in which two new scientific disciplines developed and secured coherence. This Science and Technology Studies (STS) project drew from 40 semi-structured interviews mostly with scientists based in the UK working in the nascent academic fields of Bioinformatics and Proteomics.

Charlotte’s undergraduate degree was in Education (with psychology). For her final year dissertation, Charlotte facilitated focus groups with parents at two schools and carried out a discourse analysis to explore the ways in which parents used language to justify and explain what they gave their children to eat for lunch. Like Jamie, Charlotte then went on to complete an MSc in Social Science Research Methods. In her dissertation, Charlotte undertook survey research with students studying post-compulsory qualifications in schools and colleges. Specifically, Charlotte was interested in finding out what factors determined students’ subject choices. This research involved Charlotte designing and distributing a paper questionnaire and then subsequently inputting the data into a statistical software package to analyse. Finally, her PhD explored sociologists’ attitudes toward quantitative research methods. Again, for this research, Charlotte designed a questionnaire. Unlike her MSc research, this questionnaire was distributed online to sociologists working in the UK, the Netherlands and New Zealand. This allowed Charlotte to make international comparisons about the place of quantitative methods in the discipline in different countries.

In this book, we bring together our knowledge of completing social science dissertations, dissertations just like the ones that you are undertaking, with our more recent experience of designing and conducting qualitative and quantitative research projects. We combine our skills in supervising and teaching students to guide you on your research journey. We also share with you examples of well-designed and executed research projects, as well as some of the challenges we have faced as researchers, providing you with practical tips for avoiding or overcoming them. The book unapologetically makes reference to research from our colleagues at the Cardiff University School of Social

Sciences, a department which is home to the longstanding Ethnography, Culture and Interpretative Analysis Group, and the Cardiff Q-Step Centre of Excellence in Quantitative Methods Teaching and Learning, as well as where the journals *Qualitative Research* and the *International Journal of Social Research Methodology* are edited from.

WHAT IS IN A TITLE?

Deciding on a title for a manuscript is a surprisingly challenging task. We know many colleagues who have been kept awake at night, agonising over naming their book. Here, in the UK, there ran, for three decades, a well-known television advertisement for Ronseal – a wood staining preserve used to coat and protect wood from the changeable weather in the UK. The advert is best known for its punchy and direct strapline – ‘Ronseal: *does exactly what it says on the tin.*’ Today that term forms part of the common vernacular in the UK, stabilising into a common idiom that means an accurate and fair definition of its properties: simple, straightforward, and not masquerading as anything else. In determining the title for this textbook, we too wanted the title to reflect the contents without being too florid or nebulous. We wanted a title that ‘*does exactly what it says on the paper (or screen)*’. We hope therefore that *Completing Your Research Project* works as an accompanying guide that helps you undertake and finish a piece of social science research.

Crucially, the book is a guide. It does not, and simply cannot, include everything that you need to know to complete your unique and idiosyncratic project. If it did, there would be little, if any, need for supervisors, advisors, and lecturers. For the avoidance of doubt – there absolutely is. Instead, what we have set out to provide in the pages of this book, and through the online resources, is a textbook that functions as a signpost, directing you to the relevant sources of expertise and information available to you. We provide a general template for what a social science research project involves, how you might go about tackling it, and the common conventions for reporting what you have found. We also explore some of the informal aspects of undertaking a social science research project or dissertation such as managing your time, dealing with anxiety, and what you can expect from the supervisory relationship. These aspects might not always be explicitly taught or formalised on your course, but they are crucial for producing a successful project.

However, as nascent social scientists, you should not take our statement at face value or without critical scrutiny. Let us start as we mean to go on by first assessing this claim, by paying closer attention to our title, which is divided here into its four component parts.

Completing: *the act of finishing a task*

Completing is a verb and a method. It is the process of finishing something, of getting to the end. It suggests that the task has a temporal component that begins somewhere and involves effort and perseverance to conclude. This book takes you

on a journey from preparing and designing your research project all the way through to data collection, writing up, and submission.

Your: a form of the possessive case of 'you'

The word 'your' indicates that the object or subject being discussed belongs to you. Here, the word 'your' recognises that every social science research project is different, if only subtly so. That difference might simply be you, but what a huge and important difference that is. 'Your' also recognises that the project is an independent piece of work which you must undertake and lead on. This textbook will support you in that achievement. It is a useful guide that provides general tips. It recognises that all research journeys differ and so it directs you to the relevant people you can discuss your specific journey and project with.

Research Project: a systematic study of a topic

The phrase 'research project' denotes a study where you ask a searching question or set of questions and methodically endeavour to answer the question(s) through a form of systematic evidence-gathering and analysis. This is then detailed and justified during the write-up. Most research projects tend to have both a conceptual – theoretical – and empirical – referring to data collection – strand to them. In this book, we presume you are conducting an empirical piece of work that involves the collection and/or analysis of data with the aim of contributing to a body of academic literature.

Put together, then, *Completing Your Research Project* is a guide that has been written to help you understand what a social science research project looks like, something with a structure suitable for the disciplinary diversity we outline in this chapter. We will walk you through the lifecycle of a project, explaining what you might expect, and, in turn, what is expected of you at each stage of a research project. Throughout, we recognise that each project is as unique as the researcher undertaking it. To achieve this, the textbook is divided into chapters that relate to the key tasks and milestones you will face when undertaking a research project.

BOOK STRUCTURE

Chapter 1 – *What Is Social Science Research and Why Is It Important?* – sets out what we understand by the term *social sciences*, detailing who might most benefit from reading this book. It stresses the importance of social science for our understanding of global contemporary problems and outlines the challenges social science researchers face when studying the complexity involved in these issues. The chapter also acknowledges that a social science research project might have various audiences or publics or counter-publics (Warner 2002, Burawoy 2005, Lewis et al. 2023), e.g., academics, students, policy makers, charities, governmental institutions, 'the general public,' all of whom will receive and digest information

differently. The focus of this textbook is to showcase how you, as a student, might undertake and write up a dissertation or research report drawn from your research project. This first chapter also recognises the various forms that the findings of research projects can be disseminated in, from the more traditional journal article or monograph through to more contemporary digital forms such as blogs and podcasts. This is then further developed in Chapter 7 (*Presenting Your Social Science Research*). Crucially, we also dedicate space in Chapter 1 to discuss the importance of developing robust research questions that anchor your project and guide your research journey, before importantly outlining the typical structure of a social science dissertation.

A major thread running through the textbook is the importance of managing your time. We want to help you understand that completing a research project is not something you can leave until the end. It needs to be approached iteratively. Most importantly, it is a craft that you can continue to work on (and improve at). Chapter 2 – *Planning a Social Science Research Project* – specifically focusses on sketching out your research journey. The chapter encourages you, from the outset, to consider where you are on your research journey and where you want to end up. This can then be translated into a series of steps and actions required to achieve this goal, making the process feel more manageable. It will also help you to identify if there are any gaps that need addressing such as training opportunities. As part of this, we discuss designing a ‘doable’ research project, one which is coherent, feasible, and achievable to study and complete with the resources at hand and time available. This might mean you need to narrow your focus a little, not being overly ambitious and not over-reaching or flying too close to the sun, while still generating interesting and meaningful findings. It is often the case that students come to us with very interesting initial ideas, but they are too grand (and thus unachievable) for a student project. Remember, a good research project is a completed research project. We provide several examples of time management tools, which we encourage you to use such as Gantt charts and Kanban boards and tips for managing your project. We also provide an indicative research plan which we recommend you draft in the early stages of your project.

