



Birkbeck
UNIVERSITY OF LONDON

MRes and Social Research Dissertation
Workshop

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Today's Agenda

- What is a dissertation?
- Ethics
- Working with your supervisor
- Research topics and research questions
- Concepts
- Literature reviews
- Research methods
- Writing your dissertation
- Assessment criteria

What is a Dissertation?

An original piece of research using a method or set of methods learned during your MSc/Mres

12000-15000 words

Supervised by an academic member of staff

Deadline: 15th September



ESRC: Six Principles of Ethical Research

1. Research should be designed, reviewed and undertaken to ensure **integrity and quality**.
2. Research staff and subjects must be **informed fully** about the purpose, methods and intended possible uses of the research, what their participation in the research entails and what risks, if any, are involved.
3. The **confidentiality** of information supplied by research subjects and the **anonymity** of respondents must be respected.
4. Research participants must participate in a **voluntary** way, free from any coercion.
5. **Harm** to research participants must be avoided.
6. The **independence** of research must be clear, and any conflicts of interest or partiality must be explicit.



Costs and Benefits

- There is never zero cost and risk to participants
 - Time costs
 - Seemingly innocuous survey or interview questions could trigger negative emotional responses
- Bigger risks (eg reporting of illegal behaviours) require more careful consideration
- Balance of costs and benefits
- Risks should be mitigated as much as possible

Informed Consent

- A description of the study should be provided to participants in advance, describing
 - the purpose of the research
 - the expected duration
 - what is involved
 - their right to decline to participate and to withdraw from the research once participation has begun
- Participants must actively consent



Privacy, Anonymity, Confidentiality

- Personal information given by the subject should be confidential
- Wherever possible, the researcher will take steps to ensure the anonymity of the subjects
- Data Protection Act



