

# Masters Research Handbook

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# Chapter 1

## Stage 3: Developing your research design

By now you will have some mastery of the techniques and tools that you need to *do* research at masters level. You may also have ideas about what you still need to do in the next step\*.

With the skills you have so far gained, you're developing into an independent researcher<sup>†</sup> and you may feel that this book holds nothing more for you.

Stay with us a little longer though: the next sections aren't as long as those that you've studied already – you'll be doing more yourself, honing the skills you've picked up as you go along – but they might help to keep you systematic and on the path to submission.

You won't be surprised to know that stage 3 comes next; there's another research increment coming.

### 1.1 Introducing stage 3

Activity: Understanding the effort needed in this stage

#1

Consider Table 1.1 carefully, taking notice of the entries in the 'Effort within stage' column. Write down the most time-consuming activities in this stage and what is expected under each.

Discussion

Developing your research design further and conducting your pilot work will constitute your major effort in this stage (55% of the study time in total): your pilot work will be an initial test of some aspects of

\*If not, don't worry – we've got you covered with this chapter!

<sup>†</sup>Being an independent researcher isn't one of the examined outcomes of masters research, but if you're feeling confident in your research that's a good thing.

LR: update at the end

LR: to check all activity titles at the end

Table 1.1: Stage 3 activities *Update as necessary*)

Research activity	Effort within stage	Suggested focus	supervisor
<b>Identifying the research problem</b>		2%	
Adjust, if needed			
<b>Reviewing the literature</b>		3%	
Adjust, if needed			
<b>Setting research aim and objectives</b>		10%	Suitability of tasks and deliverables from objectives
finalise aim and objectives, and define tasks and deliverables			
<b>Choosing the research design</b>		20%	Suitability of research procedures
Complete research design, with detailed consideration of data and evidence, research strategy, research methods and procedures			
<b>Gathering and analysing evidence</b>		35%	Scope of your pilot work
<b>Interpreting and evaluating findings</b>		0%	
n/a			
<b>Reporting, critical reflection and conclusions</b>		25%	Any further improvements required
Assess research progress and write up Stage 3 report			
<b>Work planning and risk management</b>		5%	Any major adjustment required
At stage start, review work from previous stage and project risk; adjust plan as needed If you have received feedback from supervisor on your previous stage work, adjust plan to include any revision recommended			

your research design, including a proof-of-concept application of some of your chosen methods.

## 1.2 Research design foundation

To make a contribution to knowledge we do research. Practically, to do research, we combine a number of research tasks into a framework. Designing such framework is what we term research design. The framework will depend on the research area, the type of knowledge contribution you wish to make, your mindset as a researcher, and the opportunities and difficulties you may face along the way.

A research framework has many levels. At its foundations are the research framework’s “ontology”, “epistemology”, and “methodology”:

**Ontology** is the philosophical study of the nature of existence\* and addresses the question: “What is the reality that I will research?”. Practically, ontology translates to determining what *phenomena* exist in the context of your research, the *relations* that exist between them and how they group together into *categories*.

**Epistemology** is the philosophical study of knowledge† and addresses the question: “How is knowledge generated and from what sources?”. Practically, epistemology is about finding out “What people know?”, “What does it mean to say that people know something?”, and “How do people know that they know?”.

**Methodology** is the system of principles and methods‡ by which you conduct research, that is, investigate, measure, and analyse your research’s aim and objectives. Methodology operationalises the “how” question of knowledge generation, so it is about devising concrete strategies to answer “How will I make my contribution to knowledge?”.

As you might have guessed, given that the goal of research is to make a contribution to knowledge, epistemology and ontology are incredibly important in defining what knowledge is in any particular research context and what, in that context, can be known about. Once this choice is made, an appropriate methodology can be devised: hence, methodology depends on choices made in relation to ontology and epistemology.

[ADAPTED from <https://proofed.com/writing-tips/the-four-types-of-research-paradigms-a-comprehensive-guide/>]

\*If you’re interested, there’s a fuller discussion of *Ontology* in the Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy (**hofweber2023logic**).

†If you’re interested, there’s a fuller discussion of *Epistemology* in the Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy (**steup2020epistemology**).

‡Even if you are interested, there is (at the time of writing) no Stanford Encyclopedia entry for methodology, unfortunately. But, unlike ontology and epistemology, we go into more detail of methodology below.

Fortunately, many others have thought very deeply about ontology and epistemology and, in most areas and for the vast majority of masters-level research, their answers will suffice. If not, we'd be left in a situation in which even an ostensibly simply statement like “That hat is blue” becomes in need of complex debate ([steup2020epistemology](#)).

Methodology, on the other hand, is something we will spend some time on, particularly how individual research methods combine to produce knowledge contributions through research strategies.

You should be aware that ‘methodology’ has many meanings in the literature, including the study of research methods, which questions the assumptions that underpin their creation and application. Wikipedia says\*:

#### Quote

[...] A few theorists reject methodology as a discipline in general. For example, some argue that it is useless since methods should be used rather than studied. Others hold that it is harmful because it restricts the freedom and creativity of researchers. Methodologists often respond to these objections by claiming that a good methodology helps researchers arrive at reliable theories in an efficient way. The choice of method often matters since the same factual material can lead to different conclusions depending on one's method. Interest in methodology has risen in the 20th century due to the increased importance of interdisciplinary work and the obstacles hindering efficient cooperation.

\*It could almost be seen as a warning!

These are not unimportant issues to consider. However, and as for ontology and epistemology, we will leave their discussion to others, content to stand on those giants' shoulders – we take an unapologetically practical approach to research methods, limiting our discussions to what, we feel, are their important characteristics for practice. This doesn't ignore philosophical issues, however: where there are important philosophical considerations to be considered, we address them. This includes questions as to how to choose a particular research method, and what an experienced reader will expect to be answered by it. You can then craft your dissertation to meet those expectations.

### 1.3 Researcher mindsets

Depending on your background, you may have begun your research studies with a particular mindset – that of a scientist, for instance, or as someone embedded within an organisation. This mindset will flavour your

approach to research, but it shouldn't constrain it – there are many options for research and the right one for you might be outside of your current understanding.

Over time, researchers in different communities and disciplines have developed differing mindsets, which are known in the literature as research paradigms\*. You can think of a research paradigm as a philosophical way of thinking, a set of shared beliefs which shape a worldview.

We briefly outline the prevalent ones in this section — there is a lot, lot more to be known around this topic, and this introduction only scratch the surface! We provide some references for you to start your own investigation into this fascinating and complex topic, should you wish to.

Each paradigm comes with its own ontological, epistemological and methodological choices. Being aware of them, may help you guide your research design choices, so it is important for you to be aware of their existence, even if in practice, you will mainly focus on methodological considerations.

### 1.3.1 Positivist and post-positivism

The Positivist Research Paradigm assumes that there is a single, objective reality that can be accurately known, described and explained. Positivist researchers depend on observations and measurements of this reality to gain knowledge of it.

Under the assumption of a single objective reality, positivist researchers make claims that they compare against reality to determine the “truth”. Hence positivists seek to confirm their theories through their observations of an objective reality. This removes the researcher as a variable in the research equation so that positivist research is necessarily limited to data generation, and their analysis, and interpretation from an objective viewpoint as the basis of knowledge.

The positivist research paradigm is mostly used in situations where a “single objective reality” is most expected, i.e., the natural sciences, the physical sciences, or whenever very large sample sizes can be used to infer characteristics of a population. It leads the researcher towards quantitative methods, including experiments, tests, surveys and simulations involving formal modelling based on mathematics, statistics or computational thinking.

Positivism leads to knowledge as explanations constructed from hypotheses thus established as laws or facts. As an example, think of Newton's explanation of the action of forces on matter that is encoded as his Three Laws of Motion. These are meant as universal objective truths which apply to the natural world forever.

With this in mind, and the – almost – universal acceptance of Newton's Three Laws based on their predictive capability, positivism was, for a very long time, the dominant mode of Western thought. So much

[ADAPTED from <https://proofed.com/writing-tips/the-four-types-of-research-paradigms-a-comprehensive-guide/>]

\*A.k.a. philosophical traditions.

From <https://image.slidesharecdn.com/lecture2-1-111207045819-phpapp02/95/research-paradigms-20-728.jpg?cb=1415227903>

so, that it was a bulkhead against a growing number of worrying observations, including the movements of the planet Mercury\*, which didn't reinforce – indeed appear to contradict – Newton's Laws. How could an established truth lead that way? Indeed, Einstein's insight into the intimate connection between space and time inspired a substantial move away from the established Newtonian "laws" and "facts", which were neither any longer **lakatos2014falsificationlaka**.

The need to rethink positivist objective truths was something of a crisis in the positivist movement (see, for instance, **kuhn2012structure**), leading to post-positivism<sup>†</sup> which introduced the idea of falsification: any posited theory must make predictions which are testable, the currency of a theory being determined by whether or not it had yet been proven false<sup>‡</sup>.

So, both positivism and post-positivism accrete knowledge by formulating generalisations and cause-effect linkages, based on objective, verifiable observations and measurements, and expressed as theories and laws. However, post-positivism acknowledges some of the limitations in such observations and measurement, so that a theory or law will only remain true for as long as it is not falsified by new observations or measurements. There is therefore a shift from certainty (positivism) to probability (post-positivism), with post-positivist researchers encouraged to take multiple measurements and observations, including triangulating their data, to arrive at an objective truth. Thus you might take a post-positivist approach to establishing the linkage between a drug and the alleviation of symptoms: once a generalisation or cause-effect linkage is established, it applies for as long as it remains un-falsified.

Both positivism and post-positivism assumes an objective reality and do not admit that the researcher's own mindset and values may influence true knowledge: in being objective and verifiable, different researchers must necessarily arrive at the same truth. This denial is often levelled as a criticism of the paradigms, particularly by social scientists, and has led to new ones.

\*See [enwiki:1193607156](#), for instance.

<sup>†</sup>Not the most creative name, you must admit.

<sup>‡</sup>Note that falsifiable theories that have been tested and failed can still be useful, perhaps within a restricted context. For instance, Newton's Laws of motion provide a very good approximation at low energies.

See [wikipedia-contributors2023positivism](#) for a more detail description.

### 1.3.2 Anti-positivist (interpretivism)

The shift from positivism to post-positivism still preserves the absolute objectivity of reality. In contrast, anti-positivism asserts that different people experience and understand reality in different ways: while there may be only "one" reality, everyone interprets it according to their own views. Simply put, this might mean that generalisations and even cause-effect relationships are subject to individual experience. Think of the way that people interpret the (single) power structure within your organisation: typically, different people will describe it in different ways, as it applies to them.

Explaining the name, anti-positivists believe that all research is influenced and shaped by researchers' worldviews, leading to differing interpretations of the same reality. Again, think of the questions you might ask of people within an organisation that leads them to describe the power structure. Different questions can lead to different descriptions.

As a result, anti-positivists gravitate towards qualitative research methods and techniques to understand the different perspectives, placed in an explicative context of their own perspective. These may include interviews and focus groups, participant observations, and review of documentation on a phenomenon of interest (e.g., newspaper articles, reports, or information from websites).

In moving away from objective knowledge, however, anti-positivism raises questions of research validity, that is of how knowledge generated as subjective interpretation can be relied upon. We will discuss validity in the next section.

See [wikipedia-contributors2023antipositivism](#) for a more detailed description.

### 1.3.3 Constructivism

The Constructivist Research Paradigm asserts that reality is a construct of our minds and so is absolutely subjective. Constructivists believe that all knowledge comes from our experiences and reflections on those experiences. A distinction is also made between reality which is individually vs socially constructed, the latter being the result of social interaction within a specific cultural or historical context.

Due to its focus on experiences and subjectivity, this paradigm is mostly associated with qualitative research approaches. The researcher focuses on participants' experiences, including their own, constructing knowledge as "individual reconstruction, coalescing around consensus" through understanding, sense making and reconstruction.