Chapter 3 – *Reviewing Social Science Literature* – centres on how you might approach finding the academic literature you want to locate your work in. The Literature Review is almost certainly the first substantive chapter of your dissertation that you begin drafting. Chapter 3 presumes you have read the chapter *Planning a Social Science Research Project* and sketched out your research design. The Literature Review chapter is then where you begin to formalise both the topic you want to study and the way you want to research it. The main purpose of reviewing the academic literature is to help you to further narrow the gaze of your knowledge, focussing in on your specific topic and proposed methodology. Reviewing the literature adds robust context to the topic at hand and should help inform your methodological approach (Maggio et al. 2016). The formative intention of a Literature Review is to collect pertinent, timely research on your area of interest and to synthesise it into a coherent summary of the state of the field, identifying gaps and illustrating any (in-)consistencies. As such in the Literature

Review you should develop a line of argument that informs your research questions. Beyond describing the purpose of the Literature Review, Chapter 3 details the numerous ways you can structure this chapter as well as providing tips on how and where to search for literature, highlighting the importance of selectivity and academic scrutiny.

The fourth chapter – *Being an Ethical Researcher* – discusses the necessity for putting ethical concerns front and centre of your project. A doable project is also an ethically sensitive project, one which considers the potential risks for participants in your study, for you as a researcher, and for the university or organisation which you are representing. Here, we discuss both procedural and personal ethics or what might be understood as institutional and *in-situ* ethics. We recognise that being out and about conducting your research can never be fully reflected in an account of the research field on an ethics form. Dynamic situations will always arise. Ethics, then, is better thought of as a mindset (as well as a process to navigate). At the same time, having peers, colleagues, and lecturers look over, assess, and provide comments on the ethics of a research project can only strengthen your work and offer further protection for all involved. After all, peer review is the bread and butter of academic work. Therefore, the chapter functions partly as a practical guide on what to expect when completing an ethics application, and partly as a chapter that discusses the purpose of achieving institutional ethical approval, including some of the current debates on the subject.

After drafting your Literature Review, the next step is typically to begin working on your Methods chapter. Hopefully, you will have already got a clear idea of the most appropriate methods to use to answer your fledgling research questions. You might also have submitted an ethics application to your institution detailing your methodological approach. Chapter 5 – *Methods of Social Science Data Collection* – discusses some of the most popular and pervasive social science research methods that you can employ and the reasons why you might choose them for your own social science research project. The chapter contains a section detailing quantitative methods such as questionnaire design, experiments, and secondary data analysis. It also includes a section on qualitative research methods where both traditional and more contemporary forms, such as observational techniques, interviews, documentary methods, and sensory methods are explained. It also discusses mixed methods projects but cautions that for a student research project, with all its attendant time limitations, there needs to be a compelling reason to combine methodological approaches. To this end, students working on their research design might want to read this chapter out of order and to return to it again when commencing data collection/production. Chapter 5 concludes by suggesting a general structure for writing your Methods chapter, which you can begin drafting before entering the research field.

Following a similar structure to Chapter 5, Chapter 6 on *Social Science Data Analysis* is divided into three sections: quantitative data analysis, qualitative data analysis and presenting your data. The first section draws on data from the UK National Survey of Sexual Attitudes and Lifestyles (2010–2012) to introduce approaches to the statistical analysis of numerical data. Each of the three stages – data preparation, the production

of descriptive statistics, and doing inferential statistics is discussed and explained in turn. The second section of the chapter discusses some of the practical concerns that you should consider if you decide to draw on qualitative research methods. We introduce some of the most popular types of qualitative data analysis such as thematic analysis, narrative analysis, documentary analysis, and conversation analysis. We also direct readers to Sage Research Methods Datasets, an international pedagogical data analysis resource, for more step-by-step instructions on how to undertake these analyses, as well as Sage Foundations. Once you have collected and analysed your data, the next step is to present and make sense of your main findings. The final section of this chapter, then, discusses how you might present your findings and analysis in your dissertation.

We anticipate that most of you who are producing a dissertation as part of your research project might also be asked to put together another output such as a short report, a poster, a blog or a presentation too. As such, Chapter 7 called *Presenting Your Social Science Research* is devoted to presenting other types of ‘research’ outputs. For example, we provide tips and suggestions on how you might deliver a presentation of your project, create a poster, craft a blog entry, produce an executive summary or put together a podcast. While these different formats demand specific styles of presentation, they have more in common than you might first think. The chapter provides some useful generic guidance on how to present your research to different audiences that covers a range of different outputs. As part of this, we also discuss the importance of knowing your audience.

Chapter 8 concerns the topping and tailing of your research project. We present and discuss – *Introducing and Concluding* – as sibling chapters that have a family resemblance to one another. While one is the first substantive chapter that a reader or marker will encounter in your written dissertation and the other the last chapter, they tend to be written in partnership toward the end of the project journey. As before, the sequence in which you draft your thesis does not reflect the order in which those chapters are presented in the finished product. The Introduction and Conclusion chapters should have a symmetry to them: they tend to be of similar word length with the Introduction telling the reader what it is you are going to do and the Conclusion telling the reader what it is you have done. In line with the rest of the textbook, we include sections suggesting what to include when writing these chapters.

The closing chapter – *Submitting Your Social Science Research Project* – details what work is required to get your written dissertation ready for submission. Primarily, it focusses on editing and formatting as well as producing the front matter of your thesis: the content page, abstract, and acknowledgements. We discuss referencing conventions and proofreading before considering other matters such as ‘letting go’, dealing with anxiety, and writer’s block. The key message of this section is that good enough really is good enough. All research projects are open to further tinkering but at some point, the project needs to be submitted to be assessed. A reminder of the maxim that a ‘completed project is a submitted one’. So long as you have followed all the steps covered in this book, especially keeping an open channel of communication with your supervisor and giving

yourself enough time to edit your final draft, then we expect that you will have completed a well-rounded social science research project. This final chapter includes a checklist to help ensure that you have completed all the sections of your social science research project. You may find it helpful to refer to this checklist as you progress with your project. Alternatively, you may wish to refer to the checklist before submission to check that your research project contains all the necessary elements.

HOW TO USE THIS BOOK

We envisage this book to be relevant to a whole spectrum of disciplines including, but not limited to, anthropology, business studies, communication studies, criminology, cultural studies, development studies, economics, education, history, human geography, linguistics, marketing, organisational studies, psychology, social analytics, social sciences, social policy, social work, sociology, and science and technology studies (STS). We must stress again that this book is not a replacement for the lectures, workshops, and supervisory sessions on your research project module. Rather, it should be used as a reassuring accompaniment to the formal resources provided to you on your university course, which you can digest at your own pace. Your first port of call for any information about completing a social science research project should always be the lecturers and supervisors on your course, and the resources they provide. There will be subtle but important differences in how different institutions and even departments or schools in the same institution expect your research project to be conducted and presented. Always refer to your course convenors and module handbooks as the ultimate authority on these expectations. This book has been written to supplement your university experience and to help you prepare as best you can to ask the right questions of your lecturers. The structure of the book is intended to mirror your research journey. Again, it is important to remind you that this order is different to the order presented in a completed dissertation thesis. However, each chapter works as a freestanding resource, and it is possible to move back and forth and skip chapters that do not reflect the stage of your research project journey you are at. For example, Chapter 1 (*What Is Social Science Research and Why Is It Important?*) considers the importance of research questions, but it would be perfectly acceptable to read Chapter 3 (*Reviewing Social Science Literature*) on reviewing the literature before ruminating over your research questions. Each chapter in the book begins with a set of chapter objectives and concludes with a checklist and reflective task or set of tasks, which we encourage you to complete. This should enable you to demonstrate your understanding of the content included and to think about how that content relates to your own unique research project. We provide a detailed reference list at the end of the book, which includes the location of the Sage Datasets and Sage Foundations entries discussed in Chapter 6 (*Social Science Data Analysis*). There are also accompanying PowerPoint decks available for each chapter which you can access as part of the online resources. In full, the book aims to achieve the following objectives:

- To boost your confidence in completing a social science research project.
- To function as a touchstone to be accessed in the days and/or weeks between formal lectures and supervisory meetings.
- To signpost you to the relevant sources of information and literature.
- To act as a navigational tool through your dissertation journey.
- To help manage the dissertation process by setting realistic and tangible milestones.
- To introduce you to ways to approach and structure your social science research project.
- To describe the various types of data collection tools and analytic techniques available to you.
- To showcase how you might go about writing up a social science research project.
- To talk you through the steps involved in submitting your research project.
- To direct you to the requisite sources of help at your institution.

