Sage Research Methods

Planning and Practicalities

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Planning and Practicalities

Introduction

This stage will:

- Allow you to plan your research effectively
- Define and explain the different phases of a research project
- Provide helpful suggestions for when things don't go according to plan

Practicality—the actual, messy, real business of getting good research done—matters just as much as the methods or approaches that you choose. We can have a well-developed and appropriate methodological position and still make a complete mess of getting our research done. The reverse is equally true. Research is a craft. We can be very competent research craft workers, but if we don't know how we are making and justifying our claims for knowing the world, then our research will go nowhere useful.

This section is about being a good craftsperson—our competence in the practical side of things when we do research. A lot of this is common to any good work in a craft, whether as a stonemason, potter, surgeon, gardener, or social researcher.

How Do I Plan the Various Stages of My Research Project?

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[MUSIC PLAYING] PATRICK BRINDLE: Thank you, Graham Crow, for agreeing to talk to me today. If you could quickly introduce yourself and tell us a little bit about what you're going to talk about. GRAHAM CROW: OK, my name is Graham Crow. I'm a Professor of Sociology at Southampton

were I was a Deputy Director of the National Center for Research Methods, which is a economic and social research council funding center for pushing forward methodological knowledge and innovation. And I'm going to be talking about the process of research and how one might go about planning it and also some of the pitfalls to avoid in that process.

PATRICK BRINDLE: Thank you very much. So if you're faced with me as a new PhD student, and I want to start a plan, a study involving family life. What are the first considerations that I need to bear in mind as I [INAUDIBLE] my study?

GRAHAM CROW: Yeah. Well, if you look at any number of textbooks and so on, they will have a whole series of points about stages of research to go through and they would all emphasize the importance of being clear about what you're research question is. So it's tempting to race ahead

and think that your research question will come to you in the course of time,

but the number of people who have looked back, who've raced ahead, who looked back and said, "I wish I'd taken a bit more time to be clearer about what I wanted to do because now I find that I wished I'd been asking slightly different research questions. Most of these do get modified and changed to some extent.

But it's important I think not to give into the temptation to rush into the field before you know or have a very good idea of what sorts of research questions you want to ask. Once you've got that idea, then it's important to think about how you're going to be conducting your research. So there's a whole set of questions about the methodology

that you'll be employing. I use methodology as plural because it is common for people to use a range of methods, mixed methods. It's increasingly popular in contemporary research. And having judging from the range of methods available

and thinking about an appropriate combination, then one is faced with all the practical questions about something, about who it is that is going to be a part of the research process. And there are some challenges that can be anticipated. And if you anticipate a challenge, then you're more

likely to overcome it. So thinking about research and to family and community, which

is an area about which I know a reasonable amount, one of the challenges is that your sample is not necessarily going to be representative. So you may find that some people are more prepared to talk to you than others. And that can be a gender issue.

It's a common point that's made, for example, that women are much more happy to talk to researchers. The men, in relation to family and community matters. And that's even for researchers who've anticipated that problem and tried to put measures in place to get a more [INAUDIBLE] of men and women. They still find that women are more forthcoming than men.

There are also groups of people who collectively are in those hard to reach groups or hard to hear groups, depending on exactly what type of research you're doing. And these may be people who are less readily accessible. They may be people whose first language

isn't the language of the research process, who may be more reluctant to be involved, and maybe people who are of no fixed address, who are less likely to come up in various sampling processes and so on. So it's important to think as well about who it is that you're getting in that research and to try as hard as possible to give everybody

the chance at being heard. There's also a point that's been made by Jeff Payne about community research where he says that, a lot of community researchers tended to be overpopulated by nice people and that, so the number of pieces of research in the community field don't really-- they can't seem to be too good to be true.

And people want to ask the question, well are there any nasty people who pract-- have offensive views about race or gender or some other issue? And that, again, is an interesting point because it suggests that when we go back later in our data it's important that we don't gravitate towards those people who are most like hassle, who're

most likely to make life easy for us as researchers. And that's a point that he made a long time ago that stayed with me. [MUSIC PLAYING]

There is still, of course, the whole question of access. And that can involve negotiation with gatekeepers. And again, there are various useful points that are made in a number of contexts about how to get on the side of people who maybe important as intermediaries, in order to gain access

to particular groups. So for example, in schools if you're researching children then you'll need to have the school authorities on site. Or if you're researching people in care homes, then, again, authorities there will be

key to gaining access there.

And in community research, these points of access, they come informally. [INAUDIBLE] Frankenberger, is a classic community researcher talks about when he was doing his first field work in the Welsh parish back in the 1950s. That initially is an outside, he wasn't Welsh and he didn't speak Welsh.

