Doing Your Qualitative Psychology Project

Edited by

Cath Sullivan, Stephen Gibson
and **Sarah Riley**

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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Stephen Gibson is a senior lecturer in Psychology at York St John University. He is a social psychologist with research interests in areas such as peace and conflict, citizenship and national identity, and dis/obedience. In addition, he has been involved in numerous projects concerning the teaching of qualitative research methods. Between 2008 and 2011 he was chair of the TQRMUL group, and is co-editor (with Simon Mollan) of the forthcoming volume *Representations of Peace and Conflict* (Palgrave, 2012).

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INTRODUCTION AND AIMS OF THE BOOK

Cath Sullivan, Stephen Gibson and Sarah Riley

In this chapter we provide an overview of the book and how it can be used. We also consider three key underlying issues, which come up repeatedly in later chapters. The first two issues are decision making and critical thinking; these underpin many activities that you need to do when undertaking a research project. Our third issue concerns methodology. It can be useful to think of your method as a tool you use in research. For example, you could use an interview as a tool to create a person's life history. However, methods are always used with an underlying philosophy – this underlying philosophy is called the 'methodology'. Considering some of the foundations of methodology will help you to get to grips with your research project (and the rest of the book), which is why we focus on it in this chapter.

Aims of the book

In the chapters that follow, we take you through the process of completing a student qualitative research project. This will be useful for students of psychology, sociology, criminology, education and other related disciplines that use qualitative methods. It will be most useful to those completing an undergraduate final-year project (often called a 'dissertation'), but it will also be helpful for students completing other undergraduate qualitative projects earlier in their degree, and conversely, for postgraduate students, especially those who feel like they need a more solid foundation to their understanding of qualitative research before they continue with their studies.

In a nutshell: aims of the book

- To provide a guide to the decisions you need to make at key stages of your project, including:
    - choosing a topic and designing research questions;
    - reviewing literature;
    - designing and managing the process of your project;
    - collecting and analysing data;
    - writing up and evaluating your work.

- To provide useful tips and strategies for your project, including how to deal with challenges and difficulties when they arise.
- To give ideas of ways in which you can build upon and extend your project – for example, as a way of demonstrating your skills when you apply for jobs or courses in the future.

Our main focus is on helping you to plan and execute the stages of your project, so we deal extensively with issues such as research questions, planning, supervisory relationships and writing up. Various methods of collecting and analysing qualitative data are considered and we provide overviews and key information to help you to select appropriate methods. We also provide many suggestions for further reading and information so that you can read up on your chosen methods of data collection and analysis in more depth.

Before we go any further, we would like to spend a little time considering what your research project means in the context of your course.

Your research project

Your research project allows you to apply and develop the research skills learned earlier in your course, and allows your lecturers to assess how well you can apply them to an independent piece of work. It is a complex piece of work that involves many stages. For most students it is the largest single piece of assessed work that they will do and it is a time-consuming, challenging and rewarding journey. Many people regard the final year (or master's) research project as a key indicator of a student's ability and it often has a very large contribution to make to the overall marks on a course. Because of this, and because it is a big step towards independence for many students, it can be a daunting prospect. Part of what is rewarding about doing a research project is its challenging and independent nature.

It's important then that before we start talking about the specifics of doing a qualitative research project, we take a step back and talk you through some of the core principles of good academic work, from which you can build. First, we consider decision making, as this has a central role in your research project at every stage.

Decision making

As you work on your research project, you will need to make a series of decisions. Throughout this book we aim to identify those decisions and to provide you with information and ideas that will aid you in making them.

Decision making involves a series of steps, skills and processes. In order to achieve your aims, you have to make practical decisions about what to do, when to do it, how to do it and where. At times when we find making decisions hard, such as when we are stressed or when the outcome is very important to us, it can be useful to break down the decision-making process into a number of components.

In a nutshell: what is decision making?