Good luck and *bon voyage* on wherever your social science research journey takes you.

1

WHAT IS SOCIAL SCIENCE RESEARCH AND WHY IS IT IMPORTANT?

We begin this first chapter by stressing the significance of social science research and outlining what is entailed in undertaking a social science research project. We emphasise the importance of developing clear, crisp, and cogent research questions that both anchor and direct your research project and which can be clearly and directly answered during the lifecycle of your project. We discuss the benefits of undertaking a social science research project to both you and the wider community. Recognising that students will have different interests and varied backgrounds, we illustrate the ways in which a research project might be an attractive proposition to undertake for all manner of reasons. Examples include furthering an interesting module you studied, choosing a research topic that is culturally timely or newsworthy and/or thinking about your hobbies or potential career pathways. Finally, we provide a skeletal structure of what a social science dissertation or thesis should look like, including an outline of the main substantive chapters such as the (i) Introduction, (ii) Literature Review, (iii) Methods, (iv) Findings, (v) Analysis and (vi) Conclusion, as well as detailing the skills that you likely will develop from undertaking a project.

Chapter Objectives

- To understand the broad range of topics that can be explored or examined in a social science research project.
- To recognise and consider the benefits of undertaking a social science research project.
- To consider the different approaches to collecting data for a social science research project.

(Continued)

- To identify potential sources of existing data for a social science research project.
 - To understand the main components of a written social science research report or dissertation.
 - To begin developing clear, purposeful research questions for a social science research project.
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INTRODUCTION

To begin, we ask three questions in this chapter: (i) What is social science research? (ii) Why is it important? and (iii) Who is it for? In doing so, we set out the importance of social science research for all sorts of people and publics and showcase some examples of how social science research can contribute to knowledge as well as influence policy and practice. Almost by definition, the social sciences are plural and diverse, so we also spend time demonstrating the breadth and potential variety of social science research projects on offer for you to undertake and discuss why you might choose them.

Although social science research can be disseminated in many ways and via myriad media depending on the audience, including academic journal articles, books, reports, presentations, and even blog posts and podcasts, there are key components and a generic structure that is generally followed when presenting research both textually and orally (see Chapter 7: *Presenting Your Social Science Research*). In this chapter, then, we also introduce you to the main components that make up a research project and stress the importance of developing clear, robust, and effective research questions, which both firmly ground and direct the research project.

Finally, we discuss the main skills that you will develop while undertaking a social science research project and consider how these skills might be beneficial for your future. Various key terms that appear repeatedly throughout this book are also introduced.

WHAT IS SOCIAL SCIENCE RESEARCH?

The term ‘social sciences’ is a rather elastic, umbrella category, which includes various disciplines such as sociology, criminology, social analytics, education, human geography, psychology, economics, politics, social policy and communication studies, among many others. While all different, these disciplines share a common focus on studying the social world and the social structures, groups, and individuals within it. Easy to define, then! Well, in truth, it is not so straightforward. If you were to ask 100 ‘social scientists’ to define the term ‘social sciences’, you would likely receive 100 (slightly) different responses. But despite the likely diversity in definitions, there is a tendency among scholars to consider the roots of social sciences as a unifying factor. The origin story, to use the terminology of Franklin and McNeil (1993), of the social sciences, is characterised by significant societal shifts in the 19th century like the industrial revolution,

the scientific revolution, the emergence of capitalism, and the broader transition to modernity. Yet, this 'traditional' narrative, itself a mid-20th century retrospective, has recently faced robust challenges for its perceived bias in favour of the contributions of a specific group of individuals: white, male, European scholars such as Karl Marx, Adam Smith, Georg Simmel, Max Weber, Friedrich Engels, Sigmund Freud, and Émile Durkheim who were all dealing with and trying to understand the social problems of their time. In making this critique, most point to other scholars that have been written out of the social science story, such as Ibn Khaldun, a 14th century North African social philosopher writing several decades before those typically highlighted in the social science tradition (Irwin 2018). Indeed, contemporary voices, including Woodman and Threadgold (2021) and Bhambra and Holmwood (2021), now advocate for a more inclusive and de-colonised approach to the social sciences which recognises and addresses historical omissions in the canon, scholars such as Octavia Hill (Wohl 1971), Harriet Martineau (Hoecker-Drysdale 2011), Jane Addams (Deegan 1988) and W.E.B. Du Bois (Abbott 2023), to pave the way for more productive advancements in the field.

So, if the origin story is not as unifying as was once suggested, what else links the social sciences? Its methods, surely? Again, we would be hard pressed to argue this with any confidence. Within the social sciences, diverse, and often incompatible, positions on theoretical frameworks, research methods, and even the fundamental concept of 'the social' coexist, leading to a variety of different methodological and theoretical perspectives (Lewis et al. 2023). For example, within the United Kingdom (UK), sociology is characterised as a more qualitative discipline (Strong 1988, Williams et al. 2017), whereas, in the United States of America (USA), quantitative research is dominant (Bechhofer 1981, Gartrell and Gartrell 2002, Seale 2008) and, in France, it is often theoretically driven (Lamont 2000). That is, even when examining a single discipline of the social sciences, internal divisions persist, some of which concern what has been termed the **methodological divide**. Qualitative research within the social sciences draws inspiration from a more humanities-oriented perspective, emphasising theory-building and constructivism, as exemplified by works such as Berger and Luckmann (1991), Glaser and Strauss (1967), and Urquhart (2019). In contrast, quantitative research leans towards experimental methodologies characterised by deduction and falsification, akin to approaches found in the natural sciences (Popper 1935).

However, despite all this messiness, the term 'social sciences' does mean something (to universities, to policy makers, to the broader public). Principally, it entails some type of systematic and theoretical approach to exploring the social world so to provide an updated understanding of or insight into society (Grossman 2021). It is a phrase that covers various disciplines that study society, its social institutions and the human relationships within it. It is a term that involves studying the mundane, the typical, the routine as well as the 'carnavalesque' (Bakhtin 1968) – the unusual, the extreme, the colourful. Moreover, despite recent public and political criticisms, it is gaining traction in some quarters. For example, data highlights an increase in the number of students in the UK studying social science at post-compulsory levels (Revise Sociology 2023). Indeed, in the academic year 2000/1, 141,665 students were enrolled

on a social science degree in the UK (HESA 2001), but this increased to 286,325 students by the academic year 2021/22 (HESA 2023). Many of these students will have embarked on a social science research project, just like you are doing.

So, why have we begun this book by discussing the various positions, perspectives, and cultural preferences in social science research. Well, the broad scope of the social sciences means that the topics you have on offer to research are rich and diverse, including, for instance, health and wellbeing, education and employment, everyday life, the environment, the family and kinship, access and inequalities, poverty, crime and policing, gender, race, class, science and medicine as well as housing and migration. This can pose a distinct set of challenges for social science researchers. Often social science research will involve examining and exploring parts of the human world which are difficult to measure, such as behaviours, meanings, experiences, attitudes, and feelings. But it also offers huge opportunities since the social is entangled in all our lives, impacting everyone, you, your family, your friends, your peers on your course, your work colleagues.