And the point that he makes is that it wasn't that he got involved with very simple activities around football, that he was accepted enough to be then someone that it was OK for local people to talk to. So he gives a graphic account of sitting on the hillside outside the village and wondering what was going on in the community, which he could see but was aware that he was on the outside of.

So there were various ways of getting from the outside to the inside. And then, depending on which methods you're using, the field work can take short-term or longer periods, or work in archives work with secondary data and so on. But if we think about planning research,

it's important that enough time is built in for not just the collection of data, but also the analysis of data. And it's very easy to underestimate the amount of time that can actually take. [MUSIC PLAYING]

Building in time is an important of the planning process. And analyzing and also writing, generally-- in my experience-- take longer than people imagine that they will do. So it's a good idea when planning to build in a contingency period for things maybe not going quite as smoothly as one anticipates and that can be for reasons of illness.

It can just be for reasons of things taking longer to fall into place in the process of collecting, analyzing, and then writing up data. It's hard to generalize because everybody works in slightly different ways, but those are points that are important. And if we then think we've got a reasonable draft of what

we want and putting it in front of other people, we should anticipate that there's other people that have a number of comments on their-- [INAUDIBLE] We might have to pick up from anticipating people's comments. Yep. So we should anticipate when we give up work in draft

to other people that they will have a number of comments, and it's very rare that academics and other researchers will say, this is fine. It needs no changes whatsoever. [MUSIC PLAYING]

The other thing, I think, that sometimes get missed out is ethics and, of course, increasingly recently, ethical procedures have become much more formalized. So it is important in getting started in thinking about

ethics very early on in the process because it can be that the process of gaining ethical approval can take a fair amount of time--

for good reasons, because we are talking about doing research that will stand up to scrutiny and will be regarded as good practice. The other two things that, perhaps, don't so much mention in accounts of research planning are, first of all, archiving.

Using secondary data is increasingly common in research, and all the people involved in working with archive data say that it's crucial to have people thinking about how their data are going to be archived once the individual project is finished with them

right from the outset. A number of people have realized quite late on that other people-- other researches-- made in subsequent years wish to work with that material, and if you think about it from the outset then you may find that actually you can't archive the data, or at least can't archive the data as well as you would

be able to if the planning of that process had been there from the outset. [MUSIC PLAYING] So Graham Crow, you've mentioned Timescapes. Yes, Timescapes is a ESRC-funded project

on longitudinal qualitative research, and one of the things that they have

been very mindful of is the importance of archiving of their data so that other people subsequently can use that material. And Libby Bishop, in particular, has been important in that process in identifying all sorts of ways in which it's useful to have

not just the collected materials, but also the metadata-- the information about researches and so on-- that subsequent researches going back to that material may find useful in helping to understand how the data were collected and how they were analyzed and the conclusions that were drawn. But that's true not only for archiving

of qualitative material-- and I think if we think about secondary data analysis in general, then that's going to become increasingly important. Already it's important that the research councils are saying, we want to get the best value for money from materials that have been collected-- so thinking about the research process and making sure that the materials are collected that may

be of use to subsequent generations of researchers. That's a very interesting area in which there are all sorts of developments taking place. So that's one thing that, perhaps, wouldn't be in every textbook account of the research process about archiving. [MUSIC PLAYING]

Yeah, so collaborative research is where people work with groups like,

say, community partners, and it's obviously important for people to feel that it is genuinely collaborate and participatory for people to be involved from the outside rather than being told what the research questions are or told how the research will be undertaken.

That can be quite challenging. It can be quite time consuming, but it's generally regarded by its supporters as being worthwhile in terms of better data quality being accessed. And also that's not just better data quality with people being free with their thoughts on particular issues, for example

if we're talking about ethnography or interviews, but also as a way of meeting the challenge of declining participation rates. So increasingly in research, it's hard to get people to take part. One of the arguments to put to people to say why they should take part is if it's a joint venture, where they have some degree of ownership.

And although the argument is sometimes made that this can be very time-consuming and a lengthy process, there is a study that was undertaken, led by Eric Lassiter in the United States, where he went back to Muncie, Indiana-- the home of the Middletown Studies-- and, in a book called The Other Side of Middletown, which came out in 2004-- he was able to work with that city's