Decision making can be defined as the process of identifying a course of action that will allow you to overcome obstacles and move towards a goal in a context of uncertainty or risk (Thomas, 2008).

To make a decision we must figure out what our objective is, collect information about it, identify possible options for moving towards it and evaluate those options so that we can make a choice (Thomas, 2008). We then also need to try and evaluate our course of action to see if it is working or whether our decision needs to be reviewed (Thomas, 2008).

In a nutshell: decision making in your research project

Examples of some of the kinds of decisions you will need to make include:

- deciding on a topic area for your project;
- selecting literature to include in your literature review;
- identifying appropriate methods of data collection and analysis;
- deciding on sub-goals and deadlines as you work towards your final deadline;
- selecting material to include in your research project write-up.

Much of the research on decision making has focused on creating and testing models of how the best decisions are made. There is also research that examines how people make decisions and this can help us by providing tips for those situations when we're finding it hard to work out what to do next.

Decision-making tips

Take ownership

Remember from the outset that your project is an independent piece of work, your chance to show that you can really shine when you work on your own. Your supervisor will help and guide you, but the sooner you begin to own your decisions the better off you will be in the long run. When you decide something, it is you that will have to write a justification for it in your project. So, even if your supervisor can think of 10 good reasons for you to use, for example, grounded theory (see Chapter 7), you will be the one who has to construct a good argument in your write-up for that choice. It's therefore very important that you know why you made it.

Focus on your goals

When we make decisions, it is usually for a reason – that is, we have some long-term purpose in mind. Imagine that you are trying to choose between a number of potential methods of recruiting participants. It is easy to slip into a state where the only goal we can see is that we have to make the decision. Often, there is no problem with this, but when you are finding it hard to make a decision it can be useful to think about what your ultimate goal is. This will help you to really think through what criteria you should use to evaluate the options you have. Your ultimate goal, the reason you are making this decision, is that you are trying to identify a method that will allow you to get the kind of data you need, from the people who are likely to have it, and in a way that is practicable and achievable for you. As you can see, thinking about the ultimate aim here instantly gives us a set of criteria that you can use to judge the different options.

Find a reason

Research (for example, Shafir et al., 1993) has shown that when people are choosing between two options, they tend to try and look for reasons to accept one possible course of action and reject the others. This means that decisions can be especially hard when a clear reason to do something, or not do it, doesn't really stand out. This can lead to us feeling paralysed and not actually making a choice (Ayton, 2005). Imagine, for example, that you are struggling to see which of two methods of analysis you should use, and obvious reasons

for rejecting or selecting options do not immediately appear. In this instance, one thing that you could do to help yourself is to find out as much as you can about these methods and any underlying methodologies associated with them. Try and ask yourself critical questions that can help you find a reason for a decision. Information is key here, so try to:

- Read as many relevant sources of information about these methods as you can.
- Talk to your supervisor about the suitability of different methods.
- If you are working in a group – either informally or formally – speak to your fellow students, as 'peer researchers' can be good sources of information, as they have to negotiate similar issues to your own.
- Consider the practical consequences and feasibility of each option, such as how much time it would take and whether you have the training and resources you need.
- Write lists to get yourself thinking in concrete ways about the advantages, disadvantages and key features of the various options.

Remember that, in a situation where there don't seem to be any particularly salient or obvious reasons, you can help yourself by gaining more information.

Don't sweat the small stuff

Designing and conducting your project involves many decisions and, inevitably, some of these are more important than others. One way to help you put your energies where they will bring the most reward is to try and distinguish those decisions that are the most important. This can be challenging, especially at the beginning, and this book, along with the other things you read, and discussions with your supervisor, should help you to do this. Some tips that can help with this are:

- Consider the consequences. Some decisions are very important because they have big consequences for other stages of the project. For example, the method of data collection that you choose will have big implications for the kind of analysis that you can do, and how well you can do that analysis (see Chapter 6 for more on this). Try and identify the big decisions that have many consequences.
- Think about the justification. The most important decisions that you make will tend to be those that need to be fully justified in your write-up. Your research questions, for example, will need to be fully and convincingly justified in your write-up.