For example, the aims of social science research can include tracking change over time such as exploring the various stages of fatherhood (Shirani and Henwood 2011), comparing different groups – either explicitly or implicitly – (see Allen et al. 2017), exploring the impacts of a new policy or practice such as welfare changes (Harrison 2014), and making forecasts and predictions (van Creveld 2020; Chen et al. 2021) though Grossman et al. (2023) argue that this is not our strength. Work can be **normative** pertaining to establishing the values that best fit the needs of society (how it should be or how we would like it to be) or **descriptive** pertaining to how it currently is. Social science research is interested in both the big and small questions too, but what connects social scientists is their distinctive way of thinking about the social world – what C. Wright Mills (1959) called the **sociological imagination** and what we refer to in this book as the **social scientific imagination**. This way of thinking involves making connections between what happens in people's everyday life with the broader social context in which we live. For instance, the reason why there is an extended queue in your local foodbank is not something that can be solely understood in isolation; it is very likely to be connected to an increase in inflation and food prices. Likewise, a rise in unemployment should not be attributed to the individuals who find themselves out of work, but instead considered and understood within the context of job market trends and societal factors influencing unemployment rates, including technological advancements, or systemic inequalities that affect job opportunities for certain groups. Wright Mills discussed this connection or relationship in terms of how personal or private troubles – everyday concerns which we all face – are rooted in public issues; that there is a structural basis for people's problems and circumstances. Making sense of this connection – whether you are interested in the minutiae of everyday life (like ethnographers are) or macro, global problems (like quantitative social and public policy scholars) – is then a central task for nascent social scientists like you.

As such, despite the tendency for certain social science disciplines to favour different approaches, and the dramas over its beginnings (Franklin and McNeil 1993, Knorr-Cetina 1999), there are commonalities and crossovers in social science research and a

generic structure that is often used in the presentation of research findings that we highlight later in this chapter and throughout the rest of the book (see also Chapter 7: *Presenting Your Social Science Research*). More concretely, in this book, we discuss approaches to research across the social science disciplines and draw on a variety of examples from education, sociology, criminology and social policy as well as other disciplines to help induct you into the variety of questions asked, methods drawn from, forms of analysis, and means of presentation used within the social sciences.

WHO DOES SOCIAL SCIENCE RESEARCH?

Naturally enough, social science research is undertaken by academic researchers working in university social science departments across the globe from Australia to the USA, from the Global South to Europe, from Asia to Africa. However, social science research occurs in other settings too. For example, non-governmental organisations (NGOs), public opinion and data companies, schools, charities, government organisations, independent and private research institutions, trade unions, large businesses, lobby groups and local authorities all conduct a type of social science research to help them identify trends, evaluate practice, and improve provisions. These, of course, are all organisations and places where social science students such as yourself, might look to work in the future.

Yet, there is lively debate and discussion concerning the place of social science research in modern society and who can (or who is best placed to) undertake such research (see Chapter 5: *Methods of Social Science Data Collection*). Concerns about the place for social science have been fuelled by, among other things, the rise of Big Data; colossal amounts of data which are collected and harvested routinely using various algorithms and super computers, including transactional data as well as social media data. For some commentators, data is the new oil (Hirsch 2014). This means that companies, such as Amazon, Google, Tesco, and Walmart, now have stored a wealth of data, which can provide insights into social behaviours, patterns and trends in our society. However, questions have been raised by academics (Bartlett et al. 2018) over the extent to which these organisations can provide the necessary substantive social insights to interpret and understand these data. Data are not only valuable, but they are value-laden too. Such theorists argue that the role of social science researchers is to bring methodological rigour, ethical sensitivity, and a conceptual understanding to research findings, some of which are grounded in relevant literature and lineage. While these arguments are compelling, as are arguments that we need to decolonise as well as internationalise social science research, it is highly likely that continued developments in technology and AI (Artificial Intelligence), in particular, will open further opportunities for the way in which social science data is collected and analysed, both inside and outside universities, providing new and exciting opportunities as well as challenges for those studying the social sciences.

What we strongly believe, though, is that having a grounding in social science research will aid anybody attempting to collect and make sense of social data. We add this here as our job is to demystify the research process, to open the *Blackbox* (Pinch 1992, Latour 1999) of research so to speak, to make it visible, by demonstrating how it is a craft with various skills to be learnt and finessed. Students studying the social sciences have opportunities to undertake their own research during their degree programme to develop these critical and analytic skills. For some students, undertaking a research project or a dissertation is even a compulsory requirement of their degree programme. This can often be the case if the degree is accredited by a professional body. For example, in the UK, psychology and social psychology students must complete an independent research project to fulfil the requirements set out by the British Psychology Society (BPS), which accredits psychology degree programmes in the UK. This accreditation also comes with some limits on what can and cannot be studied and the way in which students go about researching the topic. Other students who are not constrained by a professional body, may be able to choose whether or not they do a dissertation as part of their degree. For these students, it can be helpful to speak with academic staff and to look over examples of dissertations completed in previous years to help you decide whether undertaking a social science research project is for you. Importantly, this book details the importance of being an ethical social scientist, one that locates your work in academic social science literature (see Chapters 3 and 4).

WHAT ARE THE BENEFITS OF DOING SOCIAL SCIENCE RESEARCH?

First and foremost, a social science research project is an accomplishment; it involves work to produce a product. Undertaking and completing something like a dissertation is likely to have several intended as well as unintended impacts for both you and others. Some projects have rich, academic merit and further knowledge in a particular discipline (such as medical sociology or social psychology), while others are more applied having a broader range of beneficiaries, impacting on policy and practice. Social science terminologies have also been assimilated in everyday vernacular (Mandler 2019, Lewis et al. 2023). Terms such as stigma (Goffman 1963), moral panic (Cohen 1973), emotional labour (Hochschild 1983), and to a lesser extent toxic masculinity (origins discussed in Harrington 2021), all rooted in social science research, are now discussed in everyday parlance to describe social processes and events. So, while the social sciences can be agents of change helping to solve social problems, they also provide us with a vocabulary to make sense of the social processes at play.

It is safe to argue, then, that studying the social world and the individuals who occupy it can help us better understand the dynamic society in which we live. This in turn can be a catalyst for change, offering new practices (for example, the ways in which teachers use educational aids to teach) and policies (for instance, Children's Rights). For example,

the British Academy (2024: 3) states that social science research ‘is helping to solve some of the most complex and pressing problems facing society – whether that is related to health sector, the economy or the environment.’ Let us look at five examples in detail that reflect the full spectrum of the social sciences and how research has been used to tackle societal problems across the globe: (i) the Whitehall studies (1967/1985) originally led by Sir Michael Marmot have had a profound effect on our understandings of the social determinants of health, providing evidence that the relationship between health and socioeconomic status is not simply the difference between the poor, marginalised and the rest (see Centre for Social Epidemiology 2011). Instead, there is a social gradient that can be seen across society, including within the categories of ‘poor’ or ‘well-off’; (ii) Abhijit Banerjee, Esther Duflo and Michael Kremer won the Nobel prize in economics in 2019 after introducing a novel approach to garnering reliable answers on the best and most efficient ways to tackle global poverty. They emphasised the use of field experiments in research so to realise the benefits of lab-based trials. As a direct result of their studies, ‘more than five million Indian children have benefited from effective programmes of remedial tutoring in schools’ (Nobel Prize 2019); (iii) Bystander intervention is primarily associated with the work of social psychologists Bibb Latané and John Darley. Their work in the mid-20th century laid the foundations for what has become known as the bystander effect and bystander apathy. Fundamentally, the theory maintains that people are less likely to help a victim when other people are present (presumably believing that others will step forward and they are not needed). But the research suggests that the more bystanders there are, the less likely anyone will offer help. Greater understanding of bystander theory has led to the development of training programmes and educational campaigns aimed at encouraging people to act in emergencies and to step in when they know someone is being bullied. For example, cardiopulmonary resuscitation (CPR) and first aid training now often include components that address the bystander effect, teaching individuals not only the technical skills required to help but also how to overcome psychological barriers to intervening; (iv) studies led by Donald Hirsch (2011) were drawn upon to craft policy in the UK. The work of Hirsch and others identified budgets called minimum income standards, which were then used as the basis of the UK minimum wage; (v) Research undertaken at Macquarie University into the teaching and learning of mathematics in Australia has had positive impacts on both teachers and children in Australia as well as further afield (Macquarie University 2021). Findings of a 2015 study involving 600 kindergarten and Grade 1 students conducted by researchers at the university led to the development of a new assessment tool used globally to measure 4–8-year-olds’ understanding and knowledge of number, pattern, algebra, geometry, and graphical representations.