Knowledge accumulates through later research adding informed and sophisticated reconstructions, and vicarious or lived experience.

Research validity is also an issue with this paradigm.

See <empty citation>

<https://image.slidesharecdn.com/lecture21-111207045819-phpapp02/95/research-paradigms-20-728.jpg?cb=1415227903>

<https://image.slidesharecdn.com/lecture21-111207045819-phpapp02/95/research-paradigms-20-728.jpg?cb=1415227903>

### 1.3.4 Critical theory

The Critical Theory Research Paradigm originated in the fields of sociology, philosophy and political theory, and asserts that social science can never be 100% objective or value-free. Therefore, like interpretivism, it assumes multiple interpretations of reality in social contexts. However, it goes a step further by asserting

that reality is shaped by those who are powerful, who legitimate particular ways of perceiving the world: ‘truth’ is inherently political, defined by those in charge to the disadvantage of many, and challenged by those who wish to promote equality. As a result, critical researchers seek to challenge the status quo and perceive research as transformative at a social level\*, confronting ideology and trying to discover and challenge the mechanisms through which exploitation and disadvantage are perpetuated in society.

This paradigm is focused on enacting social change through scientific investigation. Critical theorists question knowledge and procedures and acknowledge how power is used (or abused) in the phenomena or systems they’re investigating.

Researchers using this paradigm can offer structural and historical insights as the basis of knowledge, approaching knowledge contributions through “critique and transformation, restitution and emancipation”. The recognition of researcher values is welcomed as a formative influence on the research.

Even though very different in approach, Critical Theory research can lead to generalisations via similarly, although these tend to be historically situated. This of the

Quality judgements in Critical Theory tend to be “Historical situatedness; erosion of ignorance and misapprehensions, action stimulus”

See [wikipedia-contributors2023critical](#) for a more detailed description.

\*As a result, this paradigm is also called ‘transformative’ in the literature.

see <https://image.slidesharecdn.com/lecture21-111207045819-phpapp02/95/research-paradigms-20-728.jpg?cb=1415227903> for this, needs further investigation

Add example here

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### 1.3.5 Indigenous

The paradigms described have attracted criticisms in that they are seen as Western-European centric, imposed on indigenous cultures as a result of colonialism, and marginalising indigenous traditions.

In counterposition, an indigenous paradigm is emerging with the aim of decolonising research. This paradigm emphasises the connection between people, their culture, and spiritual and natural worlds, valuing knowledge which is local to communities, and holistic in connecting all beings with nature and spirituality.

As a result, indigenous cultural practices and forms of expressions should be reflected in the way the research is conducted, including language, metaphors, oral traditions and indigenous knowledge systems.

From an ontological perspective, therefore, both physical and spiritual realities and their connection matter, alongside reciprocal relations between all living beings.

From an epistemological perspective, knowledge is relational, based on the connection between natural and spiritual worlds, and its generation is a fluid process based on oral traditions, such as storytelling, and inward exploration of personal experience in context. The codification of such knowledge is through community praxis, in which the ‘Elders’ are often seen as key actors in the epistemological process.

Finally, indigenous methodology is one that favours the collective involvement of indigenous people in developing, approving and implementing the research, leading to knowledge of practical use.

It is important to note that although we have tried to characterise this paradigm in relation to ontology, epistemology and methodology, some scholars reject any such classification, regarding this too as a form of colonialism imposed by a Western view of research paradigms. If you are interesting in going more deeply into this debate, you could start from \_\_\_\_\_

add references: Hart, M. A. (2010). Indigenous Worldviews, Knowledge, and Research: The Development of an Indigenous Research Paradigm. *Journal of Indigenous Voices in Social Work*, 1(1).

### 1.3.6 What's your mindset?

Table 1.2 summarises the main paradigms we have discussed based on their ontological, epistemological and methodological standpoints. From a methodological perspective, we have indicated the main tendency of the paradigm, although the quantitative vs qualitative distinction is not as stark in practice, and a mix of methods is often applied.

Your own mindset may lead you to gravitate towards one or more of these paradigms, or even somewhere in between. The next activity should help you reflect on this point.

Activity: What kind of thinker am I?

#2

Consider the following question and describe how you would go about answering it:

“What is the colour of swans?”

Then compare your approach to each of the paradigm. Which one is it closer to and why?

#### Guidance

If you can think of more than one way to approach the question, then describe and reflect on each of them in relation to the paradigms.

#### Discussion

I can think of a couple of ways I could tackle this question.

The first would be to start by observing the swans that live on the lake near my home, and record my observations. From that I would put forward an initial hypothesis, say that all 'swans are white,' as those are the only ones I can observe locally. I would then look online for images of swans from around the world to see if they match my observations. Having found images of black swans alongside white ones, I would then revise my hypothesis to "All swans are either white or black." This process would continue until

Table 1.2: Summarising research paradigms

	<b>Positivism</b>	<b>Post-positivism</b>	<b>Anti-positivism (Interpretivism)</b>	<b>Constructivism</b>	<b>Critical theory</b>	<b>Indigenous</b>
<b>Ontology</b>	one discoverable external reality	one discoverable external reality that can only be known imperfectly	one external reality which is interpreted subjectively	reality as the construct of one's mind	one external reality determined by socio, political and economic power factors	physical and spiritual realities and their connection; reciprocal relations between all living beings
<b>Epistemology</b>	objective laws and theories that can be confirmed empirically	objective laws and theories that can be falsified empirically	subjective interpretations	subjective constructions	social and historical constructions, acknowledging issues of power and social injustice	relational knowledge, indigenous knowledge systems based on oral traditions and inward exploration of experience
<b>Researcher's role</b>	objective, neutral	objective, neutral, aware of cognitive limitations	subjective, bringing own values, experience and bias	subjective, bringing own values, experience and bias	subjective, aware of own social position	researcher as indigenous participant in collective research
<b>Main methods</b>	quantitative	quantitative, with triangulation	qualitative	qualitative	qualitative	qualitative

I'm satisfied there is no further contradictory evidence I can find, hence conclude that in all probability swans are either white or black. I would have to admit that there may be swans of other colours I've yet to come across, so the statement is open to future challenges. I would also need to be convinced that I'm a neutral observer, able to determine the colour of a swan correctly and reliably. This approach closely aligns with the post-positivist paradigm, specifically: I've made observations, triangulated my direct swan observations with the review of online swan images, and formulated, rejected and then reformulated hypotheses as part of my enquiry process.

My second approach would be to ask other people. For instance, I could set up a crowd-sourcing survey

inviting participants to answer the question. By analysing their answers I could then decide if there is enough consensus on the colour of swans, like most participants may have identified swans to be either white or black, although some may have provided more nuanced answers, like yellowish or other. From my analysis I would draw my conclusions which may or may not be the same as in my previous approach. In this case, I would have to worry about who participated in my research. Were there enough participants from around the world to provide sufficient and diverse evidence? To which extent may their colour perception may differ? What else could I do to check the validity of this outcome? This approach aligns with the interpretivist paradigm: I have to accept that, like me, each observer in my study will make their own interpretation of what the colour of a swan is, so that I would have to account for this in my conclusions.

## 1.4 Research strategies

Each research area has its more-or-less well-worn paths to a successful knowledge contribution. In Stage 3, you're now at the point where you'll join researchers in your chosen area on one of those paths: as you get deeper and deeper into your research, the steps you'll take will become more and more specialised.

To identify and take such steps, you will need to devise a research *strategy*, by which we mean a collection of recipes for doing research that will, if followed accurately, lead to a contribution to knowledge *even in the presence of uncertainty*. When devised, a research strategy consists of research tasks that interact in more or less complex ways, but which are sufficiently detailed that the researcher knows what to do next, even if that means making a choice between two or more next steps.

There's good news and bad news in choosing a research strategy:

- The bad news is that there are many possible choices you could make at any point.
- The good news is that, for your particular area in masters research, there will likely be only a small subset that you need to know about.

To help you in your choice, our approach in this chapter is unapologetically practical. In Section 1.6, we will layout the options that you have together with reasons for choosing them and reasons for not choosing them. Each comes with a list of key evaluation questions the answers to which you will be expected to

present as part of your dissertation. Amongst other things, the answers you give will justify how and why your work makes a contribution to knowledge. These evaluative questions in turn give you targets to aim for throughout your research, you will need to answer each of them – they will be the driver for your research and your writing up.

Before we look at research strategy in detail, we are going to consider the importance of such choice in terms your ability to defend your claim that your research has contributed new knowledge.

## 1.5 Defending your claim of new knowledge

Being able to assert that you have made a contribution to knowledge is the point of structuring your research through a well thought-out research strategy – hence, the importance of methodology in research.

Choosing a good strategy is only the starting point, however. Having made your claim to knowledge at the end of your project, you still need to defend it in your dissertation. That means considering, essentially, everything that could have gone wrong – any weaknesses – with the execution of your research strategy, and explaining how you've dealt with it.

Introducing potential research weaknesses upfront and ways to deal with them is the purpose of this section: with this information, you can then be more mindful in the choice and execution of your own research strategy.

Figure 1.1 illustrates the point we are making. At its core is your claimed knowledge contribution at end of your project. Its defence is what you need to argue in your dissertation. Such a defence has to withstand external scrutiny, say that of your examiner or the wider community of scholars, researchers or practitioners your work is intended for. You claim to knowledge is subject to a number of weaknesses (four main types are considered in this section, illustrated as potential ‘cracks’ in your defence), and should you recognise any of them in your research, then your defence should explain how they’ve been dealt with (illustrated as bandaids over the cracks). The kind of ‘bandaid’ will depend on what you decided to do, one of addressing, avoiding, deferring or ignoring the weakness. If you choose to address it, then some specific kinds of bandaid are available to you: the ones we consider in this section are triangulation, reflexivity and critical review.

### 1.5.1 Weaknesses and ways to deal with them

We can class weaknesses in claimed knowledge contribution (see figure 1.1) as follows:

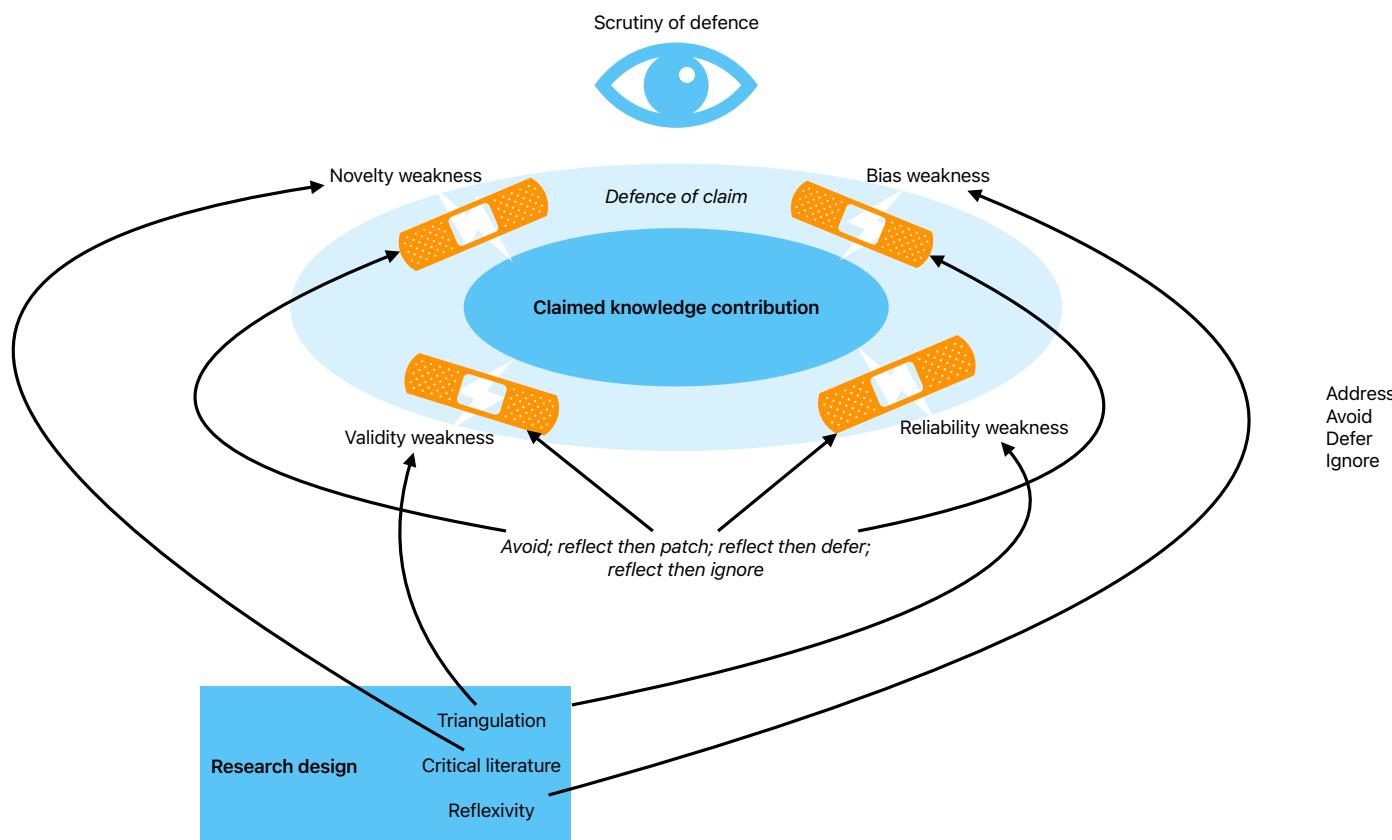


Figure 1.1: Research vulnerabilities — to edit and explain in text

- validity weaknesses, i.e., the claim you have made to new knowledge isn't sufficiently credible, trustworthy, or accurate to be considered knowledge
- reliability weaknesses, i.e., the procedures that you have used to establish your claim of new knowledge cannot be replicated under the same conditions or are not sufficiently repeatable in other contexts
- bias weaknesses, i.e., the claim you have made to new knowledge has been affected by your implicit or explicit cognitive biases, making the new knowledge invalid
- novelty weaknesses, i.e., the hole in the literature that you claimed existed doesn't actually exist – perhaps you missed some key papers in your literature survey or, perhaps in the time that you've taken to complete your research, someone else has made a similar contribution to knowledge as that you claim. If there is no hole, then you cannot have contributed new knowledge.

There are, of course, connections between these types of weakness. In particular, if your research strategy is not reliable, then any resulting claim to knowledge is invalid. For instance, if the scale you use to measure the weight of an object returns different values every time (it's unreliable), then you can't draw a valid conclusion on the weight of that object. However, reliability is not sufficient for validity. For example, your scale may reliably return the same weight every time, but it may also overestimate the weight: in this case, while your scale is reliable, then you still can't draw a valid conclusion on the weight of the object (unless you know precisely by how much your scale overestimates weights). Bias also affects validity. For instance, you may have a preconception of what the outcome of your research should be, so you discard any evidence to the contrary and only retain evidence that confirms your bias. In this case, your conclusions are unreliable, hence invalid. It is therefore essential to consider all types of weaknesses that may affect your research and take action to ensure they will not impact the validity of your claim.

The possible actions you can take to deal with potential weaknesses falls into three options\*:

- avoid the weakness, i.e., choose a research strategy which is not troubled by the weakness. Part of the justification for the choice of research strategy can then be a discussion, if necessary, that the weakness doesn't arise.
- address the weakness, i.e., be aware of the weakness during the research and put in place further strengthening research. This might be, for instance, a second of further iteration of the research strategy which addresses discovered weaknesses in earlier research. This would be reported as part of the research design.

\*There is actually a fourth way, which is to be aware of the weakness but to ignore it. We do not recommend this as your examiner of your dissertation is likely to have detailed understanding of the research strategy you have chosen, including its potential weaknesses, and is likely to pick any methodological omissions up.

- acknowledge and defer\*, most usually at the end of the research period when the research is complete, i.e., write a reflection on the effect the weakness had on the outcomes and commit to addressing that weakness in future research. This would be reported as part of your “Discussion” and “Conclusion and future work” chapters.

If you can't avoid a weakness and you can't defer it, you have to address it. Addressing it means that your examiner will have their questions answered about the weaknesses they know occur in the type of research you're doing. Their evaluation will be through the questions they ask of your research and you must be prepared to answer them.

### 1.5.2 Where to defend your claim

In your defence of claimed knowledge contribution, you should consider all potential types of weakness in turn – ignoring them leaves yourself open to a negative outcome of expert scrutiny. For each, you should make arguments as to why your claim doesn't suffer from it, or if it does to some extent, that you have dealt with it in a way that ensures there is still a contribution to knowledge arising from your research.

Typically, there are two places at which weaknesses in your claimed knowledge contribution should be discussed:

- in your dissertation, in all cases
- in any *viva voce* associated with your research course<sup>†</sup>

In general, an examiner will explore such weaknesses through a number of questions they ask of your dissertation. For each research strategy, many of these questions<sup>‡</sup> can be predicted with reference to the types of weaknesses we have discussed above. Somewhere in your dissertation, then, you will need to expose your research strategy weaknesses and argue how your research has addressed them.

Here is an example paragraph taken from an actual dissertation ([miles2019dispelling](#)) with our commentary on specific points to the right, in the margin:

My observational study focuses solely<sup>§</sup> on the external elements of the embouchure and what can be seen in real time with the human eye<sup>¶</sup>, through the recording of video images. My analysis, and the conclusions that come from it, has been made from a purely visual perspective, captured by combinations of

\*Although it may seem to have similar outcomes, this is a much better strategy than simply ignoring the weakness as, although you don't address it, you make the examiner aware that you are aware of it. It can also give you a very neat way of filling out your future work.

<sup>†</sup>As not all masters research have an associated *viva voce*, weaknesses should always be addressed in the dissertation itself. Even if your course does have a *viva voce*, it can be a nerve-racking experience to be confronted by an examiner asking questions to which you have no answer because you haven't thought about it!

<sup>‡</sup>If not all; although examiners will have their own way of asking them!

<sup>§</sup>Being specific on which phenomena are studied...

<sup>¶</sup>...and on the observations made of them...

camera angles, without needing the use of any complex and expensive technologies\*. In embarking on this research project, the initial intention was to measure facial muscle activity using Electromyography. This method proved to be too costly† and the heavily mathematic and science based analysis process, out of the current skill set of this researcher‡. Furthermore, due to the significant evidence found in the literature regarding the internal embouchure, the concept of the tongue being a pivotal element in facilitating pitch change has been accepted as fact and deemed unnecessary for further study in this project§. Therefore the ultimate goal of my research is to inform the teaching and learning of brass wind performance, with particular reference to the role of the embouchure¶. With this in mind, it is therefore important that the data obtained through this study be identifiable through the simplest means possible, so that it can be of the most benefit to the brass-playing community||.

\*...thus correcting any expectations of what might have been achieved...

†...contextual factors prevented more sophisticated observations...

‡...and initial investigations reveals how difficult this would be

§There was no knowledge contribution to be made in this particular area...

¶...and so the knowledge contribution was ...

||...and our research goals were set accordingly.

#### Activity: Which weaknesses are discussed?

#3

Consider the extract above alongside our comments. Which kinds of weakness does it refer to? How were they dealt with? Which other weaknesses could have been discussed?

#### Discussion

We found that two potential weaknesses which were considered and addressed in the research:

- novelty: by being specific on the phenomena studied (the external elements of the embouchure), the text clarifies where the claimed novelty of the research lies. This makes it easy to check against related work in the literature, something the text could have mentioned explicitly
- validity: the observation of such phenomena through video images is defended as a valid method in relation to the aim of devising a practical approach to inform teaching and learning. This is in contrast to more sophisticated, but costly, approaches that would have been possible, but deemed unnecessary for the aim of the research.

Other potential weaknesses are:

- reliability: how reliable were the observations? Would another researcher have reached similar conclusions?
- validity: the study assumes the embouchure is a key factor in the teaching and learning of a brass instrument. Where does this assumption come from?

As this is only a brief extract, it is possible, of course, these weaknesses were considered and dealt somewhere else in the dissertation.

### 1.5.3 Approaches to address weaknesses

In this section, we consider three common approaches used to address weaknesses in research.

#### 1.5.3.1 Triangulation

Triangulation **mathison1988triangulate** consists of using multiple data sources and methods, or even multiple researchers, to develop a comprehensive understanding of a phenomena under study and arrive at a particular conclusion about that phenomenon. Triangulation was introduced in the social sciences in the mid 1950s **campbell1959convergent**, and since has become an accepted approach across all disciplines, regardless of research paradigm.

The core idea behind triangulation is that if different data and methods converge towards the same conclusion, then it is more likely that such a conclusion is valid, that rival explanations can be dismissed, that the different procedures followed are reliable, and that the effect of any bias is mitigated. In this way, triangulation makes your research more credible, and your claim more defensible.

However, because triangulation applies many techniques or derives conclusions from many sources, it can result in inconsistent or contradictory findings. So, it is important to understand that triangulation does not necessarily guarantee convergence on a single proposition about a phenomenon. Instead, it provides a rich and complex picture that requires careful interpretation and explanation by the researcher. As a result, triangulation should be used cautiously and researchers should be prepared to explain and make sense of

the various outcomes it may produce. Triangulation also adds complexity and requires more time and effort that must be accounted for.

Main kinds of triangulation include **denzin1978research**; **patton1999enhancing**:

**Data source triangulation** refers simply to using several data sources. These may be the inclusion of multiple participants to interview, or the consideration of a particular phenomenon under different conditions in space and time: for example, in an educational setting, you may wish to measure the efficacy of an educational programme on different student cohorts, possibly over different academic years, or delivered by different educators. With data triangulation you increase the validity of your claim across different contexts, so that your results are more generalisable.

**Investigator triangulation** involves several researchers collecting and analysing data\*. For instance, you may have different researchers repeating measurements using the same lab equipment and procedures. The involvement of different researchers who independently apply the same techniques to arrive at the same conclusions, increases both reliability and validity of those outcomes, and mitigates against each researcher's bias. This is particularly important in qualitative research where data are often interpreted rather than measured precisely.

**Methodological triangulation** refers to the use of multiple – or mixed – methods in the examination of a phenomenon<sup>†</sup>. For instance, a neuropsychologist may combine direct observation of human behaviour with neurological data from brain scans to obtain a comprehensive picture of what motivates people to make certain choices. Methodological triangulation allows strengths and weaknesses of different methods to compensate for each other, increasing both reliability and validity. However, it may be difficult to combine results from different methods because of their differing ontological and epistemic stance.

**Theory triangulation** refers to the use of different theories or hypotheses to analyse data and interpret phenomena. For instance different motivation theories could be used to study resistance to change in organisations. By employing several theories, findings can be considered from different angles, compensating for possible limitations or biases of each individual theory.

\*Because there is more than one researcher involved, it is unlikely that you will be required to perform this form of triangulation in your Masters project. You may, however, be a researcher in the triangulation of another's researcher – your supervisor, for instance – which means that you should be prepared to be involved. Be sure to schedule some time with your supervisor to discuss their needs, should this be the case.

<sup>†</sup>We deal with mixed method research later in this Stage.

## Activity: Distinguishing different kinds of triangulation

#4

Consider each of the following examples and indicate which kind of triangulation they represent:

- a study on student experience in a university looking at student survey data and students' study results
- a study on study practice and academic performance, combining an online survey and interviews with a selected number of participants
- a study on sleeping patterns of the elderly, using data from care homes in the UK
- a study on volcanoes asking vulcanologists around the world to contribute seismological measurements over a period of time.

