Developing Effective Research Proposals

3rd Edition

Keith F Punch

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1

INTRODUCTION

1.1. RESEARCH PROPOSALS – PURPOSE AND USE OF THIS BOOK

The research proposal is a central feature of the research world. Typically, the presentation and approval of a formal proposal is required before a piece of research can proceed.

This applies to the graduate student in a university, for whom the research dissertation (or thesis) lies ahead, and for whom the approval of a research proposal is required in order to proceed with the dissertation. It applies also to the application for funds to support research, where the proposal is the vehicle by which the proposed research is assessed, and decisions are made about its funding.

This book is mainly written for the graduate student in the university, but I hope it will also be useful for other situations where proposals are required. Its central purpose is to help students develop research proposals, assuming that the research involved is **empirical** research in some area of **social science**. The idea of empirical research is discussed in Section 1.2.1. The ideas of social science, and of different social science areas which use empirical research, are discussed in Section 1.2.4.

To achieve its purpose, the book is organized around three central themes:

- What is a research proposal, who reads proposals and why (Chapter 2)?
- How can we go about developing a proposal? What general guidelines and strategies are there to help students, while recognising at the same time that the wide variety of social science research implies that we should not try to be too prescriptive or restrictive about this? This theme is subdivided into a general framework for developing proposals (Chapter 4), issues (Chapter 5), methods (Chapter 6) and tactics (Chapter 8).
- What might a finished proposal look like (Chapter 7)?

By way of introduction, I suggest a 'four Ps' view of the proposal – *p*hase, *p*rocess, *p*roduct, *p*lan:[1]

- The research proposal is a *phase* of the overall research process – the phase which launches the project, and therefore a very important first phase.
- Developing a research proposal is a *process* of planning, designing and setting up the research, including placing it in context and connecting it to relevant literature.
- The finished proposal is a *product*, where the proposal is formally presented as a document.
- That document contains the proposed *plan* for the execution of the research.

This description of the proposal suggests different ways you might read and use this book, choosing the chapters according to your interests and needs. For example, if your main interest is in the process of developing a proposal (how is it done?), I suggest you concentrate first on Chapters 2 and 8, then on Chapter 4, and then fit the other chapters in around these.

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[1] I am indebted to Sandra Carrivick for this suggestion.

If your main interest is in the proposal as a finished product (what does it look like?), you might start with Chapter 7, then read Chapter 2 and then the other chapters as required. If you want to focus on the plan for the research (how will the research be done?), I suggest starting with Chapter 4, then proceeding to Chapters 6 and 7. If you want an overview of all of this, you might read the chapters in the order presented.

Section 1.4 gives more detail about the chapter plan for the book. The remainder of this chapter now gives some background to it.

1.2 BACKGROUND TO THIS BOOK

1.2.1 Empirical research – data

Our subject is empirical social science research, and developing proposals for doing such research. **Empiricism** is a philosophical term to describe the epistemological **theory** that regards experience as the foundation or source of knowledge (Aspin, 1995: 21). Since experience refers here to what is received through the senses, to sense-data or to what can be observed, I will use the general term 'observation' alongside the term 'experience'. Thus 'empirical' means based on direct experience or observation of the world. To say that a question is an empirical question is to say that we will answer it – or try to answer it – by obtaining direct, observable information from the world, rather than, for example, by theorising, or by reasoning, or by arguing from first principles. The key concept here is 'observable information about (some aspect of) the world'. The term used in research for this observable information about the world, or direct experience of the world, is **data**. The essential idea in empirical research is to use observable data as the way of answering questions, and of developing and testing ideas.

Empirical research is the main type of research in present-day social science, but it is not the only type. Examples of other types of research are theoretical research, analytical research, conceptual-philosophical research and historical research. This book concentrates on empirical research. At the same time, I believe many of the points it makes about proposal development can be applied to other types of research.

BOX 1.1

Types of research

Empirical research rests on empirical questions – questions which are answered using data. But there are other types of questions. One type is analytic. By this we mean that an analytic question can be answered by analysis of the question itself. An empirical question

(Continued)

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requires empirical evidence – that is, data – in order to answer it. An analytic question, by contrast, can be answered by analysis of the question itself, without recourse to real-world data.

