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Wanting to Know

Whatever you can do or dream you can do, begin it. Boldness has genius, magic and power
in it. Begin it now. Popularly attributed to Johann Wolfgang von Goethe

Research should be exciting because, quite simply, it is about discovery, finding out.
It provides challenges that people resolve in different ways. This chapter introduces
that challenge and tries to reinforce the desire to do research. People should not be
deterred if they have an image of research involving extremely complex procedures.
A thoughtful and careful person can soon acquire the necessary knowledge and skills,
but slapdash, casual research should certainly be discouraged. Just as we should not
be prepared to accept a simplistic understanding of the subjects under study so we
should be critical of simplistic (mis)understandings of what is meant by research.
Hence the task of this book is to offer guidance on making appropriate decisions in
reaching towards better research.

The Appeal of Research

For me research is the natural activity of an inquiring mind; it is simply what humans
do. I enjoy the detective story that is research, the challenge of acquiring evidence and
resolving problems. Others see research as being difficult, boring or unimportant. I
hope to persuade you that none of these need be so. In practice, of course, people do
research on a daily basis though it may go unregarded, for example: finding out what
friends and family would like for presents; comparing prices when shopping; or work-
ing out how much alcohol can be drunk without getting a hangover.

I find it hard to imagine a job graduates of leisure, sport and tourism courses are
likely to find themselves in that will not require some dealing with research: commis-
sioning or managing; conducting; assessing its significance for policy and practice;

even interpreting its (mis)representations in the media. Within their jobs people have to interpret data from some budget or output figures, gather evidence for reports, work out whether a new product/service will sell better than an existing one, or know whether data published in a professional magazine are reliable.

Is researching leisure, sport and tourism any different from doing research in other areas of social study? In terms of the range of the techniques used, the answer has to be, 'Not a lot'. The practical and theoretical context is different, but it involves the same or similar techniques as many others. Importantly for us though, people 'out there' quite like answering the questions or talking about their leisure experiences. Unfortunately for us though, this is partly because they, with some justification, think they are experts. So while they may be more willing to be involved in the research they are also more likely to be critical of it, questioning the premises and the findings.

In doing my research I like to feel that I am contributing to the wider debate. This means that the research needs to relate to the key concepts people are discussing and using in leisure, sport and tourism, rather than existing in some vacuum. It may sometimes be possible to get away with knowing little about the context of the subject under investigation, but more is needed if the goal is to understand social processes rather than just model their outcomes in describing patterns of behaviour. I want to avoid the misapprehension that research is some superior form of data gathering through which the facts will speak for themselves. Facts, if there are such things in the social sciences, do not speak for themselves. These supposed facts are jointly constructed by the acts of researchers and the operations of the social processes being examined, so need to be interpreted in that light. It is important that we should understand how this knowledge is produced.

Discussion of research methods is often embedded in complicated language that puts people off. As a result I have tried to define key terms as I go along, but at the end of the book have also provided a glossary to aid understanding. The glossary is intended to give you enough information to 'get you through' rather than being the definitive explanation. As you read more widely and your understanding of research methods grows, you will arrive at more refined definitions of these terms.

Can We Identify Good Research?

The challenge I throw out to first time researchers is, 'Why should I believe you rather than my mate, Dave, down the pub?' Believe me, Dave has an answer for everything and can be very persuasive in arguing that I should believe him rather than any alternative

explanation. Research has to withstand intense scrutiny. So can we identify 'good' research? What lends a piece of research the kind of credibility that will persuade people of its findings?

Following the apparent success of the scientific approach, many see the goal of social research to be to conduct *objective* studies using *valid* and *reliable* measures to produce findings that can be *generalised* beyond the study to a wider population. The feasibility, usefulness and even desirability of each aspect of this have been questioned and represent themes to which I shall return through the course of this book. In making claims of validity we are asserting that the research is indeed measuring or examining what it claims to. This expectation of research seems eminently reasonable, but involves quite some claim if our research is about complex ideas like flow, fairness, crime, health, patriarchy, power, social inclusion or globalisation. Similarly, although we might want measures that can be relied upon to be consistent (reliable) across different studies by different people, it has to be questioned how realistic a prospect this is in the context of approaches used in leisure, sport and tourism research.