These examples demonstrate how social research can influence the approaches we use to understand the social world as well as providing new methods and ways of measuring that can be implemented in policy. Now, do not sweat, there is absolutely no expectation that a student research project should have such impact. Frankly, you neither have the resources nor the time. But if you consider undertaking a research project

as a form of apprenticeship for wherever life takes you in the future, these published works show how powerful social science work can be and why critically understanding society is so crucial. They also show the diversity of projects on offer.

Box 1.1

Social Science Impact Example

Research into child sexual exploitation (CSE) led by Dr Sophie Hallett at Cardiff University (2016 and 2017, Hallett et al. 2017) is an example of research that has made a difference to society through changes in Wales' safeguarding policy and professional practices. Her research, drawn originally from her doctorate studies and which combined ethnographic, qualitative, and participative interviews, with case file analysis and quantitative methods, examined CSE to consider the ways in which we might better define, understand, and therefore prevent and respond to this issue. As a direct result of the research, changes in policy in Wales mean professionals now direct to a list of signs and indicators of abuse with assessment geared towards care and support requirements. The definition of abuse has also been reworded to include the multiple models of this type of abuse that can occur.

But as well as potentially having benefits for society and particular social groups, undertaking social science research can also enable the development of various key skills that might be useful in your future. For instance, conducting a research project involves being able to manage your time effectively (see Chapter 2: *Planning a Social Science Research Project*) so to submit the project before the deadline, a task that is completed alongside competing workloads and other deadlines. Equally, a research project provides you with the opportunity, among other things, to showcase your ability to search for literature, synthesise arguments, collect and analyse data, problem solve, disseminate findings, work with large documents, and draw conclusions. Data analysis for your research project may also involve using specific computer software, for example, SPSS or NVivo, which are skills that can be listed on your Curriculum Vitae (CV). In some instances, you will be required to work alongside others during a research project, enabling you to develop your team-working skills. Sometimes research involves contacting and working with potential gatekeepers (see Chapter 4: *Being an Ethical Researcher*) and/or presenting research ideas or findings in written and oral forms to various stakeholders or academic audiences (see Chapter 7: *Presenting Your Social Science Research*). These opportunities help finesse your collaboration and communication skills.

HOW IS SOCIAL SCIENCE RESEARCH CONDUCTED?

For simplicity, methods of data collection are often separated into **quantitative and qualitative approaches**. This book has separate chapters on *Methods of Social Science Data Collection* (Chapter 5) and *Social Science Data Analysis* (Chapter 6) dedicated

to the collection and analysis of quantitative and qualitative data. Quantitative methods of data collection almost always produce numerical data which can be analysed using statistical approaches. Conversely, qualitative methods of data collection result in non-numerical data such as textual, audio, video, or image-based data. Table 1.1 outlines some of the commonly used quantitative and qualitative methods of data collection in the social sciences.

Table 1.1 Quantitative and qualitative methods of data collection

Quantitative	Qualitative
Questionnaires (online, telephone or in-person)	Focus groups
Experiments	Interviews (semi-structured and unstructured)
Longitudinal analysis	Diary research
Structured interviews	Unstructured observations
Structured observations	Photo elicitation
Content analysis	Drawing and images research
Systematic reviews	Video analysis
	Social media analysis
	Documentary research
	Sensory methods
	Action research/participatory research

There are other approaches, which we might label hybrid or mixed method such as Q methodology and social media or Big Data scraping.

But, as foregrounded, various disciplines in the social sciences tend to favour certain methods and approaches. This can reflect the differing research questions posed and topics explored in these disciplines. For instance, Hudson (2017: 736) differentiated economics from the other social sciences, arguing that ‘the quantitative nature of most economics research is in contrast to the qualitative methods that characterize the work of many other social scientists’. But in psychology, where experiments tend to dominate, there have been calls for a greater acceptance of qualitative approaches, particularly to enable researchers to explore individual experiences and subjective understandings better (Madill and Todd 2002, Madill and Gough 2008, Henwood 2014, Gough and Lyons 2015). Meanwhile the UK government has invested in quantitative methods to upskill and reskill social science students in statistical approaches (British Academy 2013, Nuffield Foundation 2022). As before, the use of different research methods is as much a cultural preference as it is an epistemic one and, whilst a caricature has been outlined here, it is important to ensure that the research methods you decide to use are the most appropriate ones to enable you to answer your research questions.

Of course, in some instances, social science researchers may employ a **mixed methods** approach. This often means employing a mixture of quantitative and qualitative approaches to data collection and analysis. It is necessary to be aware that drawing from multiple

methods in a social science research project does not make the research inherently better or superior. Employing both quantitative and qualitative methods does not allow the researcher to negate the limitations of each approach. Instead, the use of more than one method has the potential to jeopardise the narrative and flow of a research project unless done well, especially when writing to tight word counts. If you decide to use multiple methods, especially mixing qualitative and quantitative approaches, it is important that the justification for using more than one approach is clear and that the reader can see how the two approaches fit together and complement one another. Being able to conduct a research project that uses both quantitative and qualitative methods can be time consuming, and you should consider the time constraints concerning your social science research project before choosing a mixed methods design that draws from both approaches (see Chapter 2: *Planning a Social Science Research Project*). Alternatively, some approaches inherently bridge the quantitative/qualitative dichotomy, for example, hybrid methods such as Q methodology (Davis and Michelle 2011). This relatively novel approach involves participants sorting a series of subjective statements in an interview setting which the researcher later analyses statistically (Herrington and Coogan 2011).

Social science research projects can also be divided into those that use **primary data** and those which draw from **secondary data**. Projects which use primary data are those where the researcher has collected the data themselves specifically for that piece of research. Secondary data refers to situations where the researcher draws from pre-existing data, which was originally collected for an alternative research project and then analysed in a different way, or for a different purpose (e.g., a newspaper article). It is useful to distinguish between secondary data and **secondary data analysis** here. As explained, secondary data is all

Table 1.2 International sources of secondary data

Sources of secondary data	Web link
UK Data Service	https://www.ukdataservice.ac.uk/
Office of National Statistics	https://www.ons.gov.uk/
Consortium of European Social Science Data Archives	https://www.cessda.eu/
US Government Data	https://www.data.gov/
Australian Data Archive	https://ada.edu.au/
Australian Government Data	https://data.gov.au/
Research Data Australia	https://researchdata.edu.au/
StatsWales	https://statswales.gov.wales/Catalogue
Scotland.gov.scot	https://statistics.gov.scot/home
Northern Ireland Statistics and Research Agency	https://www.nisra.gov.uk/
Eurostat	https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat
World Bank Open Data	https://data.worldbank.org/
United Nations Statistics Division	https://unstats.un.org/home/
UNESCO Institute for Statistics	http://uis.unesco.org/
Sage Research Methods Datasets	https://methods.sagepub.com/Datasets

data that exists independent of the research being undertaken and therefore this will include various documentary sources as well as data deposited in raw form in some of the data banks listed in Table 1.2. Secondary data *analysis*, on the other hand, refers exclusively to the second order analysis of existing data (most likely located in these data banks). That is, one can draw from secondary data such as newspaper articles and be the first to analyse it as social science data, whereas secondary data analysis demands that someone else has previously analysed that same dataset (possibly with a different purpose).

