1 Becoming a Social Scientist

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This book is for you if you have already obtained a first degree in one of the social sciences and are now on track to becoming a social scientist. There is a considerable difference between getting a degree in social science and being a social scientist: for the latter you need a range of professional skills as well as a deep knowledge of social science. One almost essential qualification to become a social scientist is a further degree: a Masters or a PhD. To obtain these, you are likely to have to undertake courses to advance your knowledge and expertise in social science. But often, these courses give too little attention to the skills needed to be a proficient social scientist.

This book, in contrast to most books on research methods and similar topics, is focused on the skills that do not form part of the standard academic social science curriculum. These include how to conduct a systematic literature review, how to use the internet to maximum effect as part of your research, how to write research project proposals, how to manage research projects, how to give a presentation, how to give tutorials and classes to undergraduates, and what you can do to get a job once you have finished your degree.

These and other skills are needed if you are to survive as a professional social scientist. In the past, they were skills that one generally picked up 'on the job', but it is much quicker and easier to learn from the experts who have taken time to systematise their knowledge than it is to learn from listening and watching what colleagues do.

This has also been the view of some of those who fund graduate programmes. In the United Kingdom, for instance, over the last