In the introduction to their reader on dealing with data, Sapsford and Jupp suggest that:

> The major concern is with *validity*, by which we mean the design of research to provide credible conclusions: whether the evidence which the research offers can bear the weight of the interpretation that is put on it. Every report of research embodies an argument: 'on the basis of this evidence I argue that these conclusions are true ...' What has to be established in order that the report's conclusions can be believed is that the arguments embodied in the report are *valid* ones: that the data *do* measure or characterise what the authors claim, and that the interpretations *do* follow from them. (1996: 1)

Being objective means adopting a value neutral position free of bias and prejudice. This kind of clinical approach may be intuitively appealing, but I doubt that it is possible in the social sciences. Indeed the pretence may be unhelpful and confusing. It is unreasonable and misleading to see the researcher as a neutral, sterilised research instrument. Different people will respond to the researcher in different ways in different environments; and different researchers will see, hear and understand different things because of their personal experience, knowledge and values. A critical approach to research should be prepared to challenge at every level our presumptions about the way the world works, and indeed about the way we think and do research.

Consideration of the merits of various approaches to research commonly start with a distinction between quantitative and qualitative data. Quantitative data are based on items that can be counted and subjected to mathematical analysis (the number of

people with access to a home computer, the number of participant occasions, cost of holiday, age, etc.); qualitative data are words or images that represent phenomena that do not lend themselves to precise measurement.

Different people think about the world in different ways and important philosophical principles underlie these debates, but some people just feel more comfortable with the apparent precision of measuring things, while others want to know about feelings, meanings and processes.

If I were to say, 'I feel 77 bad today', you would probably look at me in a strange way. If I said, 'I feel 77 bad today because I've had 9 negative experiences and only 2 positive ones', you might begin to think that there is some strange logic to what I'm saying, but still be quizzical as I add, 'And on top of that my stress level is 120 because my boss is a 4'.

But then I explain that:

Depression is measured by Roberts' $D = (N^2 - P^2)/d$
(number of negative experiences squared minus number of positive experiences squared, all divided by the number of days over which we are measuring)

Aha, a researcher. He must know what he is talking about.

Of course I made it up. You must not believe everything you read in books.

The methods chosen by researchers reflect assumptions held about the nature of research and the world. Failing to examine carefully what passes for objectivity may result in naive research. This is not to give approval to those attempting to pass off personal opinion as sound research – far from it. Critical research should ensure enhanced not reduced rigour. Being critical in your research approach means trying not to take things for granted. Research is about continually asking questions, not just of people, but of previous research, of the data, of the research process (to try to find the best approach) and of oneself; in short, of everything in sight. It involves a sharp focus and an appreciation of the bigger picture. It also requires an appreciation of the part played by researchers themselves in producing a particular set of findings.

A researcher should always be the most thorough going critic of their own research, constantly asking questions and raising doubts. Approaching research in that way will help to enhance its quality and credibility. Imagine being interviewed on radio or television by a tough, persistent interviewer. All the points of challenge should have been addressed already, prior to, or during, the research.

Returning to my challenge about why I should believe your research rather than my mate Dave down the pub, my suggestion is that it requires:

1 a carefully formulated problem with precise terminology/definitions
2 an understanding of the surrounding context
3 credible data collection from a suitable set of sources
4 appropriate and competent analysis
5 an informed interpretation and preparedness to acknowledge contradictory evidence.

Remember — when doing small-scale research

Don't be too ambitious. Devise a 'nice little project' – it can always expand later.

Rather than covering a wide area superficially, it is normally better to explore a subject in detail so that you can say something substantive.

Be precise and carefully formulate your research task rather than just 'looking at' something. Ask yourself what questions you want to address, what information you need to do that, where you will get that information from and what you will do with it. At the same time you have to cultivate that most desirable of characteristics, an open mind.

Careful planning should involve a full literature search to situate your work in the context of research and others' thinking.

Although you have to 'own' the research, make the most of whatever help you can find: librarians, supervisors, local experts, friends who are prepared to tell you that you are wrong.

Don't procrastinate, but don't leap into the field before making proper preparations. Invest effort in negotiating access to the people and sites you need to involve in your research. You cannot expect everyone 'out there' to drop everything for you. Be prepared to make contingency plans for when that key informant refuses to see you. Persevere rather than give up when you encounter the inevitable setbacks.