African-American population. And his students collected most of the data and worked collaboratively with members of the community on their initial findings on the issues, like which photographs to use on the cover of the book, for example. And that didn't take a long time. You might imagine that something that had 70 or 80 participants

would take years to come out. In fact, the data were collected in 2003 and they were analyzed and discussed with members of the community. And the book was published the following year. So it is possible for collaborative work to come out fairly quickly. And that's regarded as one of the exemplars in the field of community research, working in a collaborative way to give voice to people

who, in previous research in that particular location, had been pretty much ignored. So there are examples of collaborative work working well. And, as I said, it's something that you won't necessarily find in some of the more traditional methodology textbooks, but it is something that if it's going to be part of your research approach, it needs to be there from the outset--

and right through to the conclusion, so that collaboration also means not just having thought from people in the data collection, but also in the analysis and in looking at the way in which the research has been written

out and disseminated. [MUSIC PLAYING]

Get things sorted out before you dive into doing your research. Think about the process like painting a room. First, you put things out that would get in your way. Second, you cover up the things you can't move. Then you get your tools and materials ready, cleaning your brushes if you need to and so on. Before putting any paint on your brush you go over the area to be painted, cleaning it, filling in bits that need to sorted, and making the surface fit for the application of paint. Then, and only then, you paint.

Preparation is vital. The important things are:

- **Plan the work**: It is a project and must be planned.
- **Timetable**
- **Get your tools ready**: Be familiar with the techniques you are going to use and have all the equipment you need to enable you to use them.
- **Get access**: You need to be able to get into the context(s) where you are going to do the work. If you have done this, then you are prepared to go to work.

How Should I Go About Working On My Research Project Once I Have Prepared?

- **Steady does it best**

The painting a room metaphor is useful here. Take your time to do the job thoroughly. You should have timetabled things so you can work systematically. This doesn't always hold with social research because sometimes you have to be doing multiple things at once. But if you try to do too many things you will lose control.

- **Do it well**

  You can slap paint on a wall but the result will not be pretty. Careful brushstrokes get you a good-looking painted surface; the same goes for research. If you want to make knowledge claims, then the work to support them has to be done well. That said, you should not strive for perfection! The best can be the enemy of the good: You spend too much time striving to get everything just right when you would be better devoting the effort to something else.

How Do I Finish Up My Research Project?

If you employ a craftsperson to do work in the house, you want the place left tidy—no mess! Some things involved in tidying up are:

- **Writing up**

  Of course, writing up your work is part of the actual craft job, but it is also a tidying up process. When you write up your research, you assemble the elements you have made into a coherent whole and polish the rough edges so that the answer to your research question is clear and understandable.

- **Meeting obligations**

  There are other aspects to tidying up. You need to meet obligations you have made in the act of doing social research. There can be considerable resentment when researchers insert themselves into a social context, make use of people to get information about the world, and then just disappear. Have a withdrawal strategy which treats the people who have helped you the way you would want to be treated yourself.

- **Dissemination**

  Another element of finishing off is dissemination. Social research is a craft, but it is also an art, so you want to set about showing off the thing you have made.

Practicality is about knowing what you are doing, being organized to do it, and getting it done. Think like a craftsperson and you will not go wrong.

Read more about research timetables

Read more about writing up my research

Read more about disseminating my research

How Do I Work With a Supervisor?

If you are an undergraduate doing a dissertation, a Master's student doing a dissertation, or a research student doing a PhD, you will have at least one supervisor.

It is normal in the UK for PhD students to have two supervisors, and there are particular issues which arise in this case.

What Is the Job of the Supervisor?

Your supervisor is there to help you do your work, but not to do the work for you. In most cases the topic of your research will be one you have chosen yourself, although some PhD students will be working on a topic devised by their supervisor(s). The first task of the supervisor is to assess the feasibility of the project, which they will do on the basis of your outline research proposal. This often includes authorization in relation to ethical issues.

When Should I Hold Meetings With My Supervisor?

Supervisors should meet you regularly. A good supervisor will:

- Review what you have done since your last meeting
- Allow you to present issues and problems for discussion
- Conclude with an agreement as to what you will be doing in the period up to the next supervision.

How Should I Keep a Record of Meetings With My Supervisor?

A record should be made of the supervision, and agreed between supervisor and student. This might sound overly formal, but a simple and practical way to do this is for the student to keep notes during the supervision and use them as the basis

of an email to the supervisor, summarizing the meeting. The supervisor then confirms or modifies the email in response. Both student and supervisor can file these emails as a record which enables them to keep track of the whole process.

What Are the Different Roles for Supervisors?

There is a difference between supervision of undergraduate and Master's students' work and that of research students.

- **Undergraduate and Master's student's supervisor**
  It is usual for the undergraduate and Master's student's supervisor also to be an examiner of the work. Therefore there is usually a limit placed on the amount of work which the supervisor can read and comment on. They certainly should comment on the plan, the literature review/problematic, and the methods section, but they might not go beyond this.

