

1

OVERVIEW OF THE ADAPTIVE APPROACH

PREVIEW

This chapter covers the following:

- How to choose an appropriate topic for a small-scale project
- The importance of writing as early as possible
- Scientific rigour, validity and the search for explanation
- Understanding the differences between problems, topics and questions
- Constructing a research design
- How to mix strategies and methods
- Data sampling in adaptive research
- How to use concepts in data analysis
- Ethics in social research
- Starting the Research Log

Choosing an Appropriate Topic

This book is designed to help you complete a small social research project. In order to do this to the best of your capabilities, it is important to select a topic that interests and motivates you. It should be ‘doable’ with the resources at your disposal and within the required time frame. It should be practically manageable while the topic itself should be sharply focused and well defined. Taking on a large and more general topic – say, investigating the effects of government policy on school admissions, or the educational

achievements of pupils from different social backgrounds – would invite the criticism that you are being too ambitious. In which case, those who eventually grade your project will have a ready-made reason to find fault with it.

A smaller more focused and well-defined project, such as investigating the rewards and disappointments of friendship at school or your neighbourhood, would not present the same problems. Your efforts and research findings will be automatically tailored to the more limited aims of the project. Whoever grades it will have to judge its merit (its ‘adequacy’ and ‘validity’) in relation to these rather modest aims. Thus, right from the beginning you can avoid criticisms of over-ambitiousness or vagueness of aims and objectives. In this respect, it is best to choose a topic that is of great interest to you – perhaps something that directly connects with your daily life. A personal connection like this will naturally help in providing focus and definition to your research project. Also, if you are fascinated with, or gripped by your topic, it is more likely that your enthusiasm will remain high throughout the project. In particular, it will help keep you going when you come up against problems or difficulties.

In Chapter 2 I discuss a range of topics that fit these criteria and hopefully will stimulate your thinking about potential projects. Of course, these are meant simply as *suggestions*, to get you started, they are not meant to restrict your choices. If you are confident about ideas and interests of your own, then by all means pursue them. Of course you should remain open to advice from your supervisor, or advisor, especially if they are going to play some part in marking/grading it. However, it would be unusual for an advisor to *insist* on your concentrating on a particular topic, rather than simply making ‘suggestions’ about appropriate areas, since the whole point of the exercise is to allow you to demonstrate your ability, make your own choices and display initiative.

The topics discussed in Chapter 2 are well defined and focused as well as being close to everyday experience. In addition, they spotlight what is, perhaps, the central problem issue that underpins all social study. This is the question of how human behaviour *both shapes, and is shaped by*, the wider social environment in which it is embedded. I’ll go into this in more detail in the sections that follow, but all the topic examples reveal different aspects of this central issue. Thus, the examples have strong links with key problems and themes in social study. If you are able to weave such themes into your project – and this book is designed to help you with this – your research will be more sophisticated, ‘marking it out from the crowd’. Crucially, this will give it an advantage when it comes to the awarding of marks for research excellence.

Deciding on a topic also entails being clear about which ones are best to avoid, especially if you have little experience as a researcher. Although topics close to one’s own experiences may be appropriate for small-scale projects, it is of the utmost importance not to let personal views, ideas, opinions and

prejudices cloud your thinking. As far as possible research projects must be conducted ‘objectively’ – that is, freeing them of the personal biases or preferences of the researcher.

Ensuring that personal prejudices and biases do not intrude is probably best served by steering clear of topics or approaches to research that, by their very nature, make it very difficult to maintain a neutral attitude. A good example of this is where research is guided by explicitly ‘emancipatory’ aims. That is, where the researcher takes it upon him or herself to seek to improve the lot of those social groups who are deemed to get a ‘raw deal’ from society. Such projects are fraught with difficulty as far as maintaining an unbiased stance is concerned. Problems arise when the researcher identifies with members of social groups that he or she believes to be relatively powerless and has the explicit aim of gathering evidence that will help ‘empower’ them. Unless handled skilfully and carefully, such an approach runs the danger of being open to the criticism of being politically motivated or partisan. As a result, the validity of such research may be questioned.

A novice researcher should generally avoid research topics that involve him or her making moral judgements about various kinds of behaviour, since these might slant the presentation of research evidence. Due care must also be taken when small-scale research is undertaken with an *evaluative objective* in mind. For example, assessing the efficiency or otherwise of a particular ‘social policy’ intervention, such as the effectiveness of drugs or smoking ‘education’ programmes in schools or work, requires a high level of sophistication, care and subtlety not only in terms of the practical aspects of the research, but also in juggling the sensitivities of the various stakeholders.

The Importance of Writing as Early as Possible

Writing should begin as early as possible, even before the serious business of collecting data has begun! From that point onwards writing should be continuous throughout the duration of the research – and documented in your Research Log (see last section of this chapter). In this sense there is no separate writing-up period, which, in conventional terms, comes at the end of a linear sequence of research ‘stages’. Writing is an integral and constant ‘companion’ with this kind of research. When you aren’t writing you aren’t doing research. Writing is research and research implies writing! There are a number of advantages to be gained from starting to write-up very early on.