Efficiency or outcomes?

Many decision-making models rest upon the idea that certain choices have greater 'utility' – that is, will bring a more positive or valued outcome. However, one thing that you need to consider is that you may often be in a situation where there are several possible options that are equally as good. Or, at least, where the differences in how positive the outcomes will be are so small as to make little practical difference.

Often students get bogged down at the early stages of their project in particular because they find it hard to make decisions. Understandably, given the importance of the research project, students worry that they will make a wrong choice. This can often happen in relation to the choice of a topic area (see Chapter 2). However, at this stage, you are probably going to be faced with a huge array of potential research areas that are all equally interesting and equally suitable from an academic point of view. It's important to make a relatively informed choice at this stage, but remember that making a choice too late and getting behind is probably more of a risk than making the wrong choice when your choices are between three equally suitable and equally interesting topic areas. You may find that it is useful to set yourself firm deadlines for key decisions in order to keep yourself from getting behind (see Chapters 3 and 4 for more on this).

In a nutshell: help yourself to make decisions

- Be aware of when decisions are needed and of when you have made one.
- Gather information and talk your decisions through with your supervisor, other lecturers or fellow students.
- Consider at every stage whether you will be able to justify your decisions and how you will do it – this is crucial for doing a good write-up.
- Record your decisions in a research diary; it can be easy to forget what you did, and why, at an earlier stage.
- Be aware that sometimes your choice is between several equally good options, and at times you will need to just force yourself to choose rather than risk falling behind.
- Ensure that you represent your decisions effectively in the appropriate section of the write-up (see Chapter 9 for more on writing up).

Decision making involves judgement (about the expected outcomes of options, for example, or their likelihood) and the appraisal and processing of information. It is therefore related to another foundational skill that underpins the research project; that of critical thinking, and we will consider this in the next section.

Critical thinking

Critical thinking is a term used a lot in relation to good work done by students. In this book for example, many of the contributors talk about critical thinking,

and the institutions that you and they are part of will have critical thinking as part of their marking criteria. Indeed being able to think critically is a core component of undergraduate and postgraduate education. But despite so many people saying that critical thinking is important, actual definitions of what it is and how to do it are rather thin on the ground.

In a nutshell: critical thinking

Critical thinking involves developing the ability to:

1 Evaluate other people's academic work according to appropriate criteria, and being able to make links between other people's work, other relevant literatures, and your own work.
2 Present your own work in a way that convinces your reader (including the markers) that you are knowledgeable about the topic of your project and the research methods you've used.
3 Demonstrate to your reader that your knowledge has been applied so that your research project meets the quality criteria for an excellent project.

The emphasis on the importance of critical thinking, without guidance as to what it involves, can make the idea of critical thinking a daunting one. However, critical thinking is a skill you can learn and it's one that you may be more familiar with than you think. Music reviews, for example, can demonstrate a range of critical thinking techniques. A music review will often describe the music by highlighting important features of it, and discussing how these features distinguish it from previous work by the band or other similar bands. Reviews often locate the music being reviewed within a particular genre, and then give an evaluation of the music in relation to this genre. Such analyses allow reviewers to make evaluative judgements about the pleasures (or not) of listening to the music and how the music develops or represents a genre.

The processes involved in writing a music review are similar to those you need to go through when critically reading an article or developing your own project so that it will stand up to scrutiny. These processes involve locating the research project within relevant research methods literature or previous research on the subject; and evaluating the study both in terms of the contribution it makes to this literature and the persuasiveness of the argument (in music review terms, the equivalent of whether it develops the genre and how it sounds). To do this kind of academic critical thinking in relation to qualitative research projects you need to have an understanding of:

- quality criteria in relation to qualitative methods in general;
- quality criteria in relation to the specific methods you're using (or that the article you're reading is using);
- argumentation, rhetoric and persuasion.