  There is generally a specific protocol in place in terms of how much of your research project can be read by your supervisor before final submission, because an objective is to ensure equity among students reading for classified awards. This may also specify exactly the number of supervision sessions which the student can receive. You should familiarize yourself with this information, which is usually found in a dissertation handbook.

- **Research students**
  In some universities supervisors are part of the examining team for a PhD student, but this is not usual. In any event, the supervisor(s) of a research

student should read and comment on the whole of the thesis before submission. There is not usually a formal specification of how many supervision sessions a research student can have. There will be a research student's handbook, which outlines the expectations students and supervisors will have of each other and you should familiarize yourself with this.

- **Doing a project designed by your supervisor(s)**
  This is the normal basis on which students do PhD research in the natural sciences. Hence these supervisors are entitled to be named authors in resulting publications. It is less usual in the social sciences, although it is becoming more common. Here supervisors have more of a role in the research, although the project is still primarily the property of the student. You should have a real voice as to method and plan. A research student is not a paid researcher working for a principal investigator, but someone who has to produce a thesis for examination.

What Should I Do if I Have Multiple Supervisors?

If you have more than one supervisor, the relationship can become much more than twice as complicated.

Why might you have two supervisors?

- In many instances the second supervisor is essentially a back-up in place in case your first supervisor moves jobs or otherwise becomes unavailable.

Even in this case, which is usually unproblematic, the second supervisor should read the draft thesis and be available for consultation in relation to their areas of special expertise.

- Sometimes you will have multiple supervisors because you are doing work across two disciplines or fields. This can work very well if your supervisors maintain regular contact with each other. They are likely to do so if they have worked on the issue in some way before. It is important that you ensure that they do maintain contact.

Meetings with multiple supervisors.

One practical point: When you have multiple supervisors, it can be difficult to have regular meetings with both of them at once. Indeed, it is often useful to meet them separately so that the supervision is more focused. However, you should meet both of them together at least two or three times in each year of your work. If you record supervisions in emails, as suggested, then you should copy all supervisors into the email. This keeps everybody on track.

Use this checklist to ensure that you are being supervised effectively

What Do I Need to Know About Time and Timetabling?

As you start to write your research timetable, the reality of what you've taken on

may start to seem very daunting. Remember that organizing a timetable is essential to keep control of your project.

You may also feel keen to get on with the “real” research, and wonder how necessary it is to take time over the preliminaries. But if you’ve ever rushed into writing an exam paper without reading the questions thoroughly—or started painting your bedroom without preparing the surfaces—you’ll know that time spent doing the basics will pay off later!

Make Sure to Block Off Time for Different Tasks

Your timetable should be organized in blocks, each of which represents a task. It’s not possible to allocate a specific time to each of these. As a rough guide**, preliminaries** will take up between one-fifth and one-third of the time you have available for the whole research project. **Research** requires between a third and a half of your total allocated time. You should allow at least a fifth of your overall time to **writing up**.

These tasks need not be done separately one after the other: Some of the blocks will overlap.

Preliminaries

1. **Firming up your research proposal**
   You need to firm up your original proposal into a clear specification of what you’re going to do. This is not only a useful guideline now, but will serve as the first draft of the introduction to your dissertation.

2. **Conducting a literature search and literature review**

   You need to find and read the research that other people have done on your topic. Then write this up as a literature review.

3. **Arranging access**
   a. **Documents and data**: You need to gain access to paperwork—documents and secondary data—and arrange interviews with key informants.
   b. **Ethical consent and certification**: Obtaining ethical consent may be straightforward—possibly involving your supervisor signing off on your ethics statement. But if you have to get permission from an official body, it can be much more complicated. Make sure you know what sort of ethics approval you need and how to get it. If your research involves children or vulnerable people, you will need a certificate testifying to your suitability for working with them. This is usually a simple police check, but it may take some time.
4. **Writing up your methods section**

   You'll be required to write up a methods section in your dissertation or thesis. You should say at this point what methods you intend to use. Then later, you'll have to come back to this section to say what you actually did.

Research

1. **Carrying out the research**

   This is the most important part of the exercise, and you need to allocate the

most time for it. How you break this time up depends on the style of research you're doing. Getting your research materials is vital.

2. **Analyzing and interpretation**
   As you do your research, you will begin to analyze and interpret your findings. But you should also allocate time after you've finished your research to make sense of it as a whole.

Writing

1. **Writing up and editing**
   It's important that you write up your research in draft form as you go along. Anything you write down is "money in the bank" toward your final document. At the end you have to draw the whole thing together and write and edit your final document to a specified length.