Obviously, in one sense, when you begin writing like this, you’re not trying to produce the ‘final’ version of anything. This is partly because having not yet collected the bulk of your data you aren’t in a position to draw any conclusions based on them. Another important reason is that whatever you attempt to put down in words at this early stage (such as preliminary chapter or section titles, or contents or notes on your research problem or research

design), it is inevitably a *first draft*. But the fact that you are writing from the word go is a way of helping you over the hurdle of writer's block – or more accurately getting over a reluctance to commit yourself to the act of writing in the first place.

Of course, such problems as these can afflict anyone at anytime, but first-time researchers are particularly prone to them, especially if they leave writing-up to the very last minute. Constantly putting it off only increases the pressure on yourself and, in the end, not being able to write can develop into a massive and overblown problem! Making writing an integral part of research at every point eases you into the discipline and skills of writing. By the end, hopefully you become much more accustomed to jotting down your ideas and find writing in general a much less intimidating task.

Beginning to write at such an early stage also prepares you to appreciate the links between thinking and writing, links that are essential to the execution of excellent research. Putting your thoughts and ideas into words and writing them down in a logical form that makes sense to others, as well as yourself, helps clarify your thoughts. Often we assume that the very fact that we *have* thoughts, ideas and opinions on certain matters means that they *must* be reasonably well worked out. However, putting them down on paper often reveals that this assumption is invalid. Thus the process of writing becomes a way of eliminating inadvertent errors and confusions in thinking.

Expressing thoughts and ideas in verbal written form early on in the research process also highlights the links between the act of writing and the development of ideas, concepts and arguments. Familiarity with these discursive aspects of research can only aid you when it comes to defining research problems, shaping research design and constructing explanations. The process of getting ideas down on paper is the best way – indeed the only effective way – of developing and honing them, and making them acceptable for critical evaluation by others. Endlessly thinking them through, without writing them down, only leads to confusion and mental over-load.

Perhaps the greatest advantage to be gained from tackling the writing sooner rather than later is that it makes writing the 'final' research report much easier. In this respect, keeping a 'Research Log' provides you with a record of the procedures and practices you used – including any adjustments in sampling or problem-focus – and links them with your evolving thoughts about the direction and progress of the project. Having a record (the log) that matches what you actually did, against your findings and conclusions as they are expressed in your final report, makes the whole process so much more vivid and transparent. Intellectual honesty, integrity and transparency are highly prized assets when it comes to the evaluation of research. A project that displays these attributes by offering a transparent audit trail will be rewarded by a higher mark or grade.

Finally, developing an attitude towards writing (and re-writing) as an organic part of research and a constant ally (rather than a barrier to be overcome), also

allows you to develop the argumentative skills that are so necessary for the communication of your findings to a wider audience – and most immediately, to those who are grading it. All research reports whether they be undergraduate coursework projects or PhD theses, are essentially held together by the force of the arguments you make and the manner in which they are presented.

Each element of the research report is made up of arguments that must be reasoned, coherent and robust. In this respect, each chapter of a thesis or each sub-section of a report is based on, and presented in the form of, a mini-argument. The thesis or report as a whole rests on this patchwork of mini-arguments – but it must also make sense independently of them. It must have its own meta-argument which links all the subsidiary arguments together. A Research Log encourages you to write in a structured and systematic manner, and thus makes you more aware of the need to employ both mini- and meta-arguments, and to develop them with due care and attention.

Scientific Rigour, Validity and the Search for Explanation

Social research requires *scientific* rigour, but what does this mean? This is a big question, but for present purposes we only need to focus on four basic issues.

1 The difference between description and explanation in social research

While description is necessary in social research, it should be regarded only as a stepping stone. The search for answers to the problem-questions that drive the research is the key to scientific adequacy and rigour. Description only scratches the surface of social life by concentrating on how people conduct their lives. For example, a description may provide us with an account of how drug users live out their daily lives, their routines and habits, their pleasures and affiliations. However, social research is required to go further and inquire into *why* people engage in certain kinds of behaviour. What causes them to behave in this manner? How do social influences and pressures – of friends, environment, up-bringing – help shape drug-taking behaviour? In what ways does drug use influence the lives of the users, or those around them, and society in general?

It is the move from the question *how* (or a description of what is happening) to *why* (an explanation or set of reasons for why this is happening) that makes such an inquiry more scientifically interesting. To some extent explanation requires and depends on the preliminary work of description. Thus providing accurate and reliable descriptive accounts of drug-taking behaviour enables the researcher to make the next step and collect evidence and

data that may provide reasons (explanations) as to *why* this behaviour is occurring in the first place.

A description may achieve a high standard of descriptive accuracy but for overall excellence small-scale research must *at least* attempt to explain the behaviour under study. The words *at least* are extremely important here. You don't have to come up with a completely comprehensive explanation or 'the last word' on the matter. The point is to organise the research (via its design, methods and forms of analysis) so that it at least attempts to answer some 'why' questions. Even if you only manage to come up with a partial explanation or one that has obvious weaknesses, it will be better than taking the (seemingly) 'safe option' and remaining purely descriptive.