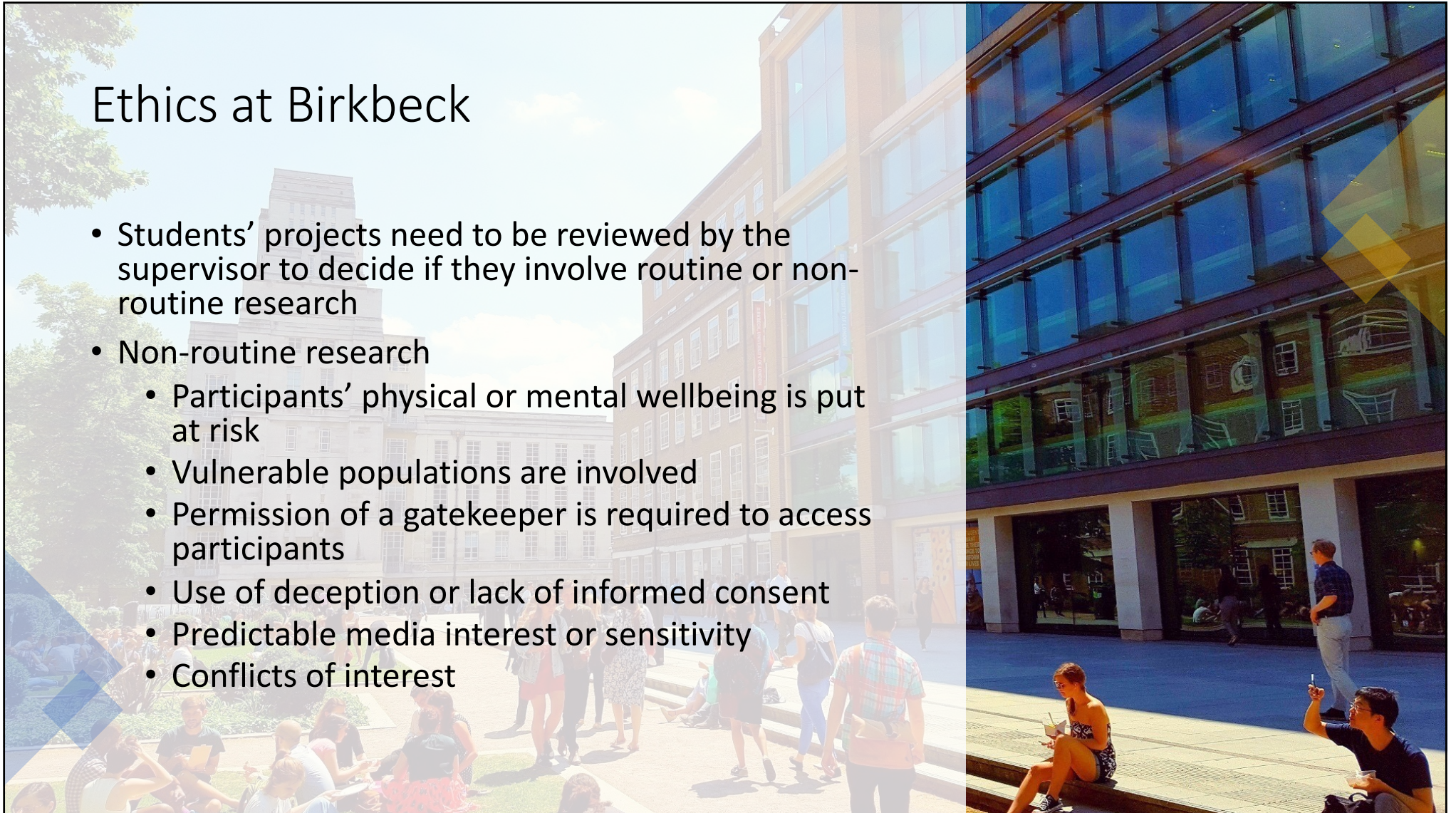


Vulnerable groups

Special care must be taken with vulnerable groups to ensure ethical treatment (e.g. children, prisoners, people with mental health issues)