We discuss qualitative research methods in general in Chapters 6 and 7 and refer you to books on specific qualitative methods for the detailed discussion you need for method-specific criteria (for example, Forrester, 2010). Here, then, we focus on argumentation, rhetoric and persuasion, while discussing the other quality criteria when relevant.

Argumentation, rhetoric and persuasion

Sarah once went to a museum of fashion with a builder friend. Knowing his interests didn't lie in clothes, she was surprised when he seemed happy to spend time there. All was revealed though, when they left and the first thing he said was 'did you see how they'd built that glass staircase?' While Sarah had been looking at the museum's content, he'd been looking at the museum's structure. But, together they'd evaluated the whole thing. In the same way, critical thinking requires you to evaluate the content of a research report and the way its arguments are constructed.

We need to consider how arguments are constructed because poor thinking can be dressed up in ways that make it seem plausible. Psychological research has shown that people can be persuaded to believe all kinds of things that are not particularly rational. So good quality thinking involves developing the skills we need to rationally judge the quality of research by evaluating the logic of the arguments it uses.

Applying critical thinking means that we can be persuaded by good quality arguments and have the skills to reject claims of poor quality ones. To develop this aspect of critical thinking, try asking the following questions about a report you're reading, or if you have already started yours, about your own project.

- Are the arguments given supported by evidence? And has this evidence been accumulated through appropriate methods such as exhaustive literature searches or systematic data collection and analyses?
- Is it a balanced analysis of the evidence? Do the authors examine alternative viewpoints fairly, but when relevant also show when there is strong support for a consensus?
- Given that all research comes from a specific standpoint, does the report recognise its standpoint and how that affected the study, or is the standpoint implicit and not addressed? (See the discussion of 'reflexivity' in Chapter 8 for more on this.)
- Is the ordering of the points logical so that gradually a complete and consistent account is built up?

- Was the study justified and explained in 'watertight' rhetoric (that is, persuasive arguments)? For example, if you follow their arguments to their logical conclusion do they still stand? What are the implications for their arguments? Are there absences that would allow you to question the logic (such as not reporting studies that take a different approach)? Do they play a 'numbers game', where the authors report a bigger number of participants or hours of analysis from a larger data set than the data set that they actually analysed, so making their present study look bigger than it is? Do they use precise terms that can be easily defined and studied or do they use vague concepts that can't easily be evaluated? Do they make false analogies or unwarranted leaps in the logic, such as arguing that one thing leads to another when it may not?
- Is the document consistent? Does the report draw on the same theoretical or methodological framework throughout? Does information on participants or other procedures remain the same throughout?
- Do the authors demonstrate that their work meets appropriate quality criteria? For example, do they demonstrate a good understanding of the methods and procedures they've used? Does their work make a contribution to the literature they're addressing and demonstrate rigour or transparency?
- Does the outcome of the work generate new ideas or ways of implementing others' ideas in new and potentially useful directions?
- Is it written clearly? Good writing is clear and concise and takes the reader on a journey that is so well articulated and signposted that the reader focuses on the content of the message and not the delivery. Conversely, poor academic writing often 'hides' behind big words and uses overly complicated sentences or obtuse writing that obscures ideas rather than clarifies them.

With time, asking such questions can become second nature for experienced researchers. However, for a student developing their skills it can be hard to know when or how to ask them. If you thought about each of these questions overtly for every paragraph you read or wrote you'd soon lose focus on the actual study. So take your time to become familiar with them and practice using them gradually. To help you get started, we finish this section with a table that identifies some of the common problems students have with critical thinking, with some suggested solutions.

Critical thinking challenges

When you are learning and developing your critical thinking skills, there can be challenges and difficulties. We have outlined some of these in Table 1.1, along with some suggested solutions for you to try.

Want to know more about critical thinking?

Cottrell, S. (2005) *Critical Thinking Skills.* London: Palgrave MacMillan.