It is important to bear in mind that research excellence depends not only on the successes of a project – whatever they may be. Excellence is often demonstrated by being aware of, and engaging with, potential weaknesses. So even where your project has been less than successful in some (major or minor) respect, it is still possible to achieve excellence. The main requirement is that you show how you have attempted to go beyond description pure and simple.

2 Choosing research methods

Excellent small-scale social research requires adherence to scientific principles and practices which emphasise the search for the explanation of a problem. This differs from a 'pragmatic' approach (Baert 2005; Creswell 2009; Teddlie & Tashakkori 2009), in which methods are chosen on the basis of what is most 'useful' or 'practically expedient' or 'works best'. To the contrary, research methods and strategies should be chosen because they are the most adequate and appropriate for the *problem* than is being investigated. They should be chosen because they help provide explanations of the *problems and questions* that drive the research. Choice of method must also take account of what we know about the main domains of social life and the processes and the mechanisms that produce social behaviour. All these factors help shape research problems and questions.

3 The role of evidence (the data collected) in social research

Evidence – the data collected during the research, such as interview transcripts, documents, the results of surveys, and so on – play a crucial role in supporting explanations that emerge from the research investigation. There are two stages in this process. First, the collection and analysis of data allows the researcher to more accurately describe the phenomenon she or he is investigating. Second, description must be supplanted by a concern with explanation, that is, with the question of *why* the phenomenon is the way it is.

What social influences have caused it to be so? For instance, why is there a greater incidence of certain kinds of criminal behaviour in particular neighbourhoods or, why is drug taking more prevalent in certain kinds of work environment?

Both description and explanation must be firmly anchored in evidence collected during the research. The strength of an explanation is determined by the weight and ‘persuasiveness’ of the evidence on which it rests. Without such a foundation any proposed explanation will lack evidence to back it up and thus, risks being dismissed as ‘speculative’. Conversely, an explanation is *verified* (and thus confirmed) in and through the weight and strength of evidence that supports it.

But there must be a balance between explanation and evidence. Evidence isn’t *more* important than explanation. Thus, making sure there is enough evidence to support an explanation must be balanced by a concern with ensuring that the explanation makes sense. Its internal logic must be right. Its conclusions must follow from its initial assumptions. Thus, it is crucial to be sure that the claims the explanation makes, the warrants it draws on, and the arguments that lend it support, are coherent and robust. Claims about evidence and explanation are of equal importance for scientific adequacy and rigour. The *validity* of research involves a constant dialogue between evidence and explanation.

4 The principles of scientific rigour and adequacy

An awareness of the principles of scientific rigour and adequacy should be present in all facets and phases of the research process:

- a The problems, questions and explanations that drive and direct the project
- b The design of the research (based on (a))
- c The methods of data collection
- d The analysis of the evidence (data)
- e The arguments, claims and findings that appear in the concluding report.

In the final written account of the research – the academic report, dissertation or thesis – you should constantly make it clear how the principles in 1–3 above have been worked into your research practices. This is where keeping a written log of your progress is essential, because it ensures that as you go along you make a note of the way in which you attend to these issues. You must make it clear to the reader that you have followed a coherent research

strategy (an ordered plan) throughout the research. Even though this plan might be modified during the course of the research, as long as it has been for scientifically justifiable reasons, then there is no problem.

The essential point is to avoid any impression that you were simply reacting in an expedient or convenient manner (the danger of a purely 'pragmatic' approach). By making sure that what you collected and analysed data scientifically, you add to the strength and excellence of your work. The persuasiveness of your findings and conclusions is enhanced by showing how the claims and arguments that you make are supported by the evidence (data) that you have collected.

Research Questions are Problem-Driven

Let us now tease out in more detail the connections between explanations, problems, topics and questions. Social research is literally a search for the best explanation of 'the problem' around which evidence or data is focused. But remember, 'social research problems' are not the same thing as 'topics' or 'areas of interest'. Nor are research problems the equivalent of what are often called 'social problems', such as poverty, unemployment, social inequality, and so on. Research problems address deeper issues about social organisation, social processes and social behaviour. The best quality social research always takes into account that such deeper problems profoundly influence research questions.

There are two types of research question: 'problem-questions' and 'topic-questions'. Problem-questions are most often overlooked in social research but it is important to appreciate that they have a crucial influence on the form and content of 'topic-questions'. In Chapter 3, I discuss in detail six problem-questions that are of great importance for research design. Here I shall introduce them in a preliminary way in order to familiarise you with them early on, and to show how they relate to topic questions.

Six key problem questions

- 1 *How are a person's self-identity, feelings, ideas and attitudes related to his or her social environment?*

A research project tackling this question might focus on individual's attitudes towards emotional or sexual intimacy in friendships or romantic partnerships, and how they are influenced by TV programmes, films and magazines. Another project might concentrate on whether or not certain individuals, such as those with low self-esteem, are more susceptible than others to drug addiction.