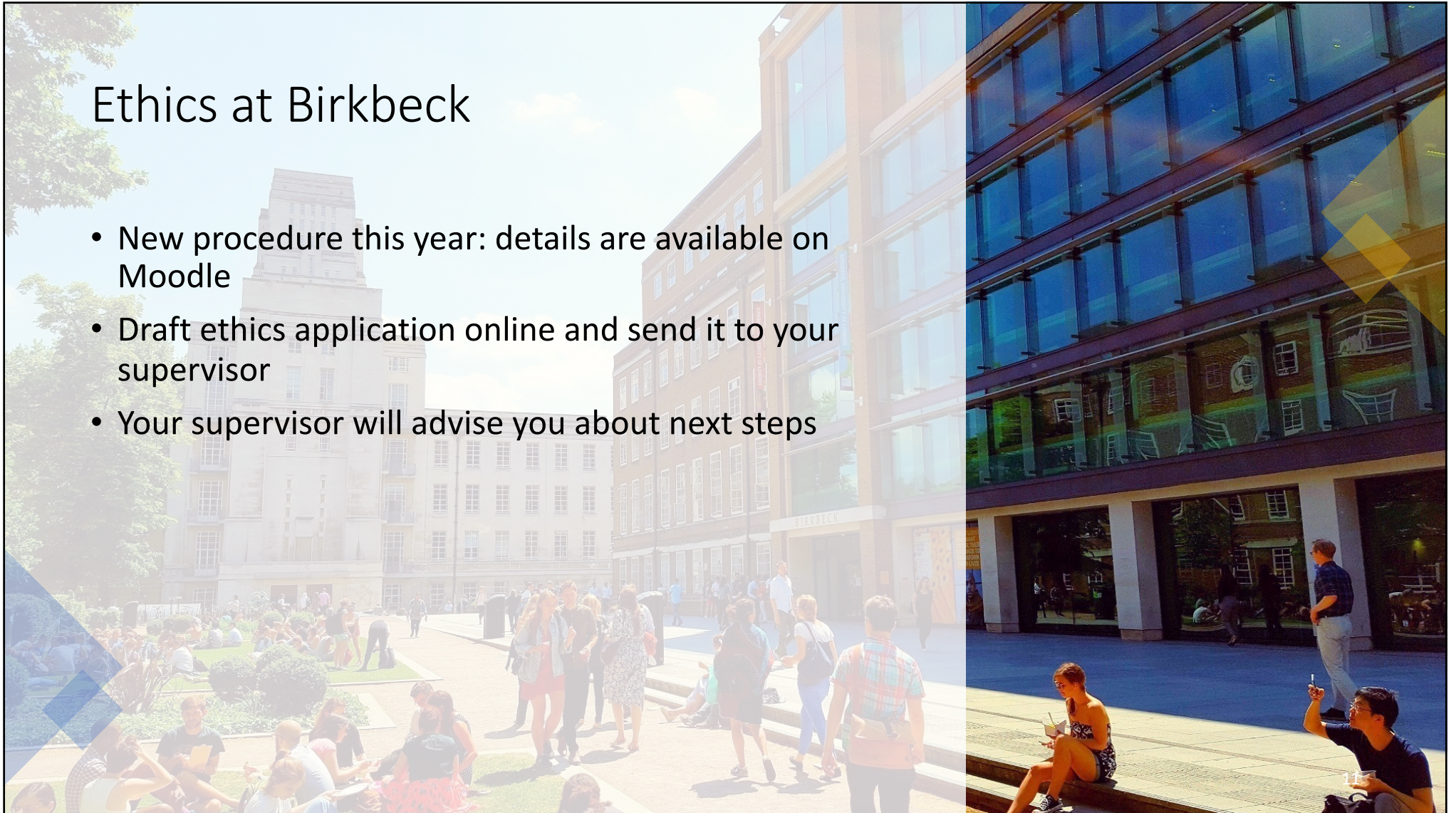
Ethics at Birkbeck

- Students' projects need to be reviewed by the supervisor to decide if they involve routine or non-routine research
- Non-routine research
 - Participants' physical or mental wellbeing is put at risk
 - Vulnerable populations are involved
 - Permission of a gatekeeper is required to access participants
 - Use of deception or lack of informed consent
 - Predictable media interest or sensitivity
 - Conflicts of interest



Ethics at Birkbeck

- New procedure this year: details are available on Moodle
- Draft ethics application online and send it to your supervisor
- Your supervisor will advise you about next steps

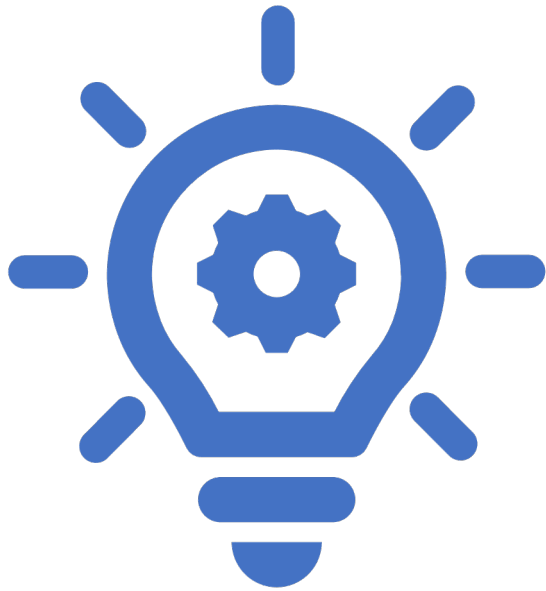


Supervisors

- Supervisors offer guidance and support, but not direction
- They can advise you on research questions, approach, the outline structure and research design
- They cannot comment on full drafts
- 3x1hr meetings (or more meetings for a shorter time)
- It is your responsibility to arrange meetings
- Agree a rough plan and schedule with your supervisor



Some Examples



Research Topics and Research Questions

- Research Topic
 - The overall field in which you are researching
 - If you are focussing on a particular event, movement, idea etc, consider what it is a case of
- Research Question
 - Make sure you have a question that you can clearly express
 - Your dissertation should focus throughout on answering the question

Research Questions: Examples



Why has membership of the Labour Party increased substantially in recent years after years of decline?



Why do some left-wing militant groups turn to urban terrorism when significant pressure is applied, while others do not?



How does public sculpture contribute to the construction of nationalism in Israel?



How has the experience of political power changed how democracy is discussed by the AKP in Turkey?

Concepts

- It is important to identify the key concepts in your research topic/question
- Make sure you understand existing conceptual debates
- Be clear about how you use the concepts in your argument
- Don't be afraid to criticise how concepts are used in the current literature
- Think about operationalisation: how do you turn an abstract concept into something we can measure?