## Discussion

These are examples of, respectively:

- data triangulation, in which two different kinds of data are considered
- methodological triangulation, in which two different methods are applied
- data triangulation, in which similar data from different locations are considered
- investigator triangulation, in which several researchers are invited to collect and contribute data. Presumably, this also encompasses some data triangulation in the sense that similar data from different locations around the world are then analysed in the study.

### 1.5.3.2 Reflexivity

According to **jamieson2023reflexivity**:

Reflexivity is the act of examining one's own assumption, belief, and judgement systems, and

thinking carefully and critically about how these influence the research process. The practice of reflexivity confronts and questions who we are as researchers and how this guides our work.

So, reflexivity admits that the researcher isn't an objective, unbiased observer of truth, but someone whose worldviews and subjectivity influences every step of the research process. Through reflexive practice, the researcher can then engage in a more honest and transparent research process, increasing research reliability and mitigating bias.

Note that there is a difference between reflection and reflexivity. Reflection is usually done retrospectively: you could reflect on something that has happened during your study to identify important lessons for the future. In contrast, reflexivity takes place throughout the research process — before, during and after, hence has the potential to shape it. Also reflection focuses on things you have done, while reflexivity explores motivations — your assumptions, beliefs, biases, etc., behind those actions.

Reflexivity is relevant and applicable to all types of research. Qualitative research has the longest tradition of reflexivity, with qualitative researchers encouraged to examine and openly acknowledge their own beliefs and biases, and their impact on the research. In quantitative research, the acceptance of the importance of reflexivity is growing, and goes alongside an acknowledgement that there are limitations and biases in the scientific method too, so that qualitative research is not a 'gold standard' of objectivity.

Reflexivity should be embedded in all steps of the research process. In the early stages, it can apply to the choice of research problem or questions, by guiding the researcher to consider explicitly subjective factors which can explain why that particular choice was made and why the researcher is best placed to research it. In data collection, reflexivity can expose biases and unchecked assumptions which may affect how samples and data sources selected or participants are recruited. In data analysis and their interpretation, reflexivity may lead to uncover reasons why certain evidence is given more weight or meaning, while other is discarded, for instance due to confirmation bias. In formulating conclusions, reflexivity can support "thinking about thinking"<sup>\*</sup>: the process of questioning the way we think to assess how valid and reliable our conclusions are. This is particularly important because while the human brain has the potential for logic and critical thinking, these are not innate skills: rather they need developing, akin to the skills that one must develop to become, say, a proficient musician or mathematician. Psychologists have uncovered that left untrained, our brain tends to make mistakes, which stem from a variety of factors<sup>†</sup>, including errors in perceptions, flawed memories, heuristic thinking, logical fallacies and cognitive bias. Reflexivity can help us become aware of these tendencies.

<sup>\*</sup>So-called 'meta-cognition'

<sup>†</sup>A fascinating series of lectures on this topic is "Your Deceptive Mind: A Scientific Guide to Critical Thinking Skills" by Steven Novella.

## Activity: Reflexivity practices

#5

Conduct a web search on reflexivity practices adopted by researchers. Briefly summarise what they are, and how they are useful. Comment on which of such practices you could adopt in your work.

## Discussion

You may have found some or all of the following:

- Reflexive writing, such as research journals, diaries, fields notes and memos. These are common tools used by the reflexive researcher at any point in the research process to record assumptions, experiences, observations, perceptions, procedures, and decision points. They are used to bring into focus the researcher's intention and gaps in their knowledge or thinking, as well as interpersonal dynamics, including power ones.
- Positionality statement. This is a kind of reflexive writing aimed at describing researcher's characteristics (such as age, social class, race, etc.) and beliefs (such as political, philosophical, etc.) which may influence the research.
- Narrative autobiography. This is also a kind of reflexive writing focussed on the researcher's life experiences and motivations which may influence the research, particularly the researcher's interaction with participants and understanding of participants' accounts. The aim is to better prepare the researcher for their interaction with participants, so it is best conducted when planning data collection/generation.
- Reader-response exercise. This addresses how the researcher's own assumptions and experiences may affect their interpretation of participants' accounts. It consists of including a layer of codes to indicate how the researcher reacts to and interprets participants' accounts in relation to their own background and personal history. As such, this practice is useful during data analysis and interpretation.
- Collaborative reflexivity. This entails engaging in reflexivity as part of a research team, with collaborators questioning assumptions and decisions. It assumes mutual trust, and a commitment to ethics and rigorous research, regardless of seniority or status. It applies to all stages of the research process.

### 1.5.3.3 Returning to the literature

Addressing novelty weaknesses means returning to your literature review as your research progresses and understanding increases to cast an increasingly critical eye over it, and possibly widen its scope to further related work which may have been published more recently. Each source should be reconsidered for what you thought it originally said and what you now think it says, using any difference\* to drive further reflection on your findings, methods, data generation, or even research problem.

As in the example of Section 1.5.2, while defending your claim or explaining your research design, your reader can be made aware of this process and how it has altered your research. Deepening the critical nature of your literature review allows your reader to understand that you are a reflective researcher and can turn any novelty weakness into a research strength!

\*In the best case, there will, of course, be no difference!

## 1.6 Your research strategy candidate list

While your own research strategy will be specific and unique to your project in the way it informs the research you will conduct, standard research strategies have emerged over time, influenced by research paradigms and research practice within specific disciplines. Each of them can be seen as a sort of ‘recipe’ which summarises common ways to conduct academic research: by adopting or combining some of these strategies, you can come up with your own specific instance for your project.

There are many standard research strategies in the literature, often with many variants: the 12 strategies we consider in this book are discussed in this section. The outcome of working through this section should be your choice of a candidate research strategy that:

- is a good fit for your research problem, i.e., that will allow you to develop a contribution to knowledge arising from your research problem
- makes the most of your current research skills and resources, i.e., the background knowledge and skills you bring to the research, the time that is available to you, and it fits with your research context.
- can be evaluated through a list of questions that could be asked of it by a knowledgeable evaluator, such as an examiner.

From the first two of these, you will gain an understanding of which steps you will be required to take to generate, analyse and interpret research data that, when complete, will make your contribution to knowledge.

Table 1.3: Research strategy choice

Research Strategy candidate	Considered	Excluded	Reason excluded
Survey	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	
Design and Creation	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	
Experiment	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	
Case study	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	
Action research	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	
Ethnography	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	
Systematic research	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	
Grounded theory	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	
Phenomenology	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	
Simulation	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	
Mathematical and logical proof	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	
Mixed methods	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	

From the third of these, you'll be able to structure your research report – your dissertation – by describing your answers to the evaluative questions.

The 12 candidate research strategies we consider are listed in Table 1.3. For each, after a brief description explaining the focus of the strategy, we will:

- describe what kind of knowledge contribution that can be made through it
- describe any variants that exist and the choices that constitute them
- describe the ways in which data is generated within the strategy
- describe how a contribution to knowledge using the strategy will be evaluated
- ask “Is this strategy right for me?”
- provide a number of references that give more detail, if you are seriously considering the strategy

compare to structure of each strategy section, at the end of editing

This is a lot to digest! Rather than going through all the information about each strategy in turn, we recommend you take the following steps to first reduce your list of candidate strategies from which to arrive at your chosen one.

**Step 1** Consider a strategy, and read its description and type of knowledge contribution that can be made through it. Compare these with your research problem to check whether that research strategy should be a candidate for your project. When you have done this, you should check its tickbox in the first column of Table 1.3 – I’ve considered the strategy. If there’s a clear mismatch with your research problem, you should check the tickbox in the second column – that the research strategy has been excluded – and give a reason why you have excluded it – say, the knowledge contribution it makes is not of the correct form – and you can move onto the next research strategy and repeat this step. The “Reason excluded” column will be used in the your dissertation to justify your choice of research strategy so think deeply about what you write here – you can use the text of the knowledge contribution and subsequent subsections to frame your reason for excluding it. Whatever you do, don’t leave it blank!

**Step 2** If you have not excluded the research strategy, then you should read further – next come the techniques you would have to use for data generation. This gives you another reason to exclude a research strategy – that you do not have access to the data generation techniques or the skills to perform them\*. If this analysis leads you to exclude the research strategy, complete<sup>†</sup> the second tickbox column and record the reason, then move on to the next research strategy going back to Step 1.

**Step 3** If you have not been able to exclude the research strategy, then you should read the “Evaluation” section<sup>‡</sup>. \*\*\* say something about reasons for exclusion.\*\*\*\* Once again, if you have excluded the strategy, tick the box in column 2, record the reason in column 3, then move on to the next strategy and restart the process.

**Step 4** If you have not been able to exclude the research strategy, it’s time to look at “Is this strategy right for me” section. This lists a number of other things you should consider that might lead you to exclude it. \*\*\*expand\*\*\* If that’s the case, as before, tick the box in column 2, record the reason in column 3, then move on to the next strategy and restart the process. This section may include alternative strategies you could consider next, otherwise, just proceed through the list.

Activity: Arriving at your candidate strategy list

#6

Copy Table 1.3 to your favourite word processor or spreadsheet application. Apply the process above until you have considered all the strategies, updating your table as you go along.

\*Of course, you will need to choose *one* research strategy, so be careful not to exclude something that wouldn’t be too difficult to access or to gain skills for.

<sup>†</sup>This time, the reason will be something to do with data generation techniques not accessible.

<sup>‡</sup>Perhaps taking notes on things you haven’t immediately understood.

Once you have exhausted all strategies, there are three possible outcomes:

- you find yourself with a single candidate research strategy, in which case you should go for it!
- you find yourself with a number of candidate research strategies, in which case you can make a choice based on your skillset, how much fun you think you could have applying it, or any other criteria you wish. You may also like to think about mixing up bits of each to give you your own mixed methods research strategy
- you find yourself without a choice, in which case you've probably been too picky... and you should try again – you can't do research without a research strategy and you're unlikely to come up with one not on this list – a completely novel one.

In all cases, you should discuss the outcome with your supervisor: as an expert in the research process and in your field of study, your supervisor will be able to advise on whether the choices you have made are appropriate, or even recommend strategies you should consider in details.

Activity: discuss your choice with your supervisor

#7

Title says it all, really.

Once you've narrowed down your list of candidate strategies sufficiently, you will need to deepen your understanding of each to decide which is the most applicable to your project, and how it should apply to your research, down to deciding specific collection and analysis methods and procedures.

Activity: Deepening your understanding of your chosen strategy

#8

For each candidate strategy you have arrived at, go to its "Further reading" section and access the academic literature cited to learn more about the strategy, and how you it may apply practically to your project.

#### Guidance

The references we have provided are only a starting point, so you may also explore other literature on the topic. Your supervisor will also be able to make suggestions for further reading.

As you read the literature, you should make notes of possible choices of data collection and analysis

methods, and how these may apply within your research. By the end of this activity, you should have a clear idea of which methods you are most likely to focus on in Stage 4 of your project.

## 1.6.1 Survey research

Survey research focuses on collecting, in a standardised and systematic fashion, up-to-date, real-world data from a sample of the population which is the focus of your research. Depending on the population and selected sample, large amounts of data may be collected.

### 1.6.1.1 Knowledge contribution

The contribution to knowledge of survey research is to uncover patterns that can be generalised from the sample to the target population.

A typical application of survey research is to predict the outcome of an upcoming election by polling data from a sample of voters.

### 1.6.1.2 Data generation and analysis

For your data collection, you need to identify upfront which data you will collect in a standardised matter, your target population and sample. The sample must be representative of the population in the sense that it should reflect accurately population characteristics.