Even if you are a slow reader like I am, try not to restrict your reading too much. Read widely round your topic well past your formal literature review so that you can become 'expert'.

Good research projects are a whole rather than a series of discrete entities. Make sure, for example, that the literature review is properly integrated with your own investigations and that the method and techniques you select are a logical extension of that review and the way you have formulated the research problem.

Make sure you don't forget your good ideas. Keep a notebook to record and rework your ideas – they are precious.

If you are engaged in empirical work, don't leave consideration of the analysis until after you have collected the data. Work out early on whether the kind of analysis you think might be most revealing requires data in a particular form. And if you are able to get someone else to enter your data into the computer, check your forms/questionnaires with them early on.

Don't assume that when you have collected the data you have broken the back of the exercise. Detailed analysis takes time and you should make sure you get maximum benefit from the data you have worked so hard to get. This applies as much to qualitative data as to quantitative.

For most of us writing is hard work, so make sure you leave enough time to do this properly, and write specifically for your audience.

Discipline yourself and resist the temptation to bung in everything that just might be relevant.

Don't forget: don't plagiarise by passing off other people's work as your own.

What the Book Offers

The book does not cover the detail of quantitative approaches that are addressed well in other publications. Instead, while certainly not ignoring the quantitative, I shall give more emphasis to the qualitative dimensions of research. I also aim to bring a more critical approach to the arena of leisure, sport and tourism by linking to some of the key concepts to do with academic and professional practice (gender, equity, social inclusion, etc.). Hence readers will be encouraged not just to model outcomes of behaviours, but also to try to gain an understanding of the processes that underpin them.

I find people who just know *the* right way to do research quite worrying. So, I have tried to avoid writing one of those 'how to' books that purports to offer the perfect recipe and cover all the multitude of techniques available. Consequently the chapters are not written to a standard format; they address issues that have been important to me in doing research in leisure.

To avoid purely abstract discussion of research methods, the text makes extensive use of real projects from the field. A lot of the time this means drawing on research I have been involved in myself. The intention is certainly not to parade this as perfect practice (I have a rather better appreciation of its limitations than most), but rather to present a series of exemplars suitable for examination so that you can work out what, to your mind, is good and bad practice, and why. Researchers often do things that they recognise as being 'less than ideal', because they are constrained by pragmatic considerations (logistical difficulties, time or money). They may also be trying to balance conflicting considerations, for example, amount of information gained and imposition on the respondent/participant.

The intention is that the text should pose questions and provide material to help the active reader move towards their own answers. Slightly different research problems may benefit from substantially different approaches. Indeed, two different researchers may approach the same problem from very different angles (Chapter 15). It is possible that on the basis of your own experience or what you have read elsewhere you disagree with some of the points that are made in this book. That does not matter in and of itself – there is plenty of disagreement in research circles about the best way to do research. What does matter is that you should be able to mount a reasoned argument about why you have chosen the strategy, technique or even wording that you have.

The book contains some exercises that can be completed either individually or in groups (or ignored if the reader is already adept) as a means of beginning to get to grips with the challenges posed in carrying out research. Doing these should encourage you to rehearse arguments and play with ideas in working out practical solutions

that will shape your research. The intention is to promote a DIY approach, but if you have the opportunity to work through some of these issues with someone else, the ensuing debate is likely to help enormously.

Presumably if you are reading this book you either want to do research or have to do it because your boss or course leader says so. The ideal, of course, is that even if you start doing it because you have to, you finish it because you want to and have become enthused by the process. While books like this can help give confidence in developing research skills, it undoubtedly helps if there is someone around to act as a sounding board. I am fortunate in that I conduct almost all my research as part of a team, but you may need to prevail upon work colleagues, friends, family or fellow students. Those sounding boards will also be helpful in getting the most out of the ideas discussed in this book.

You never know, research may become your recreational drug of choice.

Further Lines of Enquiry

The Higher Education Academy Network for hospitality, leisure, sport and tourism has set up a research gateway that provides useful research resources:www.hlst.ltsn.ac.uk/gateway/gateway.html.

Howard Becker (1998) in his book, *Tricks of the Trade: How to Think about Your Research While You're Doing It*, gives a good insight to this process of continual questioning that I have been discussing. Otherwise, start with the article you've found most interesting over the past year and ask yourself, 'What is going on here?' See if you can reconstruct the story of the research.