Key concepts: Examples



Party membership, populism



Terrorism



Nationalism

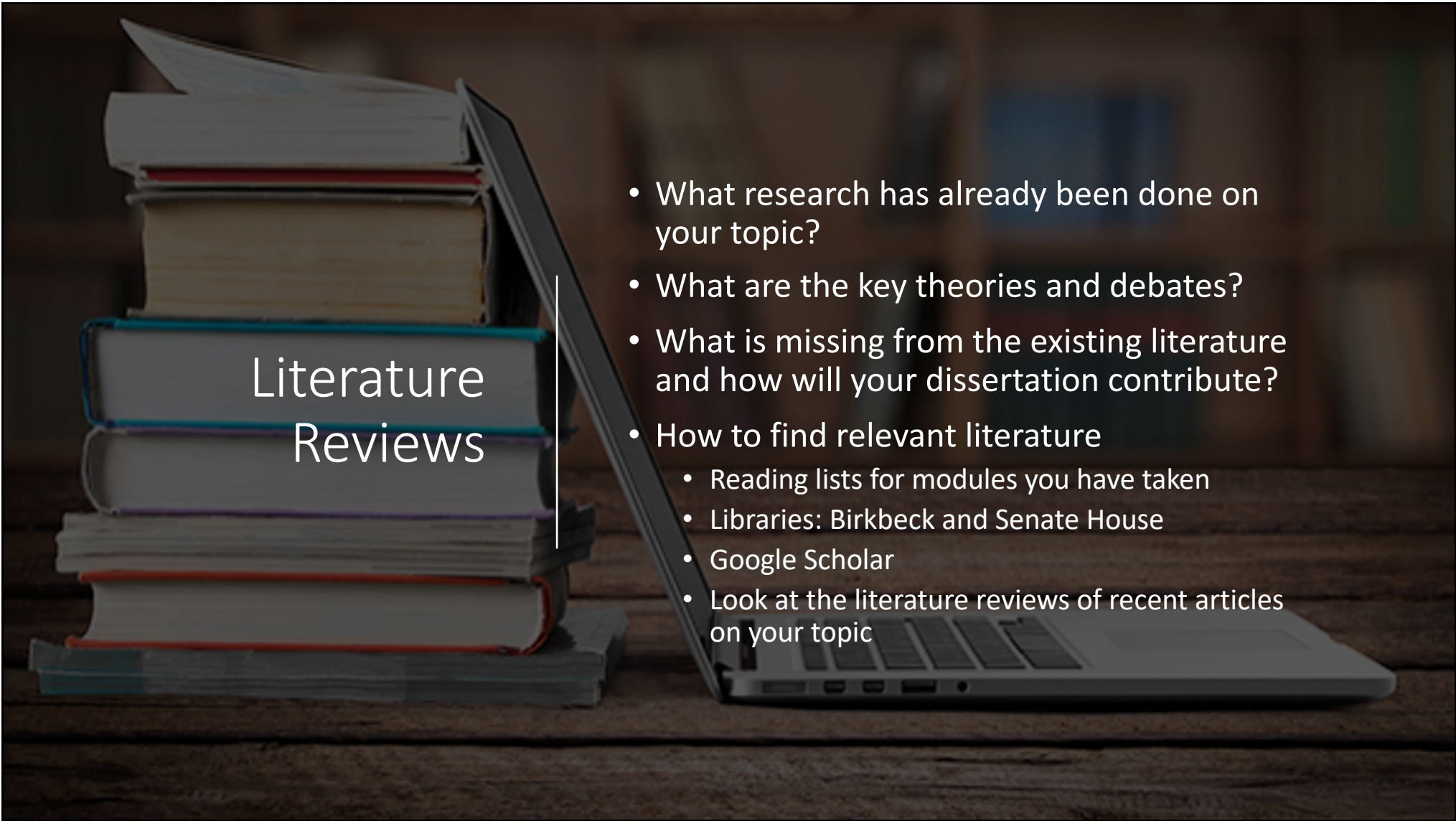


Democracy

Discussion

What are the key concepts in your research design?

How will you operationalize your concepts?

The background image shows a stack of several books of varying thicknesses and colors (white, blue, purple, orange) on a dark wooden surface. A silver laptop is open to the right of the books. The text 'Literature Reviews' is overlaid on the books in a white, sans-serif font. A thin white vertical line is positioned to the right of the text.

Literature Reviews

- What research has already been done on your topic?
- What are the key theories and debates?
- What is missing from the existing literature and how will your dissertation contribute?
- How to find relevant literature
 - Reading lists for modules you have taken
 - Libraries: Birkbeck and Senate House
 - Google Scholar
 - Look at the literature reviews of recent articles on your topic

Literature reviews: Examples



Cartel Party Thesis, quantitative studies



Instrumental theories of terrorism, studies of other terrorist groups



Ethno-symbolist approaches to nationalism, studies of nationalism in Israel



Political theory debates on conceptualising democracy, studies of elite discourse on democracy in other countries/regions

Discussion

What are the key theories you need to engage with?

What other studies have been done which might be relevant for your research?

Research Methods

- You can use any method, or mix of methods, you think will help to answer the question
- Qualitative: interviews, focus groups, case studies
- Quantitative: surveys (original or existing), analysis of administrative data
- Mixed methods: think carefully about how to combine them

Research Methods: Examples



Focus groups and a survey



Case studies based on news reports and published writings by militant leaders



Case studies based on news reports and art history books



Discourse analysis of President Erdoğan's speeches and analysis of World Values Survey data

Discussion

Which method(s) will you use in your project?

What data will you collect?

Writing Your Dissertation

- Introduction
- Literature Review
- Theory
- Methods
- Results
- Analysis/Discussion
- Conclusion



Assessment Guidelines

- the research question is well-defined, and contextualised
- an argument is specified, coherently presented and supported by evidence
- alternative arguments are analysed
- the approach is critical, not descriptive
- a relevant methodology is employed
- relevant sources have been consulted
- knowledge of relevant literature, issues and debates is demonstrated
- the style and presentation is clear and careful, and appropriate academic conventions have been observed



Any
Questions?