Table 1.1 Common critical thinking challenges and some suggested solutions

Challenges	And possible solutions
Feeling overwhelmed by what you have to do	• Read though the questions previously listed regularly so that you are familiar with them and they can be in the 'back of your mind' when you are reading or writing. • Remember it is a skill that takes time to develop so you will not be able to do everything at once. • At the end of a paper or a significant section that you have written, go through the questions given previously and see if you can answer them easily. If you cannot, ask yourself if it is because you have not read closely or consciously enough or is it because there's a problem with the article? • When you read an article, make brief notes summarising the key points (for example, research question, topic studied, method used, findings, what you liked or disliked about it, how it might relate to your own work, or to other literature). This writing should develop your thinking, it will give you a summary of the articles you have read so that you can build up a database you can use for your literature review and it will allow you to develop links across the papers more easily.
Finding it difficult to do a balanced critique of a study, perhaps because all the points made seem good, or you can criticise easily but find it hard to see positives.	• At the end of each main section (for example, introduction or method) write one advantage and one disadvantage about the decisions made there. • Think of different options the researchers could have taken for each decision they made. Considering the advantages and disadvantages of your suggestions might help you either identify better ways of doing things or better realise the logic behind the decisions made. • Consider what level of knowledge you could develop that may help you. For example, would it help if you knew more about qualitative research methods in general, the specific method used or the topic being discussed? If you can work out which then you can find the right supplementary reading to help you. • If you cannot change your cognitive assessment, consider your emotional response. How do you feel when you read it? Your 'heart' may tell you something your 'head' has missed. For example, you may read something and feel that it is odd or it makes you feel uncomfortable. Do not ignore these feelings, but work out why. For example, you might develop an ethical critique because when you read the method section you felt 'I wouldn't like that to happen to me'.
Having difficulty making useful notes that do not just repeat what the authors are saying.	• Develop your critical thinking by trying to make links across the papers you read; note the author's position as succinctly as possible; how they tried to make their argument sound plausible; and any assumptions in the work. • Put the paper to one side and have a short break, such as making a cup of tea. When you come back try to write your notes without referring to the paper itself. The break may allow you to mull over the key points without having to rely on the exact words used by the authors.

Challenges	And possible solutions
Finding it difficult to identify what is important	• Read the article through once so you get a sense of the main points, then go back through each section, summarising each subsection and writing one advantage and one disadvantage for the decisions made there. • Compare the abstracts of different articles. Since abstracts summarise the key points of a paper they can help you identify what is important.
Not feeling motivated to do more than read an article.	• Develop your critical thinking by joining or starting a reading group. Reading groups let you learn techniques for critical thinking from each other and can help motivate you to do the work if you have to discuss it with others.
Being unsure how to develop self-awareness to know what your standpoint is or what implicit standpoints other researchers may take.	• Do the findings resonate with what you believe or don't believe, and could this be affecting your evaluation of the study? • Read more on principles of qualitative research methods to get a better sense of what standpoints are out there and which one resonates with you and the implications for taking that position and not another.

So far, we have highlighted the importance of decision making and critical thinking. The third key underlying issue relates to our understanding of methodology, which means dealing with some weighty issues concerning the nature and purpose of research, the nature of knowledge (in contrast to beliefs, for example) and the nature and role of evidence. The next section considers some key aspects of these issues that are relevant to your research project.

Methodology

The chapters in this book cover the full range of issues involved in conducting your qualitative research project, from managing the relationship with your supervisor to writing up your report. At the heart of any research project, however, is *methodology*, and many of the chapters cover various methodological issues about which you will need to make important decisions. Although most of these are presented in stand-alone chapters (for example, Chapter 2 on research questions and Chapter 6 on data collection), you will notice as you read the book that many of the issues involved are interconnected. For example, the decisions you make concerning data collection will be related to the decisions you make regarding your research question, your analytic approach, and so on.