Is your research positivist or interpretative in nature? Can you justify your approach in terms of its appropriateness to the research objectives?

Are you collecting quantitative or qualitative data? Can this be reconciled with your choice of a positivist or interpretative approach?

Are you following a deductive or an inductive design? Can this be reconciled with your answers to the above questions?

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THE RESEARCH PROCESS

INTRODUCTION

When people think of research, many will think immediately of the collection of quantitative or qualitative data through interviewing, questionnaires or other methods. Whilst such primary data collection is an important part of many research projects, there is much more involved, and it is generally more appropriate to consider data collection as part of a wider process involving important stages both before and after those of data collection. This chapter introduces this concept of the 'research process', describes the elements within the process, and the relationships between the elements. It is important that you have an understanding of all elements of the research process before commencing your research project so that you have an idea of the 'big picture'.

THE RESEARCH PROCESS

The research process described in the following section is a very generalised model of carrying out research. In reality, the process is much less 'neat', and you will generally find that you will not usually follow the process stage by stage, but
will often move continually back and forth between the elements, or carry out two or more of the elements concurrently, especially if you are undertaking a more interpretative or qualitative study. Although different models of the research process exist, each containing different numbers of stages, most include the same general elements. The research process that we will refer to consists of eight elements (Figure 3.1).

It is important to remember that these are not isolated, discrete stages, but are actually part of one overall process. As we said earlier, it may also be the case that for certain methodological approaches the order of the stages may be somewhat different; for example a qualitative research project may involve a continual integration of reviewing the literature and data collection. Alternatively, a grounded approach (see Chapter 7) will generally involve data collection at a much earlier stage, before the theoretical and conceptual frameworks have been fully developed. Thus, you should be prepared to be flexible, depending upon the nature of the research being undertaken. Whatever approach you take, however, it is important that you maintain a sense of coherence within the overall research project, or what some refer to as a ‘golden thread’, or ‘vertical thread’. This thread should be the research question, and everything within the research process should be related to answering that question. This chapter will briefly outline the stages of the research process. Each of the areas will be covered in more depth in later chapters of the book.

Stage 1. Selection of topic

The stage that will take up most, if not all of your time at the beginning is that of selecting a topic, and developing a preliminary research question and set of objectives. The selection of your research question is a crucial stage, as an inappropriate topic or question will often lead to irretrievable difficulties later in the research, so it is worth dealing with this stage carefully. It is unlikely that you will develop a final question and set of objectives at this stage of the research process, and the following two stages are important in developing and assessing your question more fully. We will discuss some of the issues related to coming up with a research question in more depth in Chapter 4.

Stage 2. Reviewing the literature

This stage is covered in more depth in Chapter 5. A literature review essentially consists of critically reading, evaluating and organising existing literature on the topic to assess the state of knowledge in the area. During this stage you should aim to become an ‘expert’ in your field of research. The literature review is generally done alongside the development of the theoretical and conceptual frameworks (stage 3 of the research process). Reading widely may also alert you to other helpful factors, such as whether similar research has already been carried out, show you the types of findings that you could expect, or provide descriptions of the theoretical frameworks and previous methodologies adopted by others doing similar research.

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Figure 3.1 The research process
Stage 3. Development of theoretical and conceptual frameworks

As you read the literature, you should be continually developing and refining your theoretical and conceptual frameworks. This is a stage that can often be overlooked in the haste to collect data. It is, however, a vital part of the research process, and is important in alerting you to potential problems before they occur. Your theoretical framework refers to the underlying theoretical approach that you adopt to underpin your study, for example social learning theory, or theories of self-efficacy. The conceptual framework defines and organises the concepts important within the study. These issues are covered in more depth in Chapter 6.

Stage 4. Clarification of the research question

Stages 1, 2 and 3 of the research process will initially, in many cases, become a circular process, whereby initial research questions are chosen, investigated and often rejected for a number of reasons, for example:

- The question lacks sufficient focus.
- The conceptual framework has identified problems in either defining and/or measuring the appropriate concepts.
- There are too many moderating or intervening variables.
- The project is unfeasible in terms of complexity, access, facilities or resources.

Stages 1 to 3 can take longer than initially anticipated, and you may well become discouraged by a lack of success in identifying a good research question or hypothesis. There are no easy methods to come up with an appropriate question, and it can be very much a case of perseverance. Once you have developed a good, focused research question, then the rest of the research process is based upon answering that specific question. The importance of developing a clearly focused question and set of research objectives at this stage cannot be overstated. A common fault is the lack of clarity over the overall aim of the research. Without this, it is difficult to maintain your vertical thread.

Stage 5. Research design

Once the focused research question has been ascertained, the next stage is to consider two questions:

1. What data do I need to collect to answer this question?
2. What is the best way to collect this data?

Breaking this down into more detail, the issues faced by the researcher are:

- What overall research design should I use? Will I, for example, use a cross-sectional, experimental or longitudinal design?
- Will I need to collect primary data, or will there be suitable secondary data to use?
- What methods, for example interviews, questionnaire surveys and so on, will be the best ones to collect the primary data?
- Who should participate in the research, and how will I gain access to them?
- What are the exact procedures that I should adopt in my data collection to ensure reliability and validity?

These issues are covered in depth in Chapter 7, as well as throughout much of the rest of the text.

Stage 6. Data collection

Once the issues identified in stages 4 and 5 of the research process have been addressed, then you should have a clear idea of what data to collect, and how to collect it. You have to consider which methodology to choose, and which methods to utilise within the methodology. The background to this is dealt with in more depth in the next chapter, and the actual practical issues of collecting data are dealt with in Chapters 8 to 11.

Stage 7. Data analysis and discussion of the findings

The data you collect in stage 6 needs to be analysed to provide answers to your research question. Methods of data analysis should always be related to the objectives of the research, that is your analysis should answer the research question or hypothesis. In your discussion of the results, reference should also be
Stage 8. Drawing conclusions

This should relate back to the focused research question. Here, the answer to the research question(s) should be clearly stated. You can evaluate how successful you have been in achieving your research objectives, and highlight the strengths and weaknesses of the research. You may also want to make recommendations for further research.

1. Research is not just about the collection of data. Data collection is important, but it is simply part of a wider process— the research process.
2. The research process follows 8 steps: selection of topic, reviewing the literature, developing your theoretical and conceptual frameworks, clarifying your research question, developing a research design, collecting data, analysing data, and drawing conclusions.
3. Relating your project to the research process will allow you to develop and answer your research question in a logical and systematic manner.

Reread one of the pieces of research from the activity suggested at the end of Chapter 1. Can you relate this research to the research process? Does the research follow this process? Are the steps easily recognisable?

FURTHER READING

At this stage it can be a good idea to catch up on your reading! Try to locate some of the key textbooks and journals in your particular field and try to get a feel for the range of topics that are covered in that field, and some of the key theories and ideas that exist within those topics. The following are two texts that you may want to browse through:


Alternatively you may want to browse through some journals. Try the Sociology of Sport Journal or the Journal of Sport Management, for example, or any journals publishing in your particular areas of interest.