Some Final Points on Timetabling

- **Blocks can overlap**. For example, you can—and probably should—arrange certification at the same time as doing a literature search. You will certainly be analyzing as you're doing your research.
- **You must have an ultimate deadline**. Things may slip a bit but you should build some slack into your timetable so you will meet your latest date for submission.
- **Have someone else check on your progress**. Give your timetable to a

supervisor or friend who can ask where you are in your overall plan, and help you catch up if you're behind.

Search for resources about arranging access

Read more about writing a research proposal

Read more about conducting a literature review

Read more about analyzing and interpreting my research

Read more about writing up my research

Look at this checklist to help you plan each stage of your research project effectively.

What Happens When Things Go Wrong?

Murphy's First Law: If a Thing Can Go Wrong, It Will

You should carefully design and plan your research so that things don't go wrong. However, you cannot control all the things that can have an impact on your work. Things beyond your control can go wrong in ways which cause you severe problems.

Try to See Problems Coming

Problems anticipated are easier to deal with if you don't hesitate. Do not ignore a potential or developing problem. Address problems as soon as they arise.

Don't Panic!

Problems can be solved or alternative solutions can be developed. There are ways out of problematic situations, even if it involves backtracking to some degree, and starting over.

Refer Up, Down and Across the Chain of Command

Do not try to resolve all your problems yourself. Others should help you. Helping students through problems is an essential part of a supervisor's job. Colleagues, managers, and subordinates can all help too. Don't ignore a problem to the extent that you cannot cope with it on your own. Seek help where appropriate.

You Are Not the First to Encounter Problems

You are never the first to encounter problems during the research process. Other people will have had the same problem or one very like it. Find out what they did. If their approach seems to be the correct solution for you, take it.

Look at this checklist for some questions to ask yourself in order to guide you through any problems that arise during your research project.

How Do I Deal With Archiving and Filing My Re-

search?

You need to keep things in order when planning and carrying out your research. This means that you need to file as you go on and make sure that you back-up by having multiple copies of material you have generated. You may also, often as a condition of funding, have to archive your material. This can mean that you must organize the material you generate in such a way that it can be deposited in a data archive so that others can use it for secondary research.

Filing

- **Keeping copies**

  It is very likely that you will use computer-based packages to prepare your material. That means that you will be creating documents for recording textual material and/or spreadsheets for recording data. You should always back-up any electronic files in a secure way. You can do this by saving multiple copies to:

  - other computers
  - data storage devices—pen drives, remote hard drives, DVDs
  - online storage.

    If working at a different site, it is a good idea to email copies to yourself as attachments.

- **Folders**

  You can organize your electronic files in folders and should create a folder system which enables you to easily store and locate material.

- **Flat files**: With data you will mostly be working with flat files, that is with files which hold material about each case as a single row in a spreadsheet.
- **Relational databases**: You may need to create a relational database with multi-levels. For example, you may have data about pupils, about the classes in a school they are in, about schools, and about the administrative district in which the school is located. You will have data in this instance for four levels. This is the kind of data set which enables you to do multi-level modelling. You can store this in a relational database.

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OK, so multilevel modeling is a form of statistical modeling. So most students are familiar with linear regressions and linear modeling. And the difference with multilevel modeling. Multilevel refers to the type of data that you use these models for. So by multilevel, we mean data that

has several hierarchical levels, several levels of nesting within the data structure. So in education, you might have data on students within schools. In geography, you might collect data on neighborhoods and on people who live in neighborhoods, these sorts of structures, basically.

And so in a nutshell, it's the structure

of the data that's important and it's modeled to fit that sort of data structures. OK, and so what's multilevel modeling going to do for me that the perhaps more basic statistical techniques won't? So if you're familiar with techniques

like linear regression or logistic regression, these sorts of techniques, they make a big assumption the data you collect is independent. So you collected, essentially, a simple random sample of data, and there's no dependency structure in that data. Now, if we go back to a education example,

if you got pupils within schools, you might expect that the pupils within the same school would be more correlated in some sense in terms of the responses because of shared experience, for example, with the same teacher, the same environment. And that sharing, that dependence, affects the estimates you'd get onto a model.

So basically, multilevel modeling will adjust for the fact that that data is dependent. Whereas if you do a standard regression, you're assuming independence in your data. And that's really a problem, because you sometimes get wrong inferences. You sometimes get results that are sig-

nificant. Whereas if you account for the data you've found, then there really isn't a significant result there.

Surely, most data isn't independent though. Yeah. I think it's like a historical thing that as academics you work through different methods and linear method. I won't even question if it's been around for a long, long time. The multilevel modeling methods have only really started out in the early '80s, and they're quite often

competition intensive. So originally you had to have special purpose software to fit multilevel modeling. There's been a bit of a boom in multilevel modeling in more recent times, and most staple software packages will have some functionality for multilevel type of models. So I'm a student, I want to design

the study that's going to use, I hope, multilevel techniques of analysis. And what do I need to do when I'm thinking about designing my data gathering? I'll rephrase that slightly. When you design a study, you really should be thinking about how you collect the data, not what modeling you'd be doing afterwards.