- 2 *How do people influence each other's behaviour in social interaction – either 'face-to-face' or 'mediated' through texts, emails, mobiles, and so on?*

Consider the following scenario. Two 'friends' meet up and one (or both) reveals for the first time that they find the other attractive. A routine peck on the cheek suddenly becomes a full-blown, passionate kiss, thus changing forever their relationship and their feelings towards one another. The way in which face-to-face interaction can transform people's understandings may thus be the focus of small-scale research. For example, a project could focus on the question of whether mixing with other drug users makes experimenting with different drugs more likely.

- 3 *How do social settings (such as schools, universities, families, factories, companies, hospitals, and so on) influence the behaviour of those operating within them?*

This question might give rise to a project examining how and why people express emotion and feeling in school, work, family and friendship. Alternatively, a project revolving around drug use might focus on the question 'is the use of certain types of drugs associated with different work settings?' A significant focus for small-scale research projects would be to help map the differences between settings and their effects on social behaviour by concentrating on a particular example – say a school, a university, a religious group, friendship, family or romantic relationships.

- 4 *How is social behaviour influenced by: (a) social class, ethnicity, gender, age, neighbourhood, region, or politics; (b) cultural values, expectations and institutions (including the media)?*

Such a problem might give rise to research on possible links between drug use and social class, gender or ethnicity. A project on intimacy might explore the extent to which media images of 'romantic love' seep into people's everyday attitudes and experiences.

- 5 *How does power influence human behaviour and social activity?*

Power is everywhere in social life (although it comes in different 'shapes and sizes', so to speak) and is an especially fruitful theme for small-scale research. Thus, a project on intimacy might centre on the way the balance of control in close relationships determines whether or not they survive in the longer term. A project on drug use could investigate the extent to which users are 'disempowered' by their addiction.

- 6 *How does the passage of time influence social behaviour?*

A project might investigate changes in intimate relationships over time. Why does the exciting frisson of a new romance begin to fade? Can intimacy deteriorate to the point where the partners are simply ‘coexisting’ with each other? A project around drug use might explore how long it takes for a user to become addicted, or it might investigate whether drug users’ attitudes towards their ‘nearest and dearest’ change as they spend more time with other users.

Research Questions and Research Design

Unlike problem-questions which are *general* in nature, topic-questions concern *specific* issues about the topic or the area of research interest. So, topic-questions about the family, for instance, might include such things as how particular individuals define their roles, or how family members relate to one another, and so on. Topic-questions about romantic relationships might centre on ‘emotional disclosure’ and/or the ‘commitment’ and ‘involvement’ of partners. Numerous other examples are discussed in the following chapters so I won’t dwell on them here. More important at this juncture is to sort out which comes first, problem-questions or topic-questions?

Because of an initial interest in a particular area or topic it is likely that you will also have ideas about the sort of topic-questions you may want to ask, before you even consider the idea of problem-questions. This is OK up to a point – it is one way of crank-starting your particular thoughts on a research project. But you must be willing to at least re-jig, or refine, any topic-questions you may have in mind, after you have decided on your key problem-questions. This is what I mean by the idea that research should be ‘problem-driven’. Viewing topic-questions through the perspective of problem-questions acts as a sort of filtering process that gives final shape and focus to topic-questions.

For example, you may be interested in the topic of friendship or romantic relationships which may lead you to pose questions such as, ‘how are friendships formed?’, or ‘why do couples become romantically attached?’ In order to give these questions more research relevance and refinement, you need to also ask what problem-questions are pertinent to your concerns? Are you more interested in the way individual’s experience friendship or romantic attachments (problem-question 1)? Or in the way friendships or romantic relationships develop through interaction (problem-question 2)? You may, in fact, want to know more about how families, neighbourhoods or schools affect the friendship and romantic choices that people make (problem-question 3).

You might prefer to focus on the way the media – magazines, books, films, internet, music and so on – influence the way people perceive and engage in intimacy (problem-question 4). Questions of power and control may be more compelling, such as ‘how are romantic relationships influenced by the power balance between partners’ (problem-question 5)? You may

wish to explore how ideas about romantic relationships have changed in particular periods of history (problem-question 6). As you begin to decide on your focus, and the problem-questions most relevant to your concerns, you can then refine your topic-questions. As they become more refined and focused, certain tentative answers or explanations may suggest themselves.

Because the design of a project hinges on the development and honing of research questions (both problem and topic varieties) a good amount of time and effort should be given over to deciding what they are *before doing* any actual research. After this essential first step in research design, you will be in a position to decide what kind of data sample you need (how many and what kinds of people, events or documents). The third step, choosing the methods and strategies of data collection, will follow from this, as will the fourth step, choosing the best ways of analysing the data.