Suggested by the name, a survey – a standardised set of questions administered to a number of respondents – allows the researcher to gather information about a population. Surveys can take many forms, from interviews to questionnaires to focus groups, but authors vary on what they consider appropriate\*. They can be administered via the internet (more traditionally by mail), over the phone, or even face-to-face. Mixed-mode surveys combine these options into more complex instruments, perhaps using a broader but simpler questionnaire to identify potential participants for a deeper face-to-face interview to follow.

In your data analysis, you seek patterns in the sample data collected to arrive at generalisations to the wider population. Statistical analysis is usually applied, possibly complemented by some thematic analysis, if open-ended questions are also included to elicit qualitative data.

\*Be sure to consider any supplied preparatory reading on the survey research strategy to ensure that you meet your supervisor's (or other's) expectations of what will be appropriate.

### 1.6.1.3 Evaluation

The following questions are typically asked of survey research: ([oates2008researching](#)):

1. Are the sampling frame\* and sampling techniques<sup>†</sup> used adequately explained?
2. Is the sampling frame appropriate? Does it provide sufficient coverage of the target population in terms of its characteristics of interest?
3. Is the sample representative? Typically, this relates to the question of whether the sample is sufficiently large and is as diverse as the population.
4. Are the data generation and analysis methods used appropriate? Has their design and application been adequately described?
5. Is the response rate adequate? How were non-respondents handled?
6. Are significant differences between respondents and non-respondents discussed?
7. Are generalisations made about the target population appropriate? What reasoning chains have led to such generalisations?
8. Are limitations or omissions in relation to any of the points above identified? Have their effect on the research and its outcomes been discussed?
9. Has the research strategy been successful in relation to the research aim and objectives?

### 1.6.1.4 Is this strategy right for me?

This strategy sets certain requirements of the researcher for them to be successful. These include that:

1. you must have access to an appropriate population sample, so that a sufficient volume of data can be collected and deep analysis performed. If this is not possible, for instance, because you have limited access to the population, you might like to consider case study research instead.
2. the phenomena and characteristics of the population which are of interest should be measurable through questions asked through a survey. If this is not the case then you're not going to be able to

\*The sampling frame is the set of individual units of the population from which the sample is drawn. Such individual units may be participants or data points in a data set.

<sup>†</sup>We will look at sampling in Stage 4.

make a contribution to knowledge about those phenomena or characteristics, and you might like to consider phenomena that can be measured, or a different population for which those phenomena can be measured.

3. while this strategy may produce lots of data in a relatively short time, the depth in the data can sometimes be lacking, given the focus on what can be measured. If deeper or more nuanced data is needed, then you may like to consider case study research instead.
4. conducting a survey means that you'll be analysing phenomena using point data, i.e., data that were collected at a point in time – that time at which the survey was answered. If your research requires longitudinal data, i.e., data that could change over time, then survey research becomes more difficult as you might need two or more surveys to collect the changing data. While it's not impossible to do this, it adds many complications: earlier participants might not be available for later surveys, their mindsets might have changed in the intervening period, etc. If this is the case, then you should consider whether the choice of phenomena is appropriate. Alternatively, you might like to consider one of the experimental research strategies described below.
5. while repeated surveys may be used to investigate causes and effects, the difficulty of doing this is one reason to reconsider phenomena or use an experimental research strategy instead. In all cases, surveys are not suitable to investigate the mechanisms behind cause and effect relationships.
6. conclusions from survey research rely on the veracity of the responses received. If there's any reason to doubt your respondents' honesty, additional care should be taken. There are techniques to avoid this (see <empty citation> for instance) but they add complexity to the strategy. If the development of a relationship of trust between researcher and population is critical to the research, then some form of ethnographic research might be more appropriate.

#### 1.6.1.5 Suggested further reading

dillman2014internet, kalaian2008encyclopedia

[add annotated bibliography](#)

#### 1.6.2 Design and creation research

The design and creation research strategy\* focuses on developing novel solutions to problems, a problem being a need in context. The solution should be an artefact, by which is meant anything designed and

\*AKA Design science research.

constructed by humans: this is a very broad definition, encompassing all that does not exist in nature, including any artificial object, construct, process, policy, model, method, etc.

### 1.6.2.1 Knowledge contribution

The contribution to knowledge is that which can be learned from the design and creation of the artefact as the solution to a problem. Knowledge contributions therefore come from an exploration of the problem, of the artefact itself, and its design, development, use, or other characteristics of the real-world problem solving process – for instance, whether it is linear or iterative, or the ways in which problem and solution understanding and validation are conducted.

This strategy leads to tangible artefacts which fit real-world contexts, and it is particularly suited to emerging and rapidly changing technology-related fields of study, where new problems emerge all the time and known solutions are sparse or become rapidly obsolete, hence necessitating continuous innovation. Lots of research in Computing is an expression of this strategy, for instance designing computational systems able to emulate human cognition, as is the case in AI.

### 1.6.2.2 Data generation and analysis

Data generation is through the problem-solving process of articulating the problem, and designing and constructing the solution artefact, with the interactions between actors (customers, clients, designers, others), technologies and/or knowledge as the source of data. Modelling techniques are widely applied, possibly informed by data collection techniques, like reviewing existing documents or interviews with stakeholders and experts or observation of people's behaviour. Prototyping is often used to produce proof-of-concept artefacts to test, demonstrate and improve the design.

Data analysis focuses on knowledge generated in the evaluation of both problem and artefact, including solution characteristics in relation to the extent they address the problem – the identified need in context. Specific evaluation techniques will depend on the nature of the artefact, and may include problem owner\*'s validation, and various forms of testing, or end-users' evaluation and feedback.

look more in the literature on this topic – DSR is not usually expressed in terms of data generation and analysis

### 1.6.2.3 Evaluation

Evaluation of the design and creation research strategy typically consists of the following questions ([oates2008researching](#)):

1. What is the novelty in the artefact, its design, development, and/or creation?

look up more in the literature

\*By problem owner we mean the person or people who have expressed the need to be addressed and are able to establish whether the solution has met it.

2. Are all stages of the problem solving process discussed, including interactions with stakeholders?
3. Are the data generation and analysis methods used appropriate and adequately described?
4. How is the artefact assessed? Are the assessment criteria documented? Are the criteria appropriate? How were they determined?
5. To which extent does the artefact address the problem? What evidence is provided?
6. Are there generalisations made from the design and creation of the artefact? Are they appropriate?
7. Are limitations or omissions in relation to any of the points above identified? Have their effect on the research and its outcomes been discussed?
8. Has the research strategy been successful in relation to the research aim and objectives?

#### 1.6.2.4 Is this strategy right for me?

For this strategy to be successful:

1. There must be demonstrable novelty. You must be able to argue that your research does not focus on ‘normal’ design, that is you are not simply re-implementing a solution to a well-known problem through a well-known development process and well-practiced skills\*. If you cannot clearly identify that novelty, then you will not be able to claim a contribution to knowledge.
2. There should be a problem owner which is separate from the researcher, and who sets the requirements and context for the artefact, with the researcher working on its development for that context to meet those requirements. If you do not have access to a real-world problem owner then this strategy is not applicable.
3. If the problem owner is, say, your employer or a business you are collaborating with, and for which addressing the problem is a matter of urgency, then you must establish whether it is feasible for you to deliver a novel solution in a timely fashion. Research always brings a level of uncertainty so that estimating time to success, or if success is even possible may not be easy. If you can’t ensure feasibility within the timescale of your project, then you may need to rethink the problem to address.

\*Learning new skills may be valuable from a personal perspective, but will not, by itself, make a contribution to knowledge – learning them means that they exist already!

it used to talk about client, but I think that's too specific; for instance, there may an open challenge expressed and acknowledged in the academic literature, in which case the problem owner may well be the community?

### 1.6.2.5 Suggested further reading

oates2008researching,brocke2020introduction

add references from DSR literature

## 1.6.3 Experimental research

Experimental research provides a controlled environment in which cause and effect relationships can be investigated, expressed as a hypothesis\*. The strength of an experiment is that it can reduce the influence of confounding factors on a cause-effect relationship.

The potential scope of application of the experimental research strategy is wide, ranging from scientific experiments under laboratory conditions controlled by the researcher to field experiments involving people in a real-world setting in which some factors may be outside the control of the researcher.

There are pros and cons of each. While laboratory experiments are very reliable due to the high level of control, they can be very artificial, with little or no relation to a real-world context. The opposite is true for field experiments.

\*A hypothesis is a tentative statement about the relationship between the phenomena to be tested in the experiment.

### 1.6.3.1 Knowledge contribution

The experimental research strategy contributes to knowledge through allowing cause and effect relationships between real-world phenomena to be established.

For instance, you may run an experiment to test whether the use of mobile phones just before going to sleep disrupts people's sleeping patterns.

### 1.6.3.2 Data generation and analysis

The experimental research strategy revolves around making an intervention within tightly controlled parameters. Observations and measurements are made of before and after the intervention and a comparison is made. Any difference is assumed associated with the intervention made.

For instance, in establishing a causal relation between the use of mobile phones and sleeping patterns, we could investigate the effect of the blue light emitted by a mobile phone on reducing the production of melatonin: this is the hormone which controls a person's sleep-wake cycle, so that its reduction is likely to disrupt a person's sleeping pattern. We would then measure the amount of melatonin produced by the body (these are our measurements) with and without exposure to the blue light of a mobile phone (this is the intervention), then analyse any difference to establish whether a causal relation exists.

So, you generate data through observations and measurements under different experimental conditions, and analyse your experimental data to explain causal relationships between the factors under study.

Depending on the complexity of the relationship between cause and effect, more or less complex experimental designs can be used. Those involving an inaccessible large population of individuals, as might be the case for a medical drug trial, use sophisticated techniques to choose representative samples, as well as sophisticated statistical analysis to test hypotheses.

However, even simpler “local” cause-effect hypotheses may rely on the availability of a fully equipped scientific laboratory to work.

### 1.6.3.3 Evaluation

Evaluation of the experimental research strategy typically consists of the following questions ([oates2008researching](#))

1. Was a hypothesis or predicted outcome of the experiment clearly stated?
2. Are the experimental variables manipulated or measured adequately described? What additional information is given?
3. What are the experimental procedures? Are they sufficiently detailed so that the experiment can be repeated by an independent third party?
4. In a social setting, what information is given about any participants and how they were found?
5. If a population sample was selected for the experiment, how representative is it? How was it selected?
6. What information is given about the apparatus and the process used to make measurements?
7. Are the statistical and other analyses convincing of the conclusions?
8. If statistical analysis is applied, is it adequate? Have appropriate statistical tools been used and their use justified?
9. Are limitations or omissions in relation to any of the points above identified? Have their effect on the research and its outcomes been discussed?
10. Has the research strategy been successful in relation to the research aim and objectives?

### 1.6.3.4 Is this strategy right for me?

Although widely applicable, the experimental research strategy has some counter-indications:

1. your research must be concerned with cause-and-effect relationships, for which it is possible to formulate hypotheses that can be tested
2. when the cause/effect relationship is very complex, for instance, depending on many factors, which cannot be accounted for in an experiment
3. when confounding factors and variables cannot be isolated, or no level of control is possible
4. when the experiment is a one-off and cannot be repeated
5. if you don't have access to specialised equipment required
6. if you don't have (or can't develop) statistical analysis skills required

### 1.6.3.5 Suggested further reading

oates2008researching, johannesson2014research, field2002design

## 1.6.4 Case study research

Case study research proceeds through the in-depth study of a notable instance of a phenomenon within its real-world context, particularly when it is not possible to separate the phenomenon from its context. The study of a single phenomenon requires the researcher to delve deeply into the context of that phenomenon, whether that be a project, an organisation, an engineered system, a policy, an economic or historical setting, or other. Case studies allow the researcher to study complex phenomena where several factors are at play, and to explore alternative meanings and explanations.