In some sense, multilevel modeling can be used when you can't, for example, get a completely independent sample. So that might be for eco-

nomic reasons, or just logistical reasons. So if I was to go back to education again, and I want to do some study looking at something about school children, that I have to go

get my sample of schoolchildren. Now, if I really wanted to get a completely independent sample, I'd have to basically take the list of all the schoolchildren inside the UK, pick 1,000 of them. Now, logistically, that would probably be more or less 1,000 different schools, and that's going to be very expensive. So generally what you'd find is the people will do a two-stage sampling scheme where

they'll choose a number of schools and in each school they'll take a number of pupils from that school. And once you've gone into that frame of sampling, you've already got some multilevel structure. You've got pupils within schools. And these start to more complicated. Secondary schools, you'd have maybe 200 students in each of these schools. So you might take a set of classes from those schools.

And being in the same class obviously has more correlation just being in the same school. So what you're saying is that, as I develop my Ph.D., I'm actually more likely to need to use multilevel modeling because of the limitations of what I can achieve in my search than perhaps the kind of

techniques I might have learned as an undergraduate student?

Yeah. There were two aspects, really, with multilevel modeling. There's the fact that there's usually to adjust the nuisance in some sense, in that you have to collect data. And the ideal situation may not be possible, so your data may actually result in this clustering, or this dependence.

But on the other hand, there are other interesting things with multilevel modeling. You may be interested in variability. And some of your research questions may be, for example, how much of the variability in response is due to schools, or how much is due to other factors to do with the students, how much of it

there is to do with classes. And these sorts of questions actually really need multilevel modeling to answer those questions as well. So there were two aspects. There's the getting rid of the nuisance of having this structure. But also, exploring things to do with the structure as well. Do I need to know about basic influence to do multilevel modeling? Oh, that's a good question.

Historically, the methods that came out in the backend of the '80s, the early '90s, were actually frequent as methods, classical statistical methods. More recently, there's been a boom in what we call multicollinear

Markov chain methods which are often classed as a Bayesian

statistical framework. Some of the advantages of multicollinear Markov chain methods is that they seem to be able to fit much more complicated structures. The burden in terms of computing on the classical methods increases as we have, for example, long listed structures of data.

A practical example would be, again, an education, new image, the school that the pupil's going to attend. But also, you may be interested in how the neighbors, they live. And these two things may not be nested, in which case you have-- they're just the both of them. And there are classical methods to do that,

but as this gets more and more complicated, then there is some interesting examples just come out of the literature of a couple of my colleagues. Jon Rasbash and George Leckie, they've got a paper that's just come out looking at really complicated. There's very big educational servings, and also [INAUDIBLE], these sorts of things. Their MCMC method has a little bit of an advantage in that they generalize much more

easily to these more complicated structures. So that's a yes? That's a yes, a rather long yes. Very good. And you've just mentioned the Rasbash and Leckie paper. And I wonder whether you can tell me

about any other examples that maybe I should go and look at. Great examples of multilevel modeling work. There are many resources these days for mutlilevel modeling. There are books written on multilevel modeling. There are chapters in some of the handbooks, the SAGE handbooks.

In Bristol, we produce software, got in a little win for multilevel modeling. We have got lots of user manuals there which have got lots of examples. Really, it's quite useful to have discipline-specific examples. Depending on which discipline you're working in, you would probably find a multilevel analysis done by somebody.

Archiving

If you are required to prepare your data for deposit in an archive, you will have to document it in such a way that others can make sense of it in order to do secondary analyses. It is a good idea to develop documentation of this kind—metadata, data which describe other data—as you go along. Even if you do not have to archive in a formal sense, it is a very good way of keeping track of your material.

- **Qualitative data**

  If you are using a computer-based package such as NVivo, then the way you enter material into the package actually creates an archive for you. Re-

search projects often use NVivo or something like it, not necessarily for analysis and interpretation but as a way of managing complex sets of documents and related material. It works very well for this.

- **Quantitative data**
  In the case of quantitative data, your metadata will be descriptions of your variable measures in terms of an exact account of their operationalization and descriptions of the way in which the data were collected. This may exist as a separate documentation record or it may be inserted, for example as text lines in an Excel spreadsheet.

If you document your material as you go along, then at the end of the project preparing them for depositing in an archive is easy, since the great bulk of the work will have been done.

What Should I Consider Before Doing Fieldwork?

“Going into the field” is the traditional rite of passage for the anthropologist. You cannot consider yourself a proper anthropologist unless you immerse yourself in a social context, often a context completely new to you, and engage in intensive ethnographic work on that context.

What if I Am Doing Research Which Does Not Involve Fieldwork?

Not all social researchers will do fieldwork. You may well never leave your own desk if you are doing only secondary data analysis based on large available and downloadable datasets. If you are doing documentary research you might do it downloading documents to your desk computer or in university or other institutional libraries. This is not “going into the field.”

How Do I Carry Out Fieldwork in Social Research?

However, if you move outside the “walls” of the academy into other contexts, then you are considered to be in the field. This may include:

- Doing interviews
- Conducting focus groups
- Doing ethnographic observation
- Collecting original data through a social survey (even if the survey is Internet based and you do it from your desk).

Undergraduate students, in particular, often go into the field within the university by doing fieldwork on their fellow students. In that mode, the university itself is the field.

Are There Risks Associated With Doing Fieldwork?

Once you go into the field, then you will have to do a risk assessment because you are off premises and this is an insurance requirement.

What Practicalities Should I Consider When Doing Fieldwork?

Fieldwork requires a deal of practical management.

- **Keep your eyes and ears open**
  When you are in the field you are always to some degree a participant observer. You see and hear things which can be very useful to you. You can learn a lot my listening to what people are saying and engaging in conversation with them. This informal ethnography can be very useful.
- **Enjoy it**
  Fieldwork is generally tremendous fun. It can be difficult, frustrating, and even dangerous in some circumstances.

Read more about ethnography

Read more about research safety

How Do I Capture and Record My Data?

When you gather data you also need to make sure that you have recorded your data. The data which you record will be the product of your own primary research. Any secondary data which you use in your research will have already been recorded and made available to you.

How Do I Record Survey Data?

If you are doing an original survey you can:

- Use an Internet survey tool (Survey Monkey or Bristol Online Surveys) if you can reach your potential respondents on the web.
- Equip your interviewers with laptops on which they record the answers given in structured interviews.

In both cases the data are recorded, coded, and can be transmitted and stored as they are gathered. The days of duplicated questionnaires smeared with biro from which you had to painfully copy over entries to a coding sheet are long gone.

How Do I Record Qualitative Data?

If you are carrying out interviews as part of your research, you should always ask for your participants' permission to record the interview. There are some developments in sound and video technology which may help your recording.

- Digital recorders create audio files which you can store as the basis for transcription.
- Sound editing tools are becoming available which can be used as an alternative to editing transcripts thematically so you can save elements as sound just in the same way as you can save them as text.
- Voice recognition software is available and can turn speech into text. However, you should be careful to monitor the accuracy of this software and make corrections where necessary.

- Commercial video editing equipment can be used in the same way to record and sort visual data.

If you can't record, take notes and then use a recorder as soon as possible to enter in more impressions. This is also how you should use a recorder after ethnographic observation to make field notes. If you have Internet access, you can immediately send these sorts of files to yourself as email attachments. The same applies to photos taken in your research work.

How Do I Make Notes?

All social research involves the making of notes. We have covered making notes during your literature review. Many of the same principles apply for any note taking.

- **Be systematic in your note taking**
  Whichever way you decide to take notes, with pen and paper or on a computer, always date the notes, record their purpose, and file them. Ring binders are useful for filing paper notes. You can file computer-based notes, either text or recorded, in folders in your documents section.

- **Back up your notes**
  Lost notes are a real disaster. Photocopy paper notes. Back up computer-based notes by saving the files in more than one location, or on more than one device.

- **Focus your note taking**

  Focus on key issues when taking notes. Always note the context when recording an observational or interview note.

- **Read your notes over**

  Read over your notes regularly and take notes from them. This kind of notes from notes digest can be very useful when you come to writing up. It serves as an index and reminder.

Read more about carrying out a literature review

How Can I Plan to Access the Subject(s) of My Research?

Accessing the Research Context

When you do research you have to be able to access the context in which the research will be done. A context may refer to an actual place which you will visit to do your research, or it may be an online resource. You may be accessing information from paper or online resources, or you may be observing or talking to people.

What Are Gatekeepers?

Access is always controlled by gatekeepers. These are people who can help you get what you need or stop you getting what you need. Even if you are working in a context which is familiar to you, for example your own workplace, you may find

that aspects of the research context may only be available if you negotiate access. Examples of access include:

- **Access to materials**
    - Getting permission to access documents in a library
    - Getting permission to download datasets for secondary analysis when the datasets are not publicly available.
    - In these examples, access might be easily obtained by filling in a form (often online) and giving some simple guarantees. But it might require long and complex negotiations. You must build time for this into your timetable.
    - Getting access to information people don't want to give you.
    - Here the gatekeeper is the legislation determining right of access to material considered sensitive. You may get access if you ask for it in an appropriate way. In the UK, you can make a Freedom of Information request. Some things may be held back, but this can be a useful tool in dealing with government bodies and agencies.
- **Access to a place**
    - Getting access to an institutional context to carry out any kind of quantitative or qualitative research, for example schools, hospitals, prisons, factories, social care facilities. Here obtaining access will often be associated with obtaining ethical and/or police approval. You may also require approval from governing bodies or other authorities. This can be a lengthy process and you must build time for it into your timetable.
    - Getting access to contexts for observational field research. You can

"drop in" to a context but you often need to negotiate with gatekeepers and/or obtain sponsors to gain access to interesting and important parts of the context. In preparation, you should read over some monographs describing this sort of work.

Tip: Finding Contacts

It is always easier to obtain access if you already have an "in"—that is, you have contacts in the institution who can sponsor you. You can be your own sponsor in contexts where you are already part of the system, your own place of work, for example.

You will always find discussion of access/sponsorship in much of the work of Herbert Blumer (1969) and William H. Whyte (1980). An interesting novel which describes the sorts of social relationships involved is Alison Lurie's *Imaginary Friends* (1967).

Search for resources about access

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Lurie, A. (1967). *Imaginary friends*. New York, NY: Coward-McCann.

Whyte, W. H. (1980). *The social life of small urban spaces*. Washington, DC: The

Conservation Foundation.

Checklist: What Are Some Best Practices to Help Me Plan My Research?

Here are some questions to ask yourself to help you plan effectively throughout your research project.

Before beginning your research

- **Is your proposal coherent?**
- **Have you made sure you have the resources, including your own time, to do the work?**
- **Have you done an adequate risk assessment and put in place any pre-cautions necessary?**
- **Have you outlined and dealt with any ethical issues which might arise in the research?**
- **Have you a timetable worked out for getting the job done?**

During the research phase

- **Are you keeping to your timetable?**
- **Are you maintaining adequate records of the results of all research processes?**
- **Are you backing those records up in triplicate at least?**
- **Are you writing up as you go along?**

Writing up your research

- **Are you keeping to your writing-up timetable?**
- **Are you backing up all written material in triplicate?**
- **Are you ensuring that your written work reads well as a whole?**

Once your research project is complete

- **Do you have a dissemination plan in place?**
- **Are you getting the work out there in the way that you had intended?**
- **Do you know what you want to do next?**
- **Do you have a plan for doing that?**

Read more about writing up my research

Read more about disseminating my research

Checklist: How Can I Deal With a Crisis or Problem With My Research?

Here are some questions to ask yourself to help you solve or work through any problems or crises that arise during your research project.

Before carrying out your research

- **Have you thought about what might go wrong in your research?**
- **Have you prepared rough plans for dealing with these anticipated problems?**
- **Do you know what resources you would need to deal with them?**

- **Do you have an advisor/mentor who can help in a crisis?**
- **Have you built some slack into your resources and time management so you can deal with unanticipated crises?**
- **If you are managing other people, do you have the personnel back up to help you in this?**
- **Do you know how to do a SWOT analysis—Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities, Threats? Have you done one?**

During your research process

- **Are you always thinking ahead so you can see trouble coming?**
- **Do you recognize that anything going wrong needs to be dealt with as soon as possible? You should not put things off in the hope that they will resolve themselves and go away.**
- **If you are managing other people, are you regularly in touch with them so that you know how they are getting on with the work?**
- **Do you have back-up systems in place for all records?**
- **Do you have back-up systems in place for all written-up work?**
- **Do you know that most things that go wrong can be put right with a bit of effort and the application of good common sense?**

Checklist: How Can I Ensure That My Research Is Safe and That I Am Supervised Effectively?

Here are some questions to ask yourself when planning the safety and supervisory elements of your research project.

Before carrying out your research

- **Have you done a proper risk assessment?**
- **Have you put in place all necessary precautions?**
- **Have you allocated enough time for each phase of the work?**
  This should ensure that you and those you're working with don't have to work excessively in order to get the work done.

- **Have you got a supervisor/mentor to talk to about the research as you go forward?**
- **Have you adequate premises and equipment? This should ensure that this is not a worry for you and a source of discontent for anybody you are managing.**

During your research process

- **Do you have regular and constructive contact with your supervisor/mentor?**
- **If you are managing others, do they have regular and constructive contact with you?**
- **Do you have in place a system for informal meetings and chats—the magical coffee break?**

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