It is no good starting out on a research project with only loose ideas, hunches or assumptions about what you are going to do. Research must be systematic, ordered and logical. Developing a research design at the very start provides a framework or template in advance of the research itself, so that it has some planned structure to it. This will help minimise any uncertainties you might have about how to proceed or in dealing with unforeseen or disruptive problems. Of course, deciding on key problem- and topic-questions in advance *does not mean* that you can't change things or be flexible in your thinking and ideas about the project. Thus it is best to regard these things *as preparatory and preliminary* in nature. Once underway, your plans and focus may shift, change or readjust, but having a preliminary focus and design in place will ensure that any changes will be ordered and controlled rather than being 'forced' or ill-thought-out.

Always remember that topic-questions must be 'rinsed' through the filter of problem-questions in order for them to be refined, sharpened and made fully relevant to your research purposes. After this, problem- and topic-questions together provide the key to research design – a coherent overall plan of the research. As problem- and topic-questions become joint parts of a research design they drive the research through its subsequent phases (sampling, methods and strategies of data collection, analysis of data and concluding arguments). The whole sequence then is as follows:

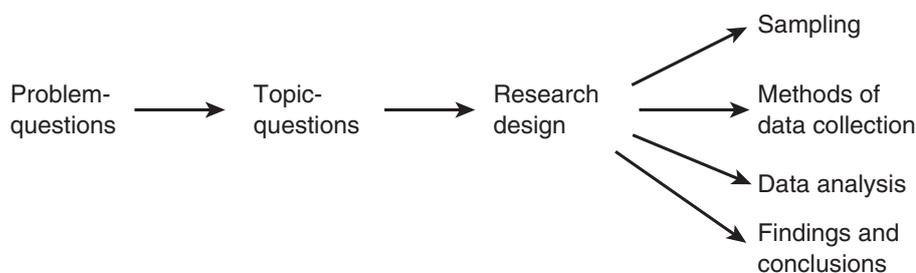


Figure 1.1

Sometimes textbooks give an impression that social research involves a succession of discrete (though related) 'stages' of activity moving in one direction from start to finish – such as design, sampling, data collection, analysis and so on. The researcher completes each successive stage with a 'clean break' before the next is begun. On this view, stages of research are self-contained units related to each other through their succession in time. With the adaptive approach, instead of discrete stages, social research is understood as a continuously unfolding process. During this process various phases of research activity merge into one another as an adaptive response to changes in research circumstances or priorities.

Mixed Design: Mixed Methods and Strategies

With the adaptive approach quantitative and qualitative methods and data are regarded as complementary to each other. In this sense they 'fill out' or 'add to' each other's picture of the social world because they represent or depict fundamentally different aspects of social reality. Quantitative methods are best able to deal with the settings and social contexts of social behaviour while qualitative methods are better suited to dealing with the social dynamics of situations, behaviour and interaction. Although they complement each other in their attempt to explain social phenomena scientifically, the soundness of quantitative and qualitative methods cannot always be judged by exactly the same criteria.

Quantitative methods (such as surveys, questionnaires, 'structured' interviews and observations) are well placed to provide information on such things as: *rates of social incidents or events such as suicide rates* (as in Durkheim 1982); *rates of class or status mobility; birth and death rates; forms of remuneration (salaries and wages); rates of physical and mental illness; indicators of well-being or happiness; the age, gender, class ethnic composition of a population; the extent of equality or inequality between groups; status and consumption patterns (what people spend their money on, and how they see themselves in relation to others).*

Qualitative studies, on the other hand, focus on the dynamic, emergent aspects of social activity. They offer in-depth analyses of specific situations or locations (say a group of friends at school or workers in a restaurant or gangs on the streets). Such studies use observations and interviews to give a detailed sense of how and why people experience what they experience, their relationships and interaction. At the heart of the analysis are the 'central concerns' of the people involved, how they feel (their emotions) about what they are doing, what they want to achieve (their motives and intentions, hopes and fears).

In many cases, qualitative analyses directly complement quantitative studies by providing data on the dynamics of encounters and 'lived experience' that quantitative information cannot directly supply. In other cases, qualitative

studies explore areas about which little is known and which may then be ‘enhanced’ by quantitative data and evidence. However, neither quantitative nor qualitative forms of inquiry are inherently superior. Nor is one more or less scientific than the other. Each form of inquiry taps into, and depicts, different, but complementary, aspects of the social world (social reality).

It follows that to create a full and comprehensive picture of social processes both kinds of study are required. Thus, small-scale researchers must be willing to *draw upon* both quantitative and qualitative methods and data. The phrase to ‘draw upon’ is of crucial importance. Producing quantitative data from large samples of people is technically difficult, expensive and time-consuming, and thus, usually, beyond the reach of small projects. Thus, small-scale researchers should make use of existing quantitative data sets – such as official government statistics, census data, market research, or surveys originally done for different purposes, to fill out or supplement other kinds of data (see Chapter 6).

Drawing on as many complementary methods, strategies and data resources as possible doesn’t require that the researcher be expert in them all. However, researchers must have *some awareness* of the broad range of possibilities. The main point is to avoid the limitations imposed by having an overly rigid and detailed knowledge of just one method or area of analysis.

