

Introduction

Stalled Research Projects Are Common and Challenging

Research projects often do not follow the smooth course that one might assume to be typical from reading research methods books and the methods sections of published research papers. The reality is that many research projects encounter serious problems (Cone & Foster, 2006, p. 40; Diesing, 1991, p. 183; Kitson, 1993; Kleinman, 1991; Morawski, 2005; Streiner & Sidani, 2009; Woods, 2006). This book focuses on one problem that is quite common in research and often difficult to deal with—a project becoming stalled. Days pass, weeks pass, even months pass with no progress. Many research projects, perhaps particularly dissertations, become permanently stalled (Bowen & Rudenstine, with Sosa, Lord, Witte, & Turner, 1992, pp. 105–122; Pauley, 2004; Valarino & Yáber, 2002; Woods, 2006). How can one restart a research project that is stalled? How can a researcher recover from what has stalled a project? How can an immobilized researcher become mobilized? This book addresses those questions, offering hope and practical solutions for dealing with stalled research.

The common (perhaps necessary) simplifications of research methods textbooks and methods sections of research reports, which almost never mention research becoming stalled, can leave a relatively inexperienced researcher whose research has become stalled with no perspective on the stalled research or on what might be stalling it and no guidance about how to get things moving. The relatively inexperienced researcher may think, for example, that being stalled is very unusual and a symptom of great personal failing. But in reality she or he is dealing with a common problem in research, and there is a good chance that the research can be restarted. Even experienced researchers might struggle with a stalled research project because they may have learned little, if anything, about

the stalled projects of other researchers, and they are as limited as beginning researchers by the lack of discussion of stalled research in methods textbooks and research publications. This book is intended to fill this knowledge gap about dealing with issues that can stall a project. This book is not for undergraduates and beginning graduate students. It is written for advanced graduate students doing dissertations and for researchers with doctorates. It is designed to help those who already know quite a bit about research to understand and deal with a wide array of matters that can arise to stall a research project.

Recognizing When a Project Is Stalled

How does one decide whether a project is stalled and needs to be restarted? One could look at how long ago something was done on the project (for example, the most recent date any computer file related to the project was added or changed), and if that was days, weeks, or even months ago, the project arguably needs restarting. If dust has gathered on your piles of papers concerning the project, if it has been a long time since you read anything relevant to the project, or if you can no longer remember key elements of the project (such as the precise research question, why you thought the project was important to do, or what you have done and what is yet to be done on the project), you definitely have a stalled project. Other symptoms that might tell you that your project is stalled are that you do not have much if any motivation to continue the project, that you have lost a crucial collaborator, or that you have lost track of how you think the project might contribute to the literature. Or perhaps you have felt trapped for a while by an issue that has arisen on the project that needs to be resolved before things can progress, but you do not know how to deal with the issue or do not like or know how to move forward on the paths to resolution that seem to be available. Perhaps a family problem, such as a sick child, conflict with a partner, or flood damage to your home, has so changed your priorities that the project seems unimportant. Perhaps the press of other work (for example, teaching or administrative duties) means that the project has not moved forward for a long time. You might also consider a project stalled if you have been stopped in your tracks for days, weeks, or months because the findings are not what you expected, you feel that an aspect of the methodology seriously jeopardizes the value of the research, or missing data has weakened your confidence that you have anything to write about. Other symptoms of a project being stalled might include recurrently

changing the topic, avoiding conversation with your peers about your research, and (for doctoral students) avoiding contact with your adviser (Ahern & Manathunga, 2004). I think the ultimate criterion is your feeling that the research is stalled—that things are not moving forward and have been that way for a while. If this is the case, you might know specifically what is causing the stall—for example, “I can’t figure out which findings to highlight”—or you might just know things are stalled without having a specific reason for the stall.

There are projects on which nothing has been done for a long time, but the researcher is not stalled. The researcher might need time off to think things through, might be waiting for a newly hired assistant to start work, or might be waiting to hear back from a grant agency, a dissertation committee member, or an institutional review board. And sometimes one needs incubation time to figure things out, find the right focus, feel that one has the right reasons for working on the project, or to clear up some other issue. So one could go for a long time on a project without seeming to move forward and yet not feel stalled.

I think at times it can be unclear whether one is stalled or one is in a place of not being ready to move forward. My inclination with the ambiguity is to try out for size the idea that the project is stalled and think through the various issues that could be relevant to stalling the project that this book addresses. In the end you might decide it is just not the right time to treat the project as stalled. But then you might find ideas and suggestions in this book that change things for you quite a bit and enable you to start moving the research forward again.

The Help This Book Offers

As research consultant, colleague, mentor, dissertation committee member, and adviser of doctoral students, I have helped hundreds of researchers to restart projects that were stalled. Also, I have learned a lot about certain aspects of stalled research by serving on many editorial boards, serving for decades as a university grievance office, and being a good listener to colleagues and students. In addition, I have had my personal issues with projects that were stalled and in need of restarting. So I have considerable experience on which to draw in writing this book. What I offer here will not help with every conceivable problem, but this book offers practical solutions, perspective, hope, and ideas for restarting projects that will help with many issues in stalled research. In fact, my experience has been that the solutions, ideas, and perspectives offered in this

book have helped many people to restart and finish projects that at one time were stalled and seemed in real trouble.

The help this book offers is not formulaic. People are complicated and their situations are complicated. So what this book offers is mostly in the form of suggestions, ideas to try out, issues to explore, and best guesses. There are not many certainties in this book. Then, too, some readers will find some discussions in this book obvious, but I must say that in my experience what is obvious to some people in the research world is definitely not so to others (Single, 2010, p. xiii). In truth, often in consulting, mentoring, advising, and teaching, our job is to help people to learn things that some others think are obvious. I hope this book helps you to deal effectively with crucial matters in your research, and if in the process some things become obvious to you that previously were not, that will be an added benefit.

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