### 1.6.4.1 Knowledge contribution

Case studies focus on the ‘how?’ and ‘why?’, so that the knowledge contribution is a detailed insightful account of the phenomenon in its natural context, including when appropriate its relationships with other phenomena, and relevant processes and causal chains.

For instance, an example of case study could be a detailed investigation of the US Equifax social security breach of 2017, in which 143 million of their consumer records were stolen by hackers. This may be descriptive of the chain of events that took place or explicative of why things happened the way they did, or both.

What you seek with a case study spans from exploring possible questions or hypotheses for follow-up research, to explaining why certain outcomes have occurred, to investigate changes over time. Therefore, case studies come in many forms, including:

- exploratory: in which the researcher explores a research problem sufficiently to be able to conduct a further study. If you're considering studying for a PhD after your Masters research, then this might provide a head-start for your future research
- multiple: in which two or more instances of the phenomenon are chosen, which present both similarities and differences, to provide an even richer analysis of the phenomenon in its context
- longitudinal: in which the researcher considers the state of a phenomenon over time. This offers a natural storytelling context in which change in the phenomenon and/or its context can be analysed.

Combinations of the above are also often adopted, allowing even deeper exploration of both relationships between phenomena and how they develop over time or in response to contextual factors.

#### 1.6.4.2 Data collection and analysis

Case studies require you to collect empirical data from a great variety of sources, and to focus on depth rather than breadth. Therefore, all data collection techniques which allow you to do so may be used, from observation of the phenomena *in situ* and the context and processes in which it participates, to surveys of those that experience the phenomena in context (through interviews, questionnaires, *etc.*), allowing for multiple stakeholder views to be taken into account, to studying forensically existing documents that directly or indirectly describe the phenomena. This will lead to much data to be collected — mainly qualitative, but also quantitative to some extent, so that their analysis can be very rich and complex.

#### 1.6.4.3 Evaluation

An experienced researcher evaluating case study research will ask the following questions:

1. Have the criteria for choosing the particular case study been described and justified? Is the choice appropriate for the phenomenon studied?
2. Has the type of case study conducted been clearly described and justified?
3. Which data generation methods were used? Did they generate the right type of data about the phenomenon in sufficient depth and quantity?
4. How was a detailed investigation of the phenomena conducted? Was the researcher able to work within the case study context?
5. Does the research adequately describe the relationships between phenomena and the processes in which the phenomena participate?
6. How were ethical considerations taken into account, particularly in relation to participants and confidential information handled?
7. What generalisations were made from the case study research? Are they appropriate for the phenomenon and its context?
8. Are limitations or omissions in relation to any of the points above identified? Have their effect on the research and its outcomes been discussed?
9. Has the research strategy been successful in relation to the research aim and objectives?

#### **1.6.4.4 Is this strategy right for me?**

There are conditions for this strategy to be successful:

1. Case study research requires you to have access the phenomenon in its context to be able study it holistically and generate rich, detailed descriptions. As an example, if you're not a teacher, it might be difficult to gain access to a classroom to study student/teacher interactions. If access is an issue, then you should consider a different strategy, like systematic research reviews, which work from secondary sources.

2. Access to data sources, such as policy, processes or procedures within an organisation, may rely upon interaction with others. Even if you already have a good relationship with them they might not have the time to assist you sufficiently for your data generation to be successful within the timeline of your project. If time is an issue you should consider alternative sources, or even a different research strategy.
3. Being embedded within the context of the phenomenon, as might be the case, for instance, of an employee of an organisation, facilitates the investigation of the phenomenon. In this case, however, alternative research strategies are also applicable, such as ethnography or action research.
4. You must have the required knowledge to understand the phenomena under study. For instance studying the processes by which an engine controller in an aircraft is designed may require a detailed understanding of technical documentation, language and even mathematical or computational theories. Acquiring this knowledge from zero as part of your research may not be possible or may consume too much time\*. In such cases you should reconsider the phenomenon to study.
5. You need to make a judicious choice of case study to be able to make any generalisations about the phenomenon beyond the particular instance. If you don't have access to a significant instance of the phenomenon and generalisation is an important consideration, then you should consider a different research strategy.

#### 1.6.4.5 Suggested further reading

yin2009case, oates2008researching

### 1.6.5 Action research

Action research focuses on real-world situations for which improvement is sought through participatory and collaborative research. Its focus is on practice change, and continuous learning and improvement via an iterative ‘plan-act-reflect’ cycle which generates both knowledge and action.

#### 1.6.5.1 Knowledge contribution

Action research should make both a contribution to knowledge *and* to practice: an action researcher strives to generate knowledge and action to address important problems that people experience in their practices, so that the knowledge contributed originates in real-world needs. The researcher is an active participant in the

\*The success of your research will depend critically on climbing any learning curve quickly and successfully, even if that learning curve looks like El Capitan!

research, rather than solely an observer, alongside other collaborating practitioners: in fact, collaboration, alongside reflection, is a key element of this strategy.

The outcomes of action research may be new theories or methods alongside their direct implementation to improve practice within a specific professional or social setting. For example, in an educational setting, where this strategy is widely applied, a group of teachers may come together to study the composition and effectiveness of homework at each school grade, with a view to improve the balance between knowledge-based and practice-based learning.

### 1.6.5.2 Data generation and analysis

Similar to case studies, action research requires you, and your collaborators, to collect empirical data from a variety of sources to gain a deep understanding of the current practical situation to be improved. Common methods which allow you to do so include observations, surveys, focus groups and document reviews. In this case too, both qualitative and quantitative data are collected and analysed.

### 1.6.5.3 Evaluation

An experienced researcher evaluating action research will ask the following questions:

(oates2008researching)

1. Has the work used an iterative cycle of plan-act-reflect? How many cycles were conducted?
2. Was the research collaborative? Is the level of collaboration achieved appropriate?
3. Have the researcher's personal stake and potential biases been discussed?
4. Is there a reflection on self-delusion and group-think of the collaborators? How was this mitigated?  
Was the mitigation successful? If not, what was the outcome?
5. Has the research generated both knowledge and action leading to change? Are any claims made appropriate for action research context?
6. What data generation methods were used? Were they appropriate, and was enough data collected?
7. Are limitations or omissions in relation to any of the points above identified? Have their effect on the research and its outcomes been discussed?

8. Has the research strategy been successful in relation to the research aim and objectives?

#### **1.6.5.4 Is this strategy right for me?**

There are conditions for this strategy to be successful:

1. Action research focuses on action aimed at solving real-world problems in professional and other social contexts. If that's not the case for your research, then you should consider a different strategy.
2. The action researcher is expected to be embedded in the context in which the research takes place, and have a professional stake in addressing the problem beyond the research itself, for instance, as an employee of an organisation. If this is not the case for your project, then you should consider case studies instead.
3. Action research requires the involvement of other practitioners as collaborators in the research. This goes beyond being merely participants in surveys or observations: instead it requires a much higher commitment and continuous involvement in the study. If this is not possible, you should consider case study research instead.
4. Action research works through reflection, and continuous learning and improvement. As such, it does not exhibit the same level of scientific rigour as, for instance, an experiment. If scientific rigour is needed in your research, then you should consider a different strategy.
5. Action research may not be suitable to study complex causal-effect relationships. If you need to establish one such relationship, then you should consider the experimental strategy instead.
6. Generalisation can also be difficult to achieve with action research. If you need to be able to generalise your research widely, then consider case studies instead.
7. While action research is accepted and commonly applied in some social sciences, like education and healthcare, this may not be the case in your discipline. You should therefore check with your supervisor whether this strategy is acceptable or you should consider a different, strategy.

#### **1.6.5.5 Suggested further reading**

oates2008researching,johannesson2014research

## 1.6.6 Ethnography

The ethnography research strategy aims to study the culture of a group of people in their natural setting.

### 1.6.6.1 Knowledge contribution

Ethnography contributes to knowledge by providing a cultural characterisation of the group under study. Such characterisation should be one that the group members recognise and find familiar, and should be inclusive of various cultural facets, both social and economical, rather than focusing solely on one specific aspect.

While ethnography was originally developed within the discipline of anthropology, particularly for the study of indigenous populations, it can be applied widely in social settings, for instance to study the work culture within a particular profession or organisation, or the culture of online communities within social media.

### 1.6.6.2 Data generation and analysis

The researcher is expected to join the group and share what the group members' experience in their natural social setting in order to gain an insider's perspective and arrive at a rich, detailed characterisation. This requires the researcher to make detailed participant observations, appropriately recorded in field notes, accompanied by gathering detailed data through interviews and document reviews, linking them to the existing literature and reflecting on what they have learnt from their own experience, including their state of mind and emotional reactions. Data generation and analysis are predominantly qualitative.

### 1.6.6.3 Evaluation

An experienced researcher evaluating ethnography will ask the following questions:

1. Is the cultural characterisation obtained sufficiently rich to account adequately the group's beliefs, customs, behaviours and interpersonal relations?
2. Was adequate time spent with the group in their natural setting? What reflection has been done on such time?

3. Are the data generation methods that were used described? Did they lead to sufficient data having been collected?
4. Are field notes sufficiently rich and detailed? Do they capture people's actions and behaviours, and the motivating reasons?
5. Are data appropriately interpreted through a cultural lens?
6. Is the ethnographic characterisation a standalone description, or has it been linked to theory, other ethnographic studies or issues in other cultures?
7. Does the research include a reflexive account of the researcher?
8. Are limitations or omissions in relation to any of the points above identified? Have their effect on the research and its outcomes been discussed?
9. Has the research strategy been successful in relation to the research aim and objectives?

#### **1.6.6.4 Is this strategy right for me?**

There are conditions for this strategy to be successful:

1. Ethnography requires you to be a researcher located within the context of your situated research. This can take extensive amounts of time, such as might be the case if the context of your research is the organisation for which you work. However, if you have yet to have identified the context, or have yet to reach out to it, then this requirement may mean that ethnographic research will not be successful. If you are not already close to your context of research, you may wish to consider case study research instead.
2. Even if you are already located within the context of your ethnographic research, the context must be accepting of an ethnographic approach for your research to be successful. An organisation, for instance, in which there is a culture of strict compartmentalisation may not provide sufficient opportunities for ethnographic research.
3. In ethnographic research you allow the culture under study to determine the outcomes of the research, so you should approach it without any preconception or bias. If there is any possibility that you could

be biased to a particular outcome – as might happen if you feel you already know the outcome and are simply trying to confirm this – then ethnography is unlikely to lead to a successful outcome for your research. Any competent ethnographer will be particularly sensitive to expressions of bias, even if they aren't even intentional. Indeed, such bias may preclude any successful research strategy being applied.

4. Ethnography can lead to rich descriptions of complex social settings, and the characterisation produced may be very deep in representing a particular group culture. However, this may be difficult to generalise to other social groups or settings. If generalisation is an important aspect of your research, then you should consider case studies instead.

#### **1.6.6.5 Suggested further reading**

oates2008researching,johannesson2014research

### **1.6.7 Systematic research reviews**

A systematic research review is used to generate new insights from published work, linked to a clearly defined research problem or question.

#### **1.6.7.1 Knowledge contribution**

A systematic research review is meant to advance a field of study by providing insights from across the literature not contained in individual research papers. It uses a rigorous set of criteria to identify, select, and critically appraise relevant research from previously published studies in order to generate a scholarly synthesis of the evidence in relation to an explicit research problem or question.

For example, a systematic research review could be conducted to generate new insights on the effectiveness of a specific medical treatment, in order to advance evidence-based medicine: published articles on randomised controlled trials for that treatment could be reviewed and a judgement made based on a synthesis of the results from the accumulated body of work.

### 1.6.7.2 Data collection and analysis

In a systematic research review you only use evidence from published studies and rely on explicit, reproducible methods for identifying the relevant research to review. Specifically, you must decide upfront your research problem/question and the set of criteria you will use to select, compare and evaluate those studies, and combine their results.