The nature of empirical questions is not hard to understand, partly because the scientific method, which is based on empiricism, saturates the modern (Western) world, so that empirical questions are everywhere. The nature of analytic questions can be harder to understand. Because they involve the analysis of concepts and propositions themselves the analysis is sometimes called analysis from first principles.

More generally, concepts, propositions and theories can be analysed, without necessarily involving empirical data, focussing on such things as their definitions, properties, implications and internal consistency. This is what is meant by such terms as analytical research, research from first principles, and theoretical and conceptual research. The point stressed here is that, while these types of research have their importance, they are different from empirical research.

Historical research is slightly different again. It concentrates on historical matters or phenomena, using the techniques of inquiry and analysis developed by historians. In one important sense, historical research is empirical, resting ultimately on real world data. Despite this, it is not usually seen as part of empirical social science research, because of the specialised issues that arise when dealing with data and phenomena from the past.

This book focuses on empirical research, easily the most important type of research in present day social science.

1.2.2 Quantitative and qualitative data

Data is obviously a very broad term, so we subdivide data for empirical research into two main types:

quantitative data – which are data in the form of numbers (or measurements), and

qualitative data – which are data not in the form of numbers (most of the time, though not always, this means words).

This leads to two simplifying definitions:

- **Quantitative research** is empirical research where the data are in the form of numbers.
- **Qualitative research** is empirical research where the data are not in the form of numbers.

These simplified definitions are useful for getting started in research, but they do not give the full picture of the quantitative–qualitative distinction. The term ‘quantitative research’ means more than just research which uses quantitative or numerical data. It also refers to a whole way of thinking, or an approach, which involves a collection or

cluster of methods, as well as data in numerical form. Similarly, qualitative research is much more than just research which uses non-numerical data. It too is a way of thinking,[2] or an approach, which similarly involves a collection or cluster of methods, as well as data in non-numerical or qualitative form.

Thus, full definitions of the terms 'quantitative research' and 'qualitative research' would include:

- the way of thinking about the social reality being studied, the way of approaching it and conceptualising it;[3]
- the designs and methods used to represent that way of thinking, and to collect data;
- the data themselves – numbers for quantitative research, not numbers (mostly words) for qualitative research.

In teaching about research, I find it useful initially to approach the quantitative–qualitative distinction primarily through the third of these points, the nature of the data. Later, the distinction can be broadened to include the first two points – ways of conceptualizing the reality being studied, and methods. Also, I find that in the practical business of planning and doing research, dissertation students very often focus on such questions as: Will the data be numerical or not? Am I going to measure variables in this research, or not? Or, in other words, will my research be quantitative or qualitative?

For these reasons, I think that the nature of the data is at the heart of the distinction between quantitative and qualitative research, and that is why I start with the simplified definitions shown above. But we need also to remember that there is more to the distinction than this, as shown in the other two points above, and that qualitative research is much more diverse than quantitative research, in its ways of thinking, in its methods and in its data.

1.2.3 Relaxing the quantitative–qualitative distinction

The quantitative–qualitative distinction has been of major significance in social science research, and a basic organizing principle for the research methods literature, up until now.

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[2]More accurately, qualitative research is a collection of ways of thinking about social reality. Whereas quantitative research is relatively homogeneous in its way of thinking, qualitative research is rather more heterogeneous.

[3]This is part of what is meant by the term **paradigm** (see Section 5.2), involving assumptions about the nature of the reality being studied. As an example, quantitative research typically conceptualizes the world in terms of variables (which can be measured) and studies relations between these variables. Qualitative research, by contrast, often studies cases and processes, rather than variables.

Despite that, we should note that the value of this sharp distinction has long been questioned in the literature (see, for example, Hammersley, 1992: 41–3), and that there are important similarities between the approaches.

Therefore, once understood, this distinction can be relaxed. This book deals with research proposals for both quantitative and qualitative studies, and is based on the view that neither approach is better than the other, that both are needed, that both have their strengths and weaknesses, and that they can and should be combined as appropriate. (Indeed, as pointed out in Section 1.2.5, it has become increasingly common to combine them, in what is now called **mixed methods**.)