Predominately, banked secondary data sources are numerical datasets which can be quantitatively analysed. However qualitative secondary data is becoming increasingly popular and the main government funder of social science in the UK has made it a requirement of their funding that where (ethically) possible, data, including qualitative data, are banked for researchers to use in the future.

WHERE IS SOCIAL SCIENCE RESEARCH UNDERTAKEN?

Society is everywhere. This given, those researchers doing primary data collection may have a particular site or setting which they need to visit to collect their data. Here, it might be useful to distinguish between what we call a site and a setting. A **setting** refers to the backdrop of the research, e.g., the education setting or the employment setting. The **site** (or field), on the other hand, refers to the particular place where the research is to be conducted, e.g. a primary school or a specific organisation. A pivotal time in some social science research projects is the process of obtaining access to the research site. This may involve speaking to **gatekeepers** who can give you access to potential participants (see Chapter 4: *Being an Ethical Researcher*). For instance, if your research involved teachers, the headteacher of a school would be a gatekeeper in your research. Ultimately, the headteacher would be the person who would give their permission for you to recruit teachers working in their school to take part in your study and determine whether this could be done during work time or not. The time it takes to negotiate access with potential gatekeepers is a crucial factor to be mindful of when planning your research project (see Chapter 2: *Planning a Social Science Research Project*).

When deciding where to undertake social science research, researchers must also consider the practicality and safety of the environment in which they are collecting data, for both themselves and their participants. For example, it would not always be practical to audio record interviews in a busy café where it may be difficult to hear the interviewee and, more importantly, they may not want to disclose personal views in such a public space. In this scenario, you may also pick up sounds from other café visitors who have not given their consent to be recorded. However, the choice of a public space is often a good, safe one too as this could be your first encounter with someone who is a stranger. The principles of picking an appropriate place to undertake social science research will be expanded on in Chapter 4 (*Being an Ethical Researcher*).

On the other hand, researchers undertaking secondary data collection may not need to venture from their desk. In fact, and particularly since the Covid-19 pandemic, there has

been an increase in the use of online methods of data collection in social science research. For example, with the rise in, and increased familiarity with, video calling platforms, researchers can now interview participants virtually using generic software programmes such as Zoom or Microsoft Teams. There is also a plethora of online survey software packages such as Qualtrics and Microsoft Forms which allow researchers to make professional questionnaires that can be easily distributed online. This shift to collecting data from the desk is a recognition that data can travel, meaning the researcher does not need to. Now, not all social scientists, particularly those of an ethnographic persuasion would champion this research-from-a-distance approach, maintaining that the researcher needs to immerse themselves in their research site. A more detailed discussion of the advantages and disadvantages of collecting data online can be found in Chapter 5 (*Methods of Social Science Data Collection*). It is hard not to argue, however, that while something is lost using this approach, something is also gained, especially for students working to deadlines. Such an approach reduces the travel costs associated with data collection as well as researchers' carbon footprint, while also allowing researchers to connect with participants across the globe. As well as some more traditional methods of data collection moving online, the Internet and specifically, social media sites are increasingly becoming fertile sites for research in and of themselves. For example, Burnap et al. (2016) used Twitter data to predict the 2015 UK general election results. Here, the setting will be political voting and the site Twitter. Similarly, Brownlie and Shaw (2019) explored empathy exchanges between Twitter users. Indeed, the Internet has been the catalyst for new research fields such as digital sociology and new methodological approaches such as netnography that pre-date the COVID-19 pandemic.

HOW IS SOCIAL SCIENCE RESEARCH PRESENTED?

As students, often your first experience of writing up and presenting findings from social science research is completing a research project or dissertation as part of your degree programme. This is essentially an extended piece of writing reporting on a piece of independent research which you have conducted. Often this sets out to answer a set of research questions through empirical exploration and is usually based on some theoretical or conceptual framework. Typically, an undergraduate social science dissertation will be around 8,000–12,000 words in length, whilst a postgraduate dissertation is often longer, usually ranging between 12,000–20,000 words. It is essential that you check the exact word count of your research project or dissertation with your institution.

The structure of a dissertation or research project will depend on the topic being studied and the approach taken. However, there is a general acceptance of what a dissertation or research project should look like. At the most basic level, a research project should always have a clear beginning, middle, and end. The beginning tells the reader what you are going to do and why, the middle sets out how you undertook the project, and the end tells the reader what it is you found and why it is important to your discipline, for policy and/or practice. These separate parts of a research project are usually divided into distinct and

discrete chapters: Introduction, Literature Review, Methods, Findings, Analysis, and Conclusion. These chapters are then topped and tailed with an abstract and an accurate reference list, alphabetically ordered. The purpose of each of these chapters is outlined in Table 1.3. The table also outlines which chapter(s) in this book focus on these specific sections of a research project in more detail, allowing you to skip ahead to read the chapters which are most pertinent to your current needs. Crucially, while each chapter should stand for itself, a dissertation needs to have a throughline or thread that connects each chapter.

Table 1.3 The purpose of each chapter

Chapter	Purpose	Chapter in Book
Front matter	Acknowledges all those that have helped with the dissertation (acknowledgements). Declares that the work is yours and not submitted elsewhere (declaration). Directs readers to the requisite pages (contents page).	9
Introduction	Introduces the topic underscoring the importance of the problem at hand and the need for further research in the area. Signposts the structure of the rest of the writing.	8
Literature Review	Locates the topic in a body of literature, critically reviewing what literature exists and how the project speaks to these works. The Literature Review can be structured in various ways including thematically and chronologically. The Literature Review should funnel into your research questions and Methods chapter.	3
Methods	The Methods chapter should tell the reader how you went about collecting data so that a reader can replicate your project. It should also justify the approach. The Methods chapter might also contribute to contemporary methodological debates and discussions.	5
Findings	The Findings chapter should present the findings of the research in a coherent and comprehensible manner. Data such as tables, graphs, interview extracts or fieldnotes should be displayed.	6 and 7
Analysis	The Analysis chapter should make sense of the findings, returning to the work discussed in the Literature Review. The analysis should remain within the guard rails of the research questions posed.	6
Conclusion	The Conclusion should summarise the main findings and explain what this might mean (for policy or practice). The chapter should answer the research questions posed earlier in the thesis. The chapter might also critically reflect on the project, outlining any limitations to the study and further work that is required on the topic.	8
Back matter	An alphabetic list of all literature cited in the text (reference list). A list of additional auxiliary information (appendices).	9

Important to note here is that the Findings and Analysis chapters might be combined into a larger chapter, perhaps called *Analytic Discussion*. This approach is common in qualitative projects that tend to have a more narrative emphasis to them in which describing and analysing the data tends to collapse into analytic description, whereas quantitative projects tend to separate the Findings and Analysis chapters, dividing descriptive statistics from analytic ones.