The type of analysis you will conduct will depend on the nature of the evidence you are considering and combining. In *narrative reviews*, a narrative synthesis is produced of qualitative results, while in *meta-analysis*, statistical techniques are used to analyse and combine quantitative results. Combinations of the two are also possible.

### 1.6.7.3 Evaluation

Evaluation of the systematic research review will involve answers to the following:

1. Are the criteria they have used to select, evaluate and combine the published research explicit and reproducible? Were there any deviations from this protocol and, if so, are they explained, justified and documented?
2. Has the researcher accessed all relevant published research in the area?
3. Have the relative strengths and weaknesses of the research reviewed been described? To which extent have conflicts between sources been identified and, when appropriate, resolved?
4. In combining results from different studies, are significant differences between those studies appropriately acknowledged?
5. To which extent has a definitive synthesis from the literature been achieved? To which extent are the limits of current knowledge described?
6. To which extent has precision and/or generalisability been improved through the systematic research review?
7. In meta-analysis, to which extent have statistics been used to produce overarching conclusions? Were the studies sufficiently homogeneous for meta-analysis to be feasible?

8. If narrative reviews, to which extent potential bias has been acknowledged and mitigation measures applied?
9. Are limitations or omissions in relation to any of the points above identified? Have their effect on the research and its outcomes been discussed?
10. Has the research strategy been successful in relation to the research aim and objectives?

#### **1.6.7.4 Is this strategy right for me?**

Here are success criteria for this strategy:

1. A systematic research review is both systematic and extensive in its coverage of the topic of interest. This requires you to have a very good grasp of the subject area in order to establish appropriate criteria for the selection of all relevant published work, and this may lead to a large body of work to review. If you lack such knowledge of the field of study or the time to conduct an extensive review of the literature, then you should consider a different strategy.
2. A systematic research review assumes that there is a substantial body of knowledge already published from which new insights can be generated. In emerging research areas, this may not be the case, so that a systemic research review is unlikely to reach any meaningful synthesis. If there is paucity of literature on your chosen topic, then this strategy is not for you.
3. You need relatively easy access to the academic literature to be able to select the body of work to review, for instance, through a university library with a large research collection in your chosen discipline. If not, you will need to devise alternative ways to access the relevant literature, like contacting the author(s) directly. Although most authors will be happy to send their published research to you, the round trip time can introduce lengthy delays in the research process as you wait for the requested research to arrive. You may also need to be persistent to ensure that a busy author is aware of your research need. If you don't think you will be able to access easily a large proportion of the published work you need, you should rethink your research strategy.
4. Systematic research reviews are required to be transparent, reliable, and easy to replicate. You will be expected to have stated explicit inclusion and exclusion criteria so that another research would be able to arrive at the same collection of published work, and ensure that no inherent bias has influenced such

choice. Choosing appropriate criteria may be difficult and require you to iterate, starting perhaps from a broader focus, then narrowing it down as your research progresses. This, too, can be time consuming, so if your time is short, you should consider a more time-efficient strategy for your research, which may involve generating your own primary evidence instead.

### 1.6.7.5 Suggested further reading

wright2007write,moher2009preferred,pollock2018systematic

See **moher2009preferred** for PRISMA statement, a 27-item check-list. The aim of the PRISMA Statement is to help authors improve the reporting of systematic reviews and meta-analyses. PRISMA may also be useful for critical appraisal of published systematic reviews. However, the PRISMA checklist is not a quality assessment instrument to gauge the quality of a systematic review. <http://prisma-statement.org/prismastatement/checklist.aspx>

## 1.6.8 Grounded theory

Grounded theory aims at defining theories\* on social phenomena based† on empirical data. The intention is for the theory to emerge from the collection and analysis of the data, rather than using the data to confirm or disprove a previously formulated theory, or test a previously formulated hypothesis.

\*In simple terms, a theory is a system of ideas intended to explain something.

†I.e., grounded, hence the name!

### 1.6.8.1 Knowledge contribution

Grounded theory contributes knowledge in the form of theories concerning complex social phenomena, striving to provide explanations of people's choices and actions grounded in those people's own accounts and interpretations.

For example, grounded theory could be used to formulate theories on what motivates people to join or leave a particular organisation, or why they may feel fulfilled or frustrated in their workplace.

### 1.6.8.2 Data Collection

Grounded theory requires the systematic collection and analysis of data without assuming any preconceived belief or theoretical framework. The data are collected, coded and analysed to define emerging concepts, categories and relationships. The process is iterated with new data used to review and revise those concepts, categories and relationships until no more can be gained from further data collection.

### 1.6.8.3 Evaluation

“The success of a research project is judged by its products. Except in unusual instances when these are only orally presented, the study design and methods, findings, theoretical formulations, and conclusions are judged through publication. Yet, how are these to be evaluated and by what criteria? When judging qualitative research it is not appropriate, we have asserted, to use criteria ordinarily used to judge the procedures and canons of quantitative studies. It has been one of the aims of this paper to show how the grounded theory approach accepts the usual scientific canons but redefines them carefully to make them appropriate to its specific procedures. In the instance of any grounded theory study, the specific procedures and canons as described above should be part of its evaluation.” **corbin1990grounded**

**Are concepts generated?** “Since the basic building blocks of any grounded theory is a set of concepts grounded in the data, the first question to be asked of any publication is: Does it generate (via coding-categorizing activity) or at least use concepts, and what is or are their source or sources? If concepts are drawn from common usage (such as, “uncertainty”) but not put to technical use, then these are not concepts in the sense of being part of a grounded theory, for they are not actually grounded in the data themselves.” **corbin1990grounded**

**Are the concepts systematically related?** “The name of the scientific game is systematic conceptualization through conceptual linkages. So, the questions to ask here of a grounded theory publication are whether such linkages have been made and do they seem to be grounded in the data? Furthermore, are the linkages systematically carried out? As in other qualitative writing, the linkages are unlikely to be presented as a listing of hypotheses or in propositional or other formal terms but will be woven throughout the text of the publication.” **corbin1990grounded**

**Are there many conceptual linkages and are the categories well developed? Do they have conceptual density?** “If there are only a few specified conceptual relationships, even if grounded and identified systematically, this leaves something to be desired in terms of the overall grounding of the theory. A grounded theory should be tightly linked, both in terms of categories to their subcategories and between categories in the final integration in terms of the paradigm features conditions, context, action/interaction (strategies) and consequences. Also categories, as mentioned in the body of the paper, should be theoretically dense (have many properties that are dimensionalized). It is the tight linkages, in terms of the paradigm

features and density of the categories, that give a theory its explanatory power. Without these, the theory is less than satisfactory.” **corbin1990grounded**

**Is there much variation built into the theory?** “Some qualitative studies report only about a single phenomenon and establish only a very few conditions under which it appears, and specify only a few actions/interactions that characterize it, and a limited number or range of consequences. By contrast, a grounded theory monograph should be judged in terms of the range of its variations and the specificity with which these are spelled out in relation to the data that are their source. In a published paper, the range of variations touched upon may be more limited, but the author should at least suggest that the fully study included their specification.” **corbin1990grounded**

**Are the broader conditions that affect the phenomenon under study built into its explanation?**

“The grounded theory mode of research requires that the explanatory conditions brought into analysis are not restricted to those that seem to have immediate bearing on the phenomenon under study. That is, the analysis should not be so “microscopic” as to disregard conditions that derive from more “macroscopic” sources: for instance, those such as economic conditions, social movements, trends, cultural values, and so forth.

These also must not simply be listed as background material but directly linked to phenomena through their effect on action/interaction, and through these latter to consequences. Therefore, any grounded theory publication that either omits these broader conditions or fails to explicate their specific connections to the phenomenon(a) under investigation, falls short in its empirical grounding.” **corbin1990grounded**

**Has “process” been taken into account?** “Identifying and specifying change or movement in the form of process is an important part of grounded theory research. Any change must be linked to the conditions that gave rise to it. Process may be described as stages or phases and also as fluidity or movement of action/interaction over the passage of time in response to prevailing conditions.” **corbin1990grounded**

**Do the theoretical findings seem significant and to what extent?** “The question of significance is generally thought of in terms of the relative importance of a theory for stimulating further studies and for giving useful explanations of a range of phenomena. We have in mind here, however, the adequacy of a study’s empirical grounding in relation to its actual analysis insofar as this combination of activities succeeds or fails, in some degree, at producing useful theoretical findings. If the researcher simply follows the

grounded theory procedures/canons without any imagination or insight into what the data are reflecting - because he or she fails to see what they are really saying except in terms of trivial or well known phenomena - then the published findings can be judged as failing on this criterion. Recollect that there is an interplay between the researcher and the data, and no method, certainly not the grounded theory one, can insure that the interplay will be creative. This depends on three characteristics of the researcher: analytic ability, theoretical sensitivity, and sensitivity to the subtleties of the action/interaction (plus sufficient writing ability to convey the findings). Of course, a creative interplay also depends on the other pole of the researcher-data equation: the quality of the data collected or utilized. An unimaginative analysis may in a technical sense be adequately grounded in the data, but actually it is insufficiently grounded for the researcher's theoretical purposes. This is because the researcher either does not draw on the fuller resources of data or fails to push data collection far enough.” **corbin1990grounded**

“This double set of criteria, for the research process and for the empirical grounding of the theoretical findings, bear directly on the issues of how verified any given grounded theory study is and how this is to be ascertained. When the study is published,, if components of the research process are clearly laid out and if there are sufficient cues in the publication itself, then the presented theory or theoretical formulations can be assessed in terms of degrees of plausibility. We can judge under what conditions the theory might fit with “reality”, give understanding, and be useful (practically and in theoretical terms). Researchers themselves can be rendered more aware of precisely what their operations have been and the possible inadequacies of these operations. In other words, they would be able to identify and convey what were the limitations of their study.” **corbin1990grounded**

#### 1.6.8.4 Is this strategy right for me?

“Grounded theory is an innovative way to gather qualitative data that can help introduce new thoughts, theories, and ideas into academic literature. While it has its strength in allowing the “data to do the talking”, it also has some key limitations – namely, often, it leads to results that have already been found in the academic literature. Studies that try to build upon current knowledge by testing new hypotheses are, in general, more laser-focused on ensuring we push current knowledge forward. Nevertheless, a grounded theory approach is very useful in many circumstances, revealing important new information that may not be generated through other approaches. So, overall, this methodology has great value for qualitative researchers, and can be extremely useful, especially when exploring specific case study projects. I also find it to synthesize well with action research projects.” **drew202310-grounded**

- Without extant data, grounded theory cannot get started, use Experiment instead

- A theory is not the goal state: if no theory is required, use ethnography instead
- the research question is too focussed\*:

\*Meaning?

Activity: Considering case study research

#9

Having read the above subsection, do you consider case study research to be a serious candidate for your research strategy?

#### Guidance

If so, add the following references to your list of reading: **smith1997understanding; corbin1990grounded; strauss1998basics; gibson2013rediscovering; charmaz2014constructing**

## 1.6.9 Phenomenology

“Phenomenology is a research strategy that focuses on the perceptions and experiences of people as well as their feelings and emotions.” **johannesson2014research**

### 1.6.9.1 Knowledge contribution

“The goal of a phenomenological study is not to establish cause and effect relationships or to describe a population through statistical means. Instead, it aims to describe and understand the lived experiences of people and thereby provide insight about the topic being studied.” **johannesson2014research**

### 1.6.9.2 Data Generation

Data generation for the Phenomenology research strategy is mainly through the long, unstructured interview, designed for the subject to: “really tell their own story without being unduly influenced by the researchers.” **johannesson2014research**

“interviews, follow-up interviews (to address any gaps in data like misunderstandings, missing information, unclear information, etc.), focus groups, field notes, journaling, audio recording, and video recording. A combination of instruments is ideal rather than one so that findings are rich, but dissertation students

should also be realistic about choosing various instruments so that they do not overwhelm themselves with unrealistic expectations.” **office2020the-phenomenological**

### 1.6.9.3 Evaluation

(**office2020the-phenomenological**)

- Will the experience as described be understandable to any reader and can be identified by anyone who has had that particular experience?
- Is the description of the phenomenon clearly presented so that experience differs from other experiences that are similar? **what does this mean?**
- Are quotations from the data used to demonstrate the emergence of themes?
- Is there a discussion of discrepancies among participants and how those discrepancies were factored in data analysis?
- Have meaning units, themes, and summaries been described?
- Are meaning units grouped together to form themes?
- Are themes combined to form a composite summary of the phenomenon?
- Are quotes used to support the findings?
- Research participants will have their individual ways of experiencing a certain phenomenon. Have you looked for these common to all or most of the participants and not clustered meaning units together where significant differences exist?

and the research process

- Bracketing/Epoché/Phenomenological reduction - have you discussed how judgments were suspended to focus on analysis of experience. How did you use suspend your judgments to focus on the analysis of participants' experiences?