Flexible Sampling: Using Your Imagination

As well as flexible designs and mixed strategies, the adaptive approach also favours the flexible and constructive use of data samples (of people, events, settings and documentary materials). This raises some initial difficulties when it comes to blending and integrating quantitative and qualitative data, because quantitative data (as in surveys) are closely associated with fixed samples (and fixed designs). However, in Chapters 5 and 6 in particular, I suggest some ways in which quantitative and qualitative data may be combined, while also using flexible sampling strategies

Flexible sampling expands the range of creative interventions the researcher can make during the research and allows him or her to monitor newly collected data in order to respond to it on an emergent basis. However, this doesn’t mean that it involves any less rigorous (scientific) planning and preparation than with a fixed research design (such as a survey or experiment).

In adaptive analysis the initial phases of research require a ‘conventional’ sample chosen on the basis of the main research problems and questions. Sampling only enters into a ‘flexible’ phase once the research is underway. Thus, only after the collection and analysis of data has indicated possible benefits of a shift in the sample base can the original sample be added to or modified.

In this sense the sample is increased or decreased according to the development of your overall research arguments and the explanations they support. The idea here is that the ‘explanation’ (of the research questions driving your research) doesn’t just ‘pop up’ out of the blue, so to speak. It emerges cumulatively during the course of the research. Thus, continuous sampling aids the emergence of this explanation.

For example, say you began studying romantic relationships and were focusing mainly on how the interpersonal dynamics of the partners creates truly satisfying intimacy. Your initial sample of interviewees might be mainly composed of couples in ‘successful’ long-term relationships. However, while interviewing the couples you come to realise that in order to fully address the problem you need to compare those in your sample with individual’s whose relationships have failed. That is, in order to show how and why some relationships have remained successful and satisfying, you also need to identify the breakdown points in failed relationships. This kind of comparison will enable you to define more exactly the reasons why the successful relationships are indeed successful.

Had the initial sample provided the basis for an adequate explanation of the dynamics of successful romantic relationships, then you would proceed with the research on that basis. However, because it became apparent that ‘other’ evidence (data) was needed, the decision was taken to extend the sample to address this problem. In this manner, the research is kept moving forward productively. The researcher keeps asking the question ‘what sort of evidence do I need to provide answers to, and explanations of, my research problem?’ There is no automatic assumption that the initial sample will provide such evidence.

What Does the Evidence Show: Concepts and Data Analysis

Data, information or empirical evidence that has been brought together during the course of a specific research project must be deciphered in certain ways. The ‘facts’ do not literally speak for themselves although, in fact, they may seem to imply particular interpretations. Data analysis is a means of clarifying the implications of the data for understanding and explaining the main research problems and questions. This link between data analysis and explanation, which itself depends on reasoning and argument, is crucial for the execution of excellent research.

Here the importance of *concepts* comes to the fore, because it is the forming, using and storing of concepts that allows reasoning and argument to proceed (Magee 1997). Understanding the relations between concepts and observations is essential for excellent research. Chapter 8 clarifies what concepts are and how they are used in social research. In particular, the chapter

spells out how concepts relate to research experience and the coding and analysis of data (Layder 1998; Rose 1984).

Concepts can be used in two main ways. First, there are what might be called 'ready-made' concepts, which have been constructed and established through social research and analytic discussion. Since they are already in regular use, they can be used to identify and explain patterns in data or evidence. For example, the concept of 'emotional labour', originally formulated by Hochschild (1983) to help explain the 'sympathetic' behaviour of airline flight attendants (particularly 'service with a smile'), could be used to throw light on encounters between an array of other service personnel and their clients – for example, sales assistants and customers, hospital staff and patients, pupils and teachers, or students and professors.

At the same time, analysing data from these areas may make it apparent that the concept of emotional labour itself should be extended, elaborated or changed so that it may be applied in different contexts. This revelation would be a significant contribution, and a very worthy research finding or conclusion. Alternatively, the concept might even be extended to reveal important aspects of the interpersonal dynamics of romantic relationships – providing a non-commercial comparison.

Social research is also concerned with 'emergent' concepts. These are especially important for areas where there are only few established concepts. They are also essential where existing concepts fail to fully capture or depict what is indicated by data from an ongoing study. For example, in my study of power and control in intimate relationships (Layder 2009), the concept of 'emotional labour' served as a useful initial 'marker' and starting point for thinking about the role of emotions and feelings in close relationships. This 'background' idea fed into my thinking while scrutinising data from interviews with couples about their everyday behaviour. I asked analytic questions such as 'what is going on here?', and/or 'what is the best way of characterising (and thus understanding), certain types of intimate relationship?'

In order to convey the inner texture of different relationships, I came up with the distinction between 'energising intimacy games', in which there is a dynamic, emotional rapport between partners, as compared with 'deficit games', which are emotionally flat, and where partners drain each other of psychic energy. For one of the deficit games, I came up with the concept of 'emotional withholding' to depict the way partners try to maintain (some) control over a relationship by being emotionally elusive. These concepts have some link with 'emotional labour' but they also radically depart from it, by opening up new ground in terms of their content and applicability.