If you look closely, most research articles use the same structure to what is outlined here when presenting the results of their social science research project. However, rather than having discrete chapters, authors of these journal articles tend to make use of subheadings to structure their writing into these areas. In many research outputs, including research projects, these substantive chapters or subsections are preceded by a short abstract which provides a succinct overview of the research project (see Chapter 9: *Submitting Your Social Science Research Project*). Following the main body of writing, it is also common to see a reference list and, in some instances, appendices, which contain valuable information not included in the main body of text itself (see Table 1.4). Table 1.4 outlines the structure used in a selection of recent articles in some mainstream social science journals. You will see that the structure mirrors that outlined in Table 1.3. Each article begins with an abstract, before introducing the research problem, discussing the relevant literature, describing the present study, presenting the findings, discussing the results and forming a conclusion. Each article concludes with a reference list, and in some cases an appendix is added containing extra relevant information.

Table 1.4 Structure of mainstream social science journal articles

Paper	Journal	Structure
Police contact and future orientation from adolescence to young adulthood: Findings from the Pathways to Desistance Study (2021)	<i>Criminology</i>	Abstract Introduction Background Current study Data Results Discussion References Appendix
Coloniality of gender and knowledge: Rethinking Russian masculinities in light of postcolonial and decolonial critiques (2022)	<i>Sociology</i>	Abstract Introduction The coloniality of power, knowledge and gender Russia in the context of global coloniality The study Eurocentric Russian masculinities Colonial Russian masculinities Conclusion References

Paper	Journal	Structure
The color of law school: Examining gender and race intersectionality in law school admissions (2022)	<i>American Journal of Education</i>	Abstract Review of the literature Analytic framework: quantitative intersectionality and critical legal studies Method Findings Discussion and implications Conclusion References
Messages for good practice: Aboriginal hospital liaison officers and hospital social workers (2022)	<i>Australian Social Work</i>	Abstract Method Findings Discussion Conclusion References
(De) legitimisation of single mothers' welfare rights: United States, Britain and Israel (2022)	<i>Journal of European Social Policy</i>	Abstract Introduction Background, objective and methods Financial dependence versus autonomy The coping versus the selfish mom Discussion References
Student loneliness through the pandemic: How, why and where? (2021)	<i>The Geographical Journal</i>	Abstract The loneliness of students Loneliness and its geographies Co-produced research Findings: Spaces of relationships, interactions and loneliness Conclusion: Student voices and loneliness strategies References
Bringing the problem home: The anti-slavery and anti-trafficking rhetoric of UK non-government organisations (2022)	<i>Politics</i>	Abstract Introduction Rhetoric and the problem of terminology Method Data analysis and discussion Conclusion References

THE IMPORTANCE OF DEVELOPING RESEARCH QUESTIONS

Notwithstanding the word 'science' in the term social sciences, to a large degree, the social sciences are influenced by the humanities. For instance, it is extremely unlikely

that you will have progressed to the end of your social science degree without having to write several essays. As we know, loosely defined, an essay is a piece of extended writing where the author addresses a question by developing an argument. And this is a good starting point to consider a research project too. Social science research projects offer you the opportunity to bring together the specific knowledge gained in different modules, where you might have completed several of these essays, with the general research methods training which you have learnt, to address a series of specific research questions in an empirical manner. Here, **empirical** refers to the collection and/or analysis of evidence or data to support the claims you make. These research questions should be direct and interconnected, outlining what it is you want to find out through your research and should drive the direction of the project. That is, your research questions should not be able to be answered with a simple 'yes' or 'no' response following a quick Wikipedia search. Instead, they require an in-depth, extended period of study so that they can be answered properly and attentively. Research questions should be clear and concise and capture the focus of the research problem being investigated.

Research questions are often developed and finessed through engagement with relevant academic literature (see Chapter 3: *Reviewing Social Science Literature*), from which data are then collected and analysed to help the researcher answer these questions (see Chapter 5: *Methods of Social Science Data Collection* and Chapter 6: *Social Science Data Analysis*). In this way, research questions anchor your research project, often connecting the top half of a research project, which mostly involves synthesising other people's work into a line of argument and situating the project within a particular corpus of published literature, with the bottom half of a research project which presents and analyses the findings from the present research project. The size of the research project (the word count and length of time you are permitted to complete the project) will often determine the number of research questions a project contains, but around 2 to 4 research questions tend to be the norm for a student project. Importantly, research questions are not fixed, they can be tweaked and tinkered with, and it is often the case that researchers will adapt and revise questions or even add or remove questions as the research process progresses. As an active researcher, you should react to changes you encounter during your study, or information you come across along the way, checking whether the original research questions that you began with are still sufficiently focussed and relevant. While it is not unusual for research questions to develop and deviate in a social science project, this might mean it is necessary to revisit the Literature Review chapter toward the end of the project so to ensure that the literature presented and discussed is still pertinent and that there is a clear, interconnected narrative running through the final project (see Chapter 3: *Reviewing Social Science Literature*).

The type of research questions posed should determine the methods of data collection used. For instance, explanatory questions which are concerned with *why* and *how* are typically associated with qualitative methods of data collection and analysis, whereas descriptive questions which are concerned with *who*, *what* and *when* are more

often associated with quantitative methods of data collection. Table 1.5 provides some examples of how research questions may be posed differently depending on the specific focus of a research project exploring mature students and university level study. The examples show the ways in which the different questions tend to lend themselves to the collection of distinct types of data.

Table 1.5 Research questions

	Question type	Quantitative/Qualitative	Example
Who?	Descriptive	Quantitative	Who decides to study at university as a mature student?
What?	Descriptive	Quantitative	What subjects do mature students study at university?
Where?	Descriptive	Quantitative	Where do mature students study degree programmes?
Why?	Explanatory	Qualitative	Why do mature students decide to study at university?
How?	Explanatory	Qualitative	How do mature students decide which university to study at?

The first research question in Table 1.5 asks, ‘*Who decides to study at university as a mature student?*’. Answering this question means exploring variables associated with entering higher education later in life, including age, household income and whether students have parental or caring responsibilities. These variables could be identified in existing sources of data held by universities, or alternatively relevant data could be collected in a quantitative questionnaire. Similarly, the question ‘*What subjects do mature students study at university?*’ might be answered by engaging with existing university admissions records on degree subject choices, or by distributing a questionnaire to mature students studying in higher education. The ‘where’ question (*Where do mature students study degree programmes?*) could again be answered by using existing secondary sources of quantitative data. But to understand *why* mature students decide to study at university demands a more qualitative approach. Running focus groups, for example, could elicit their perspectives as to the reasons for pursuing a university degree programme later in life. Likewise, to answer the question *How do mature students decide which university to study at?* qualitative data, drawn from interviews for example, would need to be gathered to understand the decision-making processes of these individuals. This demonstrates how different research questions tend to align themselves to different methods of data collection and analysis. It is important that social science researchers choose the best and most appropriate approach to answer their specific research question(s).

Table 1.6 shows various research questions taken from recent articles published in a selection of mainstream social science journals. The table also highlights whether a quantitative or qualitative approach was used to answer the research questions.