- Horizon - during data analysis, what was your present experience, your horizon? The horizon cannot be bracketed so you will need to discuss that not everything could have been realized by you, the researcher. This discussion might also lead into a discussion about future research implications in Chapter 5.
- Intentionality - discuss your level of scrutiny of the data you analyzed. How did you keep your focus on the topic you were studying? Perhaps you slowed down and dwelled on each narrative and did not pass over the details of the account as if you understood it already.
- Dasein - How has your Dasein (being-there) affected the research? How did the research affect your Dasein?
- Fore-sight/Fore-conception - What was your preconceived knowledge about the phenomenon you were studying?
- Hermeneutic Circle - How did your understandings revised as you analyzed the data?

and (**office2020the-phenomenological**)

- have you described the “what, when, where, and how” of the study? What has been done? When the steps were sequenced? Where each step happened? How each step happened?
- have you described where data will be collected? Who collected the data? How often and how much data was collected? How long it took to collect the data? How the data was recorded? (ex: transcriptions, video recordings, audio recordings) Were there follow ups to interviews?

#### 1.6.9.4 Is this strategy right for me?

- is your audience expecting scientific rigour? If so, choose ???
- does your data (source) allow analysis above the data, or will the outputs be mostly descriptive?
- are you short of time for data collection? If so, consider ???
- do you appreciate the value of deep philosophical discourse?
- ...

## Activity: Considering phenomenology

#10

Having read the above subsection, do you consider phenomenology to be a serious candidate for your research strategy?

## Guidance

If so, add the following references to your list of reading: [merleau1956phenomenology](#); [anderson1991qualitative](#); [smith2018phenomenology](#); [shudak2018phenomenology](#); [academic-educational-materials2019understanding](#); [office2020the-phenomenological](#); [groenewald2004a-phenomenological](#); [hycner1985some](#)

## 1.6.10 Simulation

The simulation research strategy builds an explicative mechanism to imitate the behaviour of a real-world artefact.

### 1.6.10.1 Knowledge contribution

“[S]imulation helps answer the question ‘What if?’” [dooley2017simulation](#)

### 1.6.10.2 Variants

The three main schools of simulation practice are ([dooley2017simulation](#)):

- Discrete event simulation, which involves modeling the organizational system as a set of entities evolving over time according to the availability of resources and the triggering of events.
- System dynamics, which involves identifying the key “state” variables that define the behavior of the system, and then relating those variables to one another through coupled, differential equations.
- Agent-based simulation, which involves agents that attempt to maximize their fitness (utility) functions by interacting with other agents and resources; agent behavior is determined by embedded schema which are both interpretive and action-oriented in nature.

### 1.6.10.3 Data Generation

“Simulation enables studies of more complex systems because it creates observations by ‘moving forward’ into the future, whereas other research methods attempt to look backwards across history to determine what happened, and how.” **dooley2017simulation**

Depending on the context in which the simulation is studied or used. May include:

- observations, interviews, questionnaires, documents, in-depth description when supporting social objectives
- accuracy, predictive capability, when used to model real-world processes – think weather forecasting
- ...

### 1.6.10.4 Evaluation

For computer simulations:

- Good development: has a documented set of requirements been maintained? Has a change control process been implemented? Is there a corresponding document (or version) control process.
- Has the architecture been documented? What is its relationship to the model?
- Have a variety of testing methods, including code walk-throughs, scenario testing, and user testing been used to establish code quality?
- Was a project plan for coding and testing developed?
- how close is the simulation’s behaviour to the “real” answer? Do the results make sense?
- has the simulation been compared to any extant quantitative behaviour available? Does it match exactly, distributionally (a variable of interest has statistically similar characteristics), or pattern-wise (variables are generally related to one another in a valid manner, but perhaps differ from reality)?
- Which experimental set-up was used? Was it appropriate?
- Have observations from analysis been noted, and results discussed in order to sense-make? Has over-interpretation of the results been avoided so that retrofitting to theories is avoided?

For simulation:

- ...

#### 1.6.10.5 Is this strategy right for me?

Do I already have the computing/mathematical/statistical skills that I need to underpin the research?

Do I have access to documentation sufficient to allow a simulation to be built?

Activity: Considering simulation

#11

Having read the above subsection, do you consider simulation to be a serious candidate for your research strategy?

Guidance

If so, add the following references to your list of reading: **dooley2017simulation**

### 1.6.11 Mathematical and logical proof

“A proof is a rigorous deductive argument that demonstrates the truth of a certain proposition.” **johannesson2014research**

#### 1.6.11.1 Knowledge contribution

Establishes the absolute truth status of a proposition.

#### 1.6.11.2 Data Generation

No data generation, although iteration and extensive exploration through examples may be needed to identify the extent to which proof is possible.

#### 1.6.11.3 Evaluation

Formal evaluation by the community of mathematicians within some logical system. Potential for automated checking should computational tools exist.

#### 1.6.11.4 Is this strategy right for me?

Do I have a formal background in logic? One way to determine whether my background is suitable would be to read the first few pages of [lakatos2015proofs\\*](#) and consider my level of engagement with the process of proof.

Do I have a community of mathematicians that would be willing to check my proof as it develops?

Is the situation to which I want to apply formal proof amenable to formalisation? If not, then the notion of formal proof might not apply. Even if a formalisation is possible, does it already exist or would I also need to formalise the area first. If you have difficulty answering this question, it may be that this research strategy is not for you.

Am I trying to predict future behaviours of a system? If so, mathematical, statistical or computational modelling might be a better option.

Activity: Considering mathematical and logical proof

#12

Having read the above subsection, do you consider mathematical and logical proof to be a serious candidate for your research strategy?

Guidance

If so, add the following references to your list of reading: [Kleene1964introduction](#); [lakatos2015proofs](#); [antonini2011examples](#)

#### 1.6.12 Mixed methods research

“Mixed methods research is the type of research in which a researcher or team of researchers combines elements of qualitative and quantitative research approaches (e.g., use of qualitative and quantitative viewpoints, data collection, analysis, inference techniques) for the broad purposes of breadth and depth of understanding and corroboration.” [johnson2007toward](#)

##### 1.6.12.1 Knowledge contribution

The Mixed methods research strategy combined the knowledge contributions of each method used. In addition, “[the methods] can be adapted, altered, or synthesized to fit the research and cost situations of the

\*Up to page 9 is available through google books

study (modified form mixed methods).” **johson2007toward**

“[P]lanfully [combining] methods of different types (qualitative and quantitative) to provide a more elaborated understanding of the phenomenon of interest (including its context) and, as well, to gain greater confidence in the conclusions generated by the evaluation study.” **johson2007toward**

### 1.6.12.2 Data Generation

Those of the individual methods, combined with those of the methods mixed. The latter form provides for triangulation: “the combination of methodologies in the study of the same phenomenon” **denzin1978research**: “If a proposition can survive the onslaught of a series of imperfect measures, with all their irrelevant error, confidence should be placed in it. Of course, this confidence is increased by minimizing error in each instrument and by a reasonable belief in the different and divergent effects of the sources of error.” **webb2000unobtrusive**

### 1.6.12.3 Evaluation

#### 1.6.12.4 Is this strategy right for me?

Mixed methods research requires competence in more than a single research method, which takes time; it is unlikely that at this stage in your research career you will have a developed understanding sufficient to apply the mixed methods research strategy. However, it may be that your work is part of broader mixed methods research, perhaps led by your supervisor. If that is the case, then refer to the description of the particular method you are being asked to work with.

Even if you are contemplating mixed methods research, perhaps as an extended research agenda leading to a PhD, at this point it may be that a focus on a single method as part of the mixed methods research will achieve what is required. If this is that case, then you should discuss with your supervisor.

## 1.7 What to do now

Activity: Mixed methods follow up

#13

Schedule some time with your supervisor to discuss the thought processes and outcomes of choosing a research strategy.

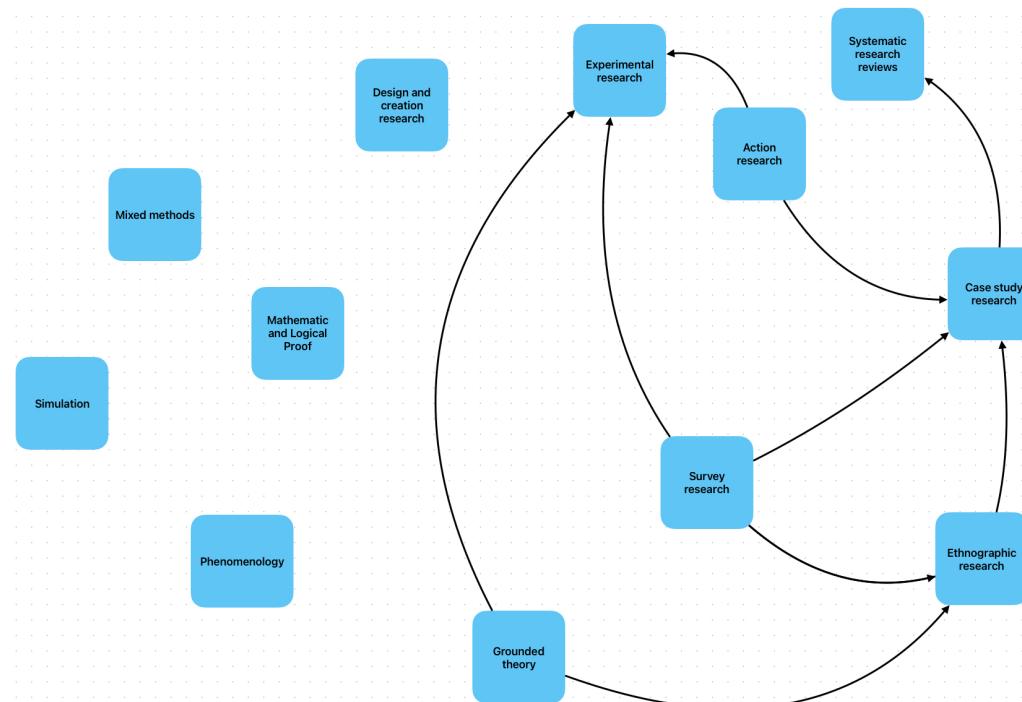


Figure 1.2: Research strategy choices

### 1.7.1 For your chosen research strategy

Activity: Dissertation structure

#14

Whichever tool you've chosen in which to write your dissertation, create chapters entitled "research strategy", "method", and "Evaluation".

#### Guidance

For the research strategy chapter, make notes from the paper you've read on the general form of the research strategy.

For the method chapter, add details on the methods that are used in the research strategy. For a complex strategy such as ethnography, you may not use all of them, but you will need to be explicit – when you come to complete it – as to which you have excluded and the reasons for their exclusion.

For the evaluation chapter, create subsections for each of the questions of your chosen research strategy from the lists above.