For first-time researchers a note of caution is called for because developing emergent concepts requires more skill and creativity than in employing ready-made or 'established' ones. In order to develop emergent concepts a researcher must have confidence and experience in handling conceptual materials, and making connections between data and concepts. Such confidence must be

solidly grounded otherwise either confusion will set in, or it will lead to inadequate, 'flaky' concepts. The most solid grounding for this kind of confidence is that gained from first-hand experience. Of course, for the first-time researcher such experience will be in short supply, although this should not necessarily deter him or her from making an attempt at conceptual innovation. However, it must be remembered that developing an existing concept, or shaping a new one as a result of data analysis, is double-edged. When it is done well, it is a clear marker of research excellence. When it is done badly, it may deflect attention from other strengths that the project may possess.

Ethics in Social Research

All social research requires adherence to ethical principles that govern the conduct of researchers and are instrumental in safeguarding the rights and well-being of research subjects. Different areas of study and their professional bodies in the UK, such as the British Sociological Association, the British Psychological Society, the Medical Research Council, and the Economic and Social Research Council, have developed approved sets of ethical guidelines (the same is true of other countries). It is important to be aware of the relevant code of ethics as it applies to your project and area of study. As far as possible researchers are expected to adhere to such guidelines and any departures from them must be justified and argued for as an integral part of your project.

Also, there are ethics committees whose approval must be sought and obtained before embarking on certain kinds of research, particularly those involving sensitive topics or issues such as in health or medicine. But your own university or college might have its own ethics approval committee, which must be satisfied as to the integrity of your research and the practices and methods it entails before you would be allowed to get started. You must take care to be aware of such 'local' committees and the standards which their approval requires. If in doubt, consult your supervisor. While each area of study or professional body may have its own special requirements, their respective guidelines share many common elements and I shall summarise the main ones here. More particular advice is to be found at the relevant points in the chapters that follow, and more detailed discussions may be found in many methods texts (for example, Bell 2010; Bryman 2008; Denscombe 2002; Homan 1991; Smith et al. 2009).

Varieties of informed consent

The principle of *informed consent* is central to ethical guidelines in general. Both research staff and research subjects must be fully informed of the purposes and methods of the research and the potential uses to which it may be put. Social researchers should not exert pressure on people, or manipulate

them into becoming involved with a project. Participants should be informed about what their participation entails and any 'risks' should be pointed out (ESRC 2005). It should be made clear that participants have a right to withdraw from the research at any time if they change their mind, and should be reassured that such withdrawal will have no negative consequences for them. Vulnerable people, such as the elderly, children under a certain age, those with learning difficulties, patients in hospital or people with mental illnesses, or addictions to alcohol or drugs, require great care and sensitivity over the issue of informed consent. Sometimes relevant guardians or caretakers may also need to be informed and written consent forms may be required.

There are some situations where it is not feasible to ask for consent, or even to ensure that people know they are being studied for research purposes, for example, public situations, or where 'covert' or 'unobtrusive' observations are being made, or with people you meet by chance – as in the case of 'directed', but 'casual' conversations (see Chapter 5). In such cases, asking for consent might have the effect of ruining the spontaneity and sincerity of the subject's responses. This is because their awareness of participating in a research project may lead to unnatural or artificial responses. Sometimes it can lead participants to attempt to please the researcher by 'anticipating' the sort of behaviour the researcher is looking for.

In other cases, obtaining full and wholehearted consent is unrealistic since there is a fine line between persuasion or inducement on the one hand, and milder forms of coercion on the other. In this respect, the extent to which people feel free to say no is crucial, especially where power relations are involved in influencing the decision. As Denscombe (2002: 188) observes, the difficulty of gaining consent that is 'completely voluntary' is acknowledged in some codes of ethics. Thus the notion of 'adequate consent' is often embraced as a more practically realistic ethical principle. It certainly measures up more squarely to the reality that there are degrees of both reluctance and enthusiasm in potential participants when making decisions about consent.

Research approaches based on flexible and 'emergent' (rather than fixed or rigidly pre-structured) designs raise the issue of how far initial consent remains valid, or in place, as the research proceeds and develops. Since the adaptive approach is based on structured but flexible research designs, this issue is moot. In particular, if the progress of the project is such that new data samples are required or existing samples need topping up (although this is not always the case), then it might be better to regard consent as potentially renewable, and subject to constant negotiations between the researcher and research subjects.

Protecting participants' interests

As a researcher you should at all times take great care to protect your research participants from physical and mental harm – and this is especially important

in relation to vulnerable people. Participants' 'interests' include quite a number of issues. For instance, you should avoid asking potentially distressing questions in interviews (or questionnaires) and, of course, this requires at least a modicum of sensitivity as well as the ability to empathise with others. You shouldn't be intrusive or invade the privacy of participants. Also, you must respect participants' autonomy, including the right to withdraw their cooperation at any point. You must treat participants with consideration and respect, and manifestly demonstrate fairness in your dealings with them, such that you are not seen to be giving benefits or rewards to some rather than others.