Table 1.6 Research questions in recent social science journal articles

Paper	Journal	Research Question(s)	Quantitative/ Qualitative
Police contact and future orientation from adolescence to young adulthood: Findings from the Pathways to Desistance Study (Testa et al. 2022)	<i>Criminology</i>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Does exposure to personal and/or vicarious police contact, compared with no exposure to police contact, reduce future orientation over time? 2. Does the association between police contact and future orientation vary by perceptions of procedural justice? 3. Does the association between police contact and future orientation vary by sex and race/ethnicity? 	Quantitative
Coloniality of gender and knowledge: Rethinking Russian masculinities in light of postcolonial and decolonial critiques (Yusupova 2023)	<i>Sociology</i>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Is there such a thing as Russian masculinity? 2. Does immigration and a new social and legal environment change Russian men's ideas about masculinity? 	Qualitative
The color of law school: Examining gender and race intersectionality in law school admissions (Fernandez et al. 2022)	<i>American Journal of Education</i>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Whether and to what extent relationships between race and admission differ by gender 2. Whether and to what extent relationships between an intersected race-gender identity and admission differ by law school ranking. 	Quantitative

Paper	Journal	Research Question(s)	Quantitative/ Qualitative
Messages for good practice: Aboriginal hospital liaison officers and hospital social workers (Orr et al. 2022)	<i>Australian Social Work</i>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1.What do social workers and Aboriginal hospital liaison officers in hospitals in Victoria identify as good practice? 2.What are the factors that support good [social work] practice? 3.What are the learnings from the findings of this study that can inform the education and training of Aboriginal hospital liaison officers and training and professional development for social workers? 	Qualitative
(De)legitimation of single mothers' welfare rights: United States, Britain and Israel (Herbst-Deby 2022)	<i>Journal of European Social Policy</i>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1.In what ways, over time, has welfare policy affecting single mothers in the US, UK and Israel been associated with changes in discourse? 	Qualitative
Student loneliness through the pandemic: How, why and where? (Phillips et al. 2022)	<i>The Geographical Journal</i>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1.How and why have students in higher education experienced loneliness in the context of the Covid-19 pandemic? 2.What geographical factors – including material, practical and metaphorical barriers to forming and performing relationships – have led to loneliness in this context? 3.What might be done, practically and feasibly, to reduce students' loneliness? What might be done to remove barriers between students and to support them as they interact and build and maintain relationships? 	Qualitative
Bringing the problem home: The anti-slavery and anti-trafficking rhetoric of UK non-government organisations (Turnbull and Broad 2022)	<i>Politics</i>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1.What rhetoric is used by contemporary NGOs in their anti-slavery and anti-trafficking campaigns? 2.How are slavery and trafficking problems and solutions framed by this rhetoric? 3.Third, what are the similarities and differences between contemporary and historical anti-slavery rhetoric? 	Quantitative and Qualitative

Depending on the size of your project you may, of course, have multiple research questions. Importantly, though, having more research questions does not necessarily make a project superior. In some cases, it can be best to have fewer research questions, which are addressed or answered more comprehensively than to have multiple questions which are not adequately answered because you do not have the space or time to answer them fully. For some people, cultivating these initial research questions is a straightforward task. Others may need more time and space to consider and finesse an appropriate set of research questions. If you are struggling to come up with appropriate research questions, it can be a useful idea to look at previous research projects or dissertations, to speak to academic supervisors, peers or other lecturers, or to draw inspiration from topics which you have previously learnt about, potential career aspirations, hobbies and interests or contemporary social affairs (we discuss this in more detail in Chapter 2 under *Sources of inspiration*). In some cases, your university may have more of a steer on the research topics which they allow you to explore. Once you have chosen a topic, a good starting base is to ask yourself what you would like to know about that subject that you do not already know. Here it is important to be aware of any parameters which may concern the topic of your research project before you begin formulating research questions. For example, asking someone about their (mental) health needs to be considered sensitively and may be beyond the scope of a student research project (see Chapter 4: *Being an Ethical Researcher*).

Some research projects may also have different levels of research questions; for example, you might decide to have two main research questions each with two sub-research questions attached to them. However many research questions you may end up with, it is important to ensure that the final research question(s) are feasible and that you can realistically address them in the allocated time with the resources that you have available. This involves careful planning at the outset of a research project (see Chapter 2: *Planning a Social Science Research Project*), but also a willingness to adapt and react positively as the project progresses, maybe even losing a research question if it feels too much.

SUMMARY

In this chapter, we have outlined the purpose of social science research, setting out the variety of topics on offer and methods used, as well as the potential impacts of this type of research. While this flexibility over topic and method can be a little daunting, we advise students to embrace this choice and consult with lecturers, supervisors and even friends and family to find a project which is a good fit for them. Inspiration can come from modules which you have previously studied, career aspirations or hobbies and interests. Most importantly though, choose a topic which will sustain your interest

throughout the lifecycle of the research project (see Chapter 2: *Planning a Social Science Research Project*). Enjoy this opportunity that you have been afforded.

We have also stressed the importance of having clear research questions which guide the project. A social science research project should clearly set out how these questions have been informed by existing literature, perhaps even gaps in the literature, and then progress to answer these research questions using either quantitative or qualitative approaches (or even both). This lends itself to the generic structure often adopted when writing up social science research projects and which can be seen in many journal articles. Often a written student dissertation will begin with an abstract before the main body of the text, followed by an introduction, a summary of the relevant literature, an overview of the methods deployed, a discussion of the main findings, an analysis of the findings and a conclusion. This is followed by a reference list and, in some instances, a set of appendices.

In the next chapter, we focus on how to effectively plan your research project. Some of the ideas introduced in this chapter are important to consider when planning your project. It is also essential for you to clarify some of the issues raised in this chapter, such as word length and parameters or guard rails around topic choice with your institution as you plan out your project. Likewise, to enable you to best answer your research questions and depending on the methods chosen to do this, you may need to build in additional time for further training or to allow you space to negotiate access to specific research sites.

Student Question

A research project is an optional component of my degree programme. I am undecided whether to take this module or not. What would you suggest?

(Carly, Sociology and Journalism student)

Charlotte and Jamie say:

To undertake a social science research project is to formalise a curiosity and passion. For any students considering choosing a dissertation or capstone module, we would first ask you to take some time to consider what topics interest you and to put on paper some nascent research project ideas. Yes, a research project requires methodological skills, and absolutely, we believe students will learn and develop important skills as they go along that will help them in the world of work, but first and foremost students need to show their social scientific imagination; they need to have a passion which they want to formalise. If you can come up with a researchable idea, then you have made a giant leap into the world of social science research, and this is a strong signal that a research project is for you.

WHAT'S NEXT?

Chapter Checklist

Table 1.7 Chapter 1 checklist

	Yes	No
I appreciate the breadth and scope of disciplines which the social sciences encompass.		
I understand the importance of research questions when designing and undertaking social science research.		
I can identify different beneficiaries of social science research.		
I can name different groups who undertake social science research.		
I can list different approaches to collecting social science data.		
I know where to find existing sources of social science data.		
I can describe the main sections of a social science research project.		

Read

Campaign for Social Science. 2015. *10 reasons why we need social sciences*. Available at: www.palgrave.com/gp/campaigns/social-science-matters/10-reasons-for-social-science (accessed 7 July 2022).

- In your opinion, why do we need social science research?
- Can you find examples of how social science research undertaken at your university has benefitted society or informed policy and practice?

Listen To

BBC. 2022. *Thinking Allowed*. Available at: www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/b006qy05/episodes/player (accessed 7 July 2022).

Thinking Allowed is a BBC Radio 4 series hosted by Laurie Taylor, which showcases social science research. Previous episodes are available online on BBC iPlayer.

- What kind of topics are covered in the *Thinking Allowed* series?
- Are there any topics which you could explore in your own social science research project?

Complete

Choose a journal article from your own discipline to read.

- Identify the research questions posed in your paper of choice.
- What methods are used by the author(s) to answer the research questions?
- What are the main subsections used in the paper?

Discuss

Kara, H. 2022. *How different are qualitative and quantitative research?* Available at: www.the-sra.org.uk/SRA/Blog/Howdifferentarequalitativeandquantitativeresearch.aspx (accessed 7 July 2022).

- Qualitative research never involves numbers. True or False?
- Quantitative methods can be good for exploring sensitive issues. True or False?
- There are similarities between quantitative and qualitative research. True or False?

Watch

UKRI. 2022. *What is Social Science?*. Available at: www.ukri.org/about-us/esrc/what-is-social-science/videos-what-is-social-science/#contents-list (accessed 7 October 2022).