



# SAGE Research Methods

## Designing Your Research Proposal

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[MUSIC PLAYING] Malcolm Williams, thank you very much. Before we begin, could you just let us know who you are and what your role is? Yes. I'm a professor and Director of the Cardiff School of Social Sciences.

My background is in methodology and methods, philosophical problems in social science and also secondary analysis of lost data sets. Thank you. We're going to talk about designing a research proposal today. And research proposals will always be shaped readily by whoever the funding body is but aren't there commonalities there?

There are commonalities and they're important commonalities. And I think I would suggest there are four. The first one is the importance of a clear research question. The second one is to be very clear about your research design. The third one is to be clear about the methods you propose to use and they may change as the research goes on.

And the last one is a realistic appraisal of resources. So when we're talking about design, research design, are you talking about quantitative over qualitative? No, I'm not.

I'm not talking about that. I think it's very important to get away from that. By designs, I think there are four main designs or subsets of those. The first one's experimental, the second one is longitudinal, the third one is cross-sectional, and the last one is case study. So let's take something like living alone. If we are interested in exploring that, we might be interested in finding out how living alone has changed over time.

You might want to follow, for example, cohorts of people through several years. Now, that could be quantitative or qualitative. You use a large data set to do that or you might actually follow some people over time. But you might be interested, perhaps, in a case study of a group of people, any person or persons, to look at that in depth.

So the design and the method are not necessarily associated-- there's not one design fits one kind of method. They might be quite separate. So what you're saying, though, is that the research question can imply the kind of designs that we use. Yes, it would. Yes.

Again, taking my initial question of living alone, if you're looking for the kinds of things that are associated with living alone, there are very often things through time. What was your previous household? What was the previous kind of household you lived in? What was the household composition? What was your marital status?

How does that change? And in fact, in that particular example, it's different for women at different times in their life cycle. So that would kind of imply a longitudinal design there. But you might also want to go to a case study, which might be a group of people. It could be quantitative then. Or it might be to look in some depth of the experiences and understanding who lives alone.

So yes, the research question would imply the design to a great extent. So how does design relate to methods? Well, again, it's about whether you are looking at things at the macro, meso, or micro level.

Let's look at qualitative methods. Now, qualitative methods are obviously very good at drilling down into the life experiences of individuals or groups. And to some extent, you can perhaps informally generalize from those away from those because there are commonalities because of the kinds of social backgrounds that the individual will have with a particular kind of community.

But there's a limit to that and you don't know whether you've got typicality or not. So at some point, you have to move towards quantitative methods and that might be cross-sectional. It might be longitudinal data. So there is a relationship but the relationship is not a fixed one.

Then, indeed, take, for example, longitudinal research. Though there is a growing body of qualitative longitudinal data, actually, what we very often mean by that are the large data sets in Britain, such as millennium cohorts, which follow a large group of individuals at a time.

You've mentioned the need to appraise the resources that we have, as well, but what kind of resources do you have in mind for a researcher? All resources are finite and the most finite one of all is time. I think people don't often think about time. Time is what will constrain with every cohort.

Let me take it in a couple of extreme examples. Suppose someone said to you, look, you can have as much money as you need to do this research but basically, what we want is a 2,000-sample survey and we want the data in by next week. You cannot do it. It's very difficult. If, for example, that survey required self-completion either online or by post, you wouldn't have time to do the reminders to the non-responders then.

And so your non-responders are going to be a problem for you. Likewise, if you do face-to-face interviews, you probably would be able to get your sample in that kind of time. At the other end of the kind of methodological scale, you wouldn't have time to have focus groups or depth interviews with people in that time span.

So actually, practice for lots of people's first experience with research is doing their PhD and you've got really around nine to 10 months to do your field work. What can you realistically do in that kind of time frame? So that's the first one is time. The second one is expertise.

Do you have the expertise or will someone in your team have the expertise to do the kind of research you want to do? So for example, you might want to use multi-level modeling. Have you got someone who can do multi-level modeling-- not just understanding what the results are, understanding what it is, but to actually do it?

So you do need to have that. You need to have perhaps statistical expertise. You might need to have expertise in doing in-depth interviews. There's a range of things you will need. Have you got those and can you get them? If you can't, then you have to try to think of answering the question in a way that will fit with your portfolio of expertise.

So be pragmatic. And the third one, then-- and of course, this is less of an issue for PhD research-- labor costs. When you're doing PhDs, you possibly will make some help with transcription and so on and so forth-- [INAUDIBLE]. But your labor costs are always by far the biggest costs in the social sciences.

We don't have lab costs as the natural sciences as such. Our lab costs are relatively smaller, a few computers and so on. But your biggest costs are your labor costs. And if you're designing a study, it's very important that you make sure you've built in enough money for all those labor costs.

And then, after that, the other kinds of things are all relatively straightforward and simple. They're things like travel, consumer rules and so on. They're not so much of a problem. But time, expertise, and labor costs are the most important things to think about.

You're painting a picture there, Malcolm, of quite a lot of compromises going on. And I want my PhD to be the best PhD it can possibly be but that does feel like compromises in what you've said there. It is compromises and there will always be compromises, even in the most well-resourced research.

But a PhD, as much as anything else, is about research training. No, you obviously want to do the very best work that you can but it's about learning from our experience and I can show you what you can do with those resources in a relatively short period of time. So that is OK. And it depends on the con-- if you wanted to do a national study of a particular social phenomenon and make claims that are going to hold up across a large number of cases, then that's a very difficult construct to patch up a local transport study, where it's very pragmatic and simple and straightforward answers.

So it's about being fit for purpose, really. So there are compromises, yes. And coming back to the whole idea of constructed answers, there's one thing we haven't talked about is how that might build on what might already be written.

How do you build on previous research? This is also related to resources because there's very few areas of research that people have not done work on. Usually, it's a fairly well-trodden path.

What you're doing is answering the very specific question, whether slightly pulled of context. And sometimes, you may work on a research proposal and then suddenly find someone's actually done almost exactly what you're looking for. And there's nothing one can do about that. But you can start by first of all conducting a very thorough literature review.

Who has done what, how have they done it, and how well have they done it? And how far can it answer part of your question or all of your question? So sometimes, market research, we've got desk research. So get your desk research done first. The second thing them is to look at the data that the model will be there, the available data.

You don't want to be spending time and money on developing a large survey, several thousand cases, when there's already a perfectly good set of data existing. Can secondary analysis do part of the job for you?

And obviously, again, coming back to PhD students, the skills are different but they are nevertheless still important. To be able to do that kind of analysis is still an important skill. So you shouldn't think somehow-- because you're doing secondary analysis as opposed to primary work, you shouldn't denigrate that.

That's actually terribly important-- same goes for qualitative data sets. A re-analysis of qualitative data sets can often give you better answers than going out and collecting original data. Then, when you've done what you can in those kinds of ways, then think about where there's a deficit in terms of the data, when you need to actually go out and handle more.

Malcolm Williams, thank you very much. You're welcome. [MUSIC PLAYING]