At all times, you should take the utmost care not to puncture participants' self-esteem or expose them to ridicule or embarrassment. Also, apart from refraining from undue pressure in obtaining their consent to take part in your project, you should not mislead participants as to the purpose of the research or what you intend to do with the findings or the data you collect. That is, you should never use deliberate deception in your routine dealings with research participants.

Confidentiality and anonymity

Informed consent needs to be backed up by assurances of confidentiality and anonymity for participants. Information gathered by a researcher on specific places, people or organisations should not be disclosed to anyone else other than co-researchers on the same project. This ensures that the information cannot be traced back to the originating sources. Denscombe illustrates this point with the following example: 'It would be unethical to feedback views expressed during an interview with one person to her colleagues in subsequent interviews – unless, that is, some specific agreement had been reached on the point' (2002: 180).

A guarantee of anonymity is about protecting the identities of participants and reinforces the principle of confidentiality. To ensure anonymity, researchers typically use 'pseudonyms', that is, alternative or fictitious names to protect the real names and identities of people, places and organisations. Bell (2010) stresses that the promise of anonymity should really stand up, and thus great care should be taken with research data and information because 'if you invent a pseudonym or a code it still might be easy for readers in the know to identify the individual or institution concerned' (2010: 50). So promises of confidentiality and anonymity should not be made lightly and might even require the shredding of interview transcripts, questionnaires and records once the research is completed.

One aspect of confidentiality and anonymity that is rarely mentioned, but which is clearly of moment for the adaptive approach, concerns the project's broader objectives and level of analysis. Adaptive analysis emphasises the need to go beyond mere description and to engage in explanation. As subsequent chapters make clear, explanation is achieved through the use of concepts and rational arguments. In this sense, conceptualisation advances

beyond description and is expressed in more general abstract terms which are independent of specific times, places and people. The centrality of conceptualisation, rather than description, for the adaptive approach helps in the effort of making data and information anonymous and confidential. This is because in the final analysis, the approach is not concerned with providing descriptions of specific (and therefore, identifiable) individuals or groups, but rather with revealing the underlying patterns of social behaviour and the general principles that explain them.

Your Research Log Begins Here!

What is a Research Log and how does it differ from a research diary?

Research diaries

Many textbooks on research methods discuss the use of 'diaries' in research and there are two forms that such diaries can take. The first is when a researcher asks particular individuals, selected from the data sample, to keep diaries of their experiences, usually according to instructions from the researcher, so that they may eventually be drawn upon as research evidence. The other type of research diary is used by the researcher him or herself as a means of keeping a record of various issues relevant to the research project in question. These are usually straightforward records of such things as: general references and specific literature searches, lists of contacts and addresses, dates and times of appointments for interviews, addresses of useful websites, and so on (Hart 2009). In short, this kind of diary is a permanent record (and thus, place of safekeeping) for a miscellany of bits and pieces of mainly 'practical' information relevant to the research.

The Research Log

By contrast, a Research Log is a way of recording a rather different, but quite specific set of issues related to the development of the research over time. The log consists of regular written entries or 'discussion pieces' which concentrate on particular issues. These might include mini-debates (with yourself – as researcher), memos about alternative approaches or courses of action, self-critiques, raising or posing questions about best practice, proposed solutions to problems, and so on. Each entry should correspond to a key element of the research process and concentrate on problems of strategy and implementation encountered along the way. Eventually these discussion pieces will cover the whole span of the project.

Your Research Log will be your constant companion throughout the whole journey of your research project and will help you make strategic

decisions along the way. By enabling you to rehearse arguments and present your findings, it will also help in the preparation of the final research report. You should begin your log immediately by responding to the points in the checklist below about issues covered in this chapter with *short* notes that comment on, or attempt to answer, the questions and issues they raise. At this stage your comments will be tentative and preliminary and should remain brief. You should feel free at this point to express any uncertainties and anxieties because the notes are simply for your own private consumption. Nonetheless, the log will act as an essential means of clarifying thinking, and in helping you to develop ideas about the project.

As you progress with the research you will be able to revise and restructure your ideas, making lengthier and more accurate notes based on what you actually do, or did, at various points in time. Supplementary and additional questions and issues arise from each chapter, so, as you read through the book, your thinking should develop and become more sophisticated. Eventually, the log will become an invaluable resource which will be the basis on which you will be able to construct your final report.

Checklist for Research Log Notes

Write preliminary notes on the following:

- Reflect on possible topics - are they appropriate and why?
- What is your research problem?
- What is the link between research questions and research design?
- What is the most appropriate mix of strategies and methods?
- How will you select samples and sampling units?
- What concepts are relevant?
- How will you code and analyse data?
- What is your overall research argument?
- What are you attempting to explain?
- What are the major ethical considerations relevant to your project and how will you tackle them?