Rather than either–or thinking about this distinction, or tired arguments about the superiority of one approach over the other, the viewpoint here is that the methods and data used (quantitative, qualitative or both) should follow from, and fit in with, the question(s) being asked. In particular, quantitative questions require quantitative methods and data to answer them, and qualitative questions require qualitative methods and data to answer them.

These statements are examples of the principle that questions and methods need to be matched with each other in a piece of research. In general, I believe that the best way to do this is to focus first on what we are trying to find out (the questions) before we focus on how we will do the research (the methods). This matter of question–method connections is discussed in Section 4.7.2.

1.2.4 Social science and social science areas

To call our research 'scientific', as in 'empirical social science research', requires that we see science as a method of inquiry and of building knowledge. There are different conceptions of science, but the one I suggest here is very general and widely applicable, has been prominent in the social sciences, and has great value in teaching research students.[4]

In this conception, the essence of science as a method is in two parts. One part concerns the central role of data. Science accepts the authority of empirical data – its questions are answered and its ideas are tested using data. The other part is the role of theory, particularly theory which explains (or explanatory theory). The aim is to explain the data, not just to collect the data and not just to use the data to describe situations or things. The two essential parts to science are therefore *data* and *theory*. Put simply, it is scientific to collect data about the world guided by research questions, to build theories to explain the data, and then to test those theories against further data. Whether data come before theory, or theory comes before data, is irrelevant. It only matters that both are present. There is nothing in this view of science about the nature of the empirical

[4]This view might be described as a 'modified logical empiricist' view, with some additions from critical rationalism (see Higgs, 1995).

data, and certainly nothing about whether the data are quantitative or qualitative. In other words, it is not a requirement of science that it involve numerical data, or measurements. It may well do so, but it is not necessary that it do so.

The general term 'social science' refers to the scientific study of human behaviour. 'Social' refers to people and their behaviour, and to the fact that so much of that behaviour occurs in a social context. 'Science' refers to the way that people and their behaviour are studied. If the aim of (all) science is to build explanatory theory about its data, the aim of social science is to build explanatory theory about people and their behaviour. This theory about human behaviour is to be based on, and tested against, real-world data.[5]

Together the social sciences cover a very wide domain, and we can distinguish between them in several ways. One distinction is between the basic social sciences (for example, sociology, psychology, anthropology) and the applied social sciences (for example, education, management, nursing). Behind this distinction is the idea that there are different perspectives (for example, individual or group) applied to different areas or settings. Despite the differences, however, one thing that unifies the social sciences is their focus on human behaviour, and the important role of empirical research in the way they are studied. Because of this central role of empirical research, a premise of this book is that there is a great deal of similarity in research methods across the various social science areas.

1.2.5 Relationship of this book to *Introduction to Social Research*

Two major developments in the last 40 years or so have greatly changed and broadened the field of research methods in the social sciences:

- The first development has been the growth of interest in, and the rapid development of, qualitative research methods, in many basic and applied social science areas. As a result, qualitative methods have moved much more into the mainstream of social science research, compared with their marginalized position of 40 years ago. They now sit alongside quantitative methods on a much more equal basis.
- The second development has been the rapid growth of mixed methods. This term describes empirical research methods which combine both qualitative and quantitative data and approaches. This second development has been a prominent feature of the field of research methodology since the late 1990s.

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[5]In addition to explanation, another often-cited goal of empirical research into people and their behaviour is understanding. That is, rather than aiming for a set of propositions which together explain behaviour, researchers focus on understanding the behaviour, usually paying special attention to its context. This latter emphasis has a long history, and is usually traced back to the work of the German sociologist Max Weber in the nineteenth century. Interpretation, and 'the actor's definition of the situation', are typically central, and *interpretive research* is the name often given to this sort of inquiry. It tends to be qualitative in its methods.

Thus, the overall history of the main methodological developments in social science research can be conveniently described in terms of three waves:

- Wave 1 – the historical dominance of quantitative methods;
- Wave 2 – the emergence, acceptance and growth of qualitative methods;
- Wave 3 – the increasing tendency to combine quantitative and qualitative methods and data in mixed-method research.

In my opinion, this history means that researchers today need to understand the basic logic, characteristics and applicability of both quantitative and qualitative methods. For beginning researchers, I believe a firm foundation of understanding in both approaches is desirable, before any subsequent methodological specialization. It is also desirable that we reinforce the recent trends to move past the either–or thinking which characterized the quantitative–qualitative debate, and towards making full use of the two approaches.

Introduction to Social Research (Punch, 2011) aims to provide that foundation of understanding in both approaches. Its goal is to give an overview of the essentials of both quantitative and qualitative methods, set within a view of research which stresses the central role of research questions, and the logical priority of questions over methods. In this view, questions come before methods. We concentrate first on what we are trying to find out, and second on how we will do it. I see this view of research as pragmatic and robust. By 'pragmatic' I mean that it works, both in getting research started and getting it finished. By 'robust', I mean it works in a wide variety of situations and across many different areas.

Because *Introduction to Social Research* aims to be comprehensive, covering the essentials of both approaches for many social science areas, it does not go into details on some topics. The present book deals with the proposal development stage of research in much greater detail and in a much more hands-on way than was possible in *Introduction to Social Research*. It operates with the same model of research, and with the same view of quantitative and qualitative methods as is described in *Introduction to Social Research*, but it elaborates and develops issues and points about proposal development much further than was possible in that book.

1.3 A VIEW OF RESEARCH

Faced with the many definitions, descriptions and conceptions of research in the methodological literature, I think that it is sufficient for our present purposes to see research as an organized, systematic and logical process of inquiry, using empirical information

to answer questions (or test hypotheses). Seen this way, it has much in common with how we find things out in everyday life – thus, the description of scientific research as 'organized common sense' is useful. Perhaps the main difference is the emphasis in research on being organized, systematic and logical.

This view of research, which I use as a teaching device, is shown in diagram form as Figure 2.1. It stresses the central role of research questions, and of systematically using empirical data to answer those questions. It has four main features:

- framing the research in terms of research questions;
- determining what data are necessary to answer those questions;
- designing research to collect and analyse those data;
- using the data to answer the questions.

A modification of this model, to include hypothesis-testing research, is shown as Figure 4.1.

As well as capturing essential elements of the research process, I think this view also takes much of the mystery out of research, and enables students immediately to get started in planning research. It focuses on research questions, whereas some other writers focus on research problems. Whether to define the research in terms of questions or problems is a matter of choice for the researcher. The question–problem distinction in approaching research is discussed in Section 2.6.

1.4 CHAPTER OUTLINE

After this introductory chapter, Chapter 2 describes the proposal and its functions, and discusses who reads proposals and with what expectations. It then takes up the question–problem distinction, and presents the model of research referred to above. Chapter 3 deals with ethics in social science research. Chapter 4 provides a general framework for developing proposals, using this model of research and focusing on the central role of research questions. Chapter 5 discusses issues the researcher may need to consider concerning the roles of theory and of the literature, which arise because of the complexity of contemporary social science research methodology. Chapter 6 then moves on to consider the methods for the research, and Chapter 7 deals with the proposal as a finished product. Chapter 8 is concerned with the process of developing a research proposal and describes some tactics I have found useful working with students in proposal development. Chapter 8 includes five full proposals, and points to other examples of proposals in the literature. At the end of each of the first eight chapters, the main concepts discussed are brought together for review, and some exercises to assist in proposal development are given. A glossary of important terms completes the book.

1.5 REVIEW CONCEPTS

Empiricism A philosophy which sees observation and experience as the foundation of knowledge.

Empirical research Research which uses observable data to answer empirical research questions.

Quantitative data Empirical data in the form of numbers.

Qualitative data Empirical data not in the form of numbers (usually, this means data as words).

Quantitative research Empirical research where the data are in the form of numbers.

Qualitative research Empirical research where the data are not in the form of numbers.

Science As used here, a method of inquiry with the two central parts of empirical data, and theory.

Scientific research Research which uses the scientific method.

Social science Using the scientific method to study people and their behaviour.

Research questions Questions that empirical research aims to answer, using data.

2

UNDERSTANDING READERS, EXPECTATIONS AND FUNCTIONS

2.1 WHAT IS A RESEARCH PROPOSAL?

In one sense, the answer to the question 'what is a research proposal?' is obvious. The proposal for a piece of research is a document which deals with:

- what the proposed research is about;
- what it is trying to find out or achieve;
- how it will go about doing that;
- what we will learn from it and why that is worth learning.

After it is approved, the proposal leads to the project itself.

In another sense, the dividing line between the research proposal and the research project itself is not so obvious. The proposal describes what will be done, and the research itself is carried out after approval of the proposal. But preparing the proposal may also involve considerable research.

This is because the completed proposal is the *product* of a sustained *process* of planning and designing the research. And both the planning of the research and the proposal for the research are just as important as the phases of research which come after the proposal – those of executing and reporting the research. Indeed, in some types of research, especially those which are tightly preplanned (see Section 2.4), the planning of the research can be seen as the most critical phase of the process. In this sort of research, the plan which is developed forms the basis for the rest of the research.

Thus, the research proposal is a document which is the product of a process of planning and designing. As I will stress throughout this book, it is also an argument which needs to have a coherent line of reasoning and internal consistency.

Two other less obvious, but important, characteristics of the proposal are:

- The proposal is often the first time a researcher (especially a dissertation student) presents his/her work to some wider audience.
- As a finished product, it needs to be a 'stand-alone' document. This means that, at certain points in the approval process, it will be read by people who have not discussed the work with the researcher.

I return to these points later. To finish this section, I quote Krathwohl's (1998: 65) comprehensive definition of a research proposal:

> What is a proposal? It is an opportunity for you to present your idea and proposed actions for consideration in a shared decision-making situation. You, with all the integrity at your command, are helping those responsible for approving your proposal to see how you view the situation, how the idea fills a need, how it builds on what has been done before, how it will proceed, how you will avoid pitfalls, why pitfalls you have not

avoided are not a serious threat, what the study's consequences are likely to be, and what significance they are likely to have. It is not a sales job but a carefully prepared, enthusiastic, interestingly written, skilled presentation. Your presentation displays your ability to assemble the foregoing materials into an internally consistent chain of reasoning.

2.2 READERS AND EXPECTATIONS

There are two main situations where research proposals are required: the university context, where the issue is approval of the dissertation proposal for the research to proceed to enable the graduate student to complete the honours, master's or doctoral degree; and the research grant or funding context, where the issue is the competitive application for (usually scarce) research funds. Some of this goes on inside universities, but much of it happens outside universities.

As noted in Chapter 1, this book is written mainly with the graduate student in mind, who is preparing a research dissertation. As well as being a convenient way to organize and present the material about proposals, it is perhaps an area of greater need, because several books already exist to guide proposal writers in the research grant context (for example, Lauffer, 1983, 1984; Lefferts, 1982; Meador 1991; Miner and Griffith, 1993; Schumacher, 1992). But, while written mainly with the dissertation student in mind, much of what is said in this book applies to proposals in both contexts. And, as Kelly (2012) points out, the two contexts come together in the sense that social science graduates will have to apply their knowledge and earn their living in an increasingly competitive marketplace, so that practical skills such as proposal writing become important.

In the dissertation context, readers of the proposal (and members of dissertation committees or proposal review committees in particular) are required to make two sorts of judgements. First, there are judgements on a general level, which are concerned with the overall viability of the proposed study as a dissertation. Second, there are judgements on a more detailed and technical level, such as those concerned with the appropriateness of the research design, or quality control issues in data collection, or the proposed methods of data analysis. This section concerns judgements on the more general level.

The more general judgements centre on such questions as:

- Is the proposed research feasible and 'doable'?
- Is the research worth doing?
- Can the candidate do it?
- If done, will it produce a successful dissertation, at whatever level is involved?

In other words, review committees use the proposal to judge both the viability of the proposed research, and the ability of the candidate to carry it out. It is therefore a pivotal document in the dissertation student's journey. As Locke et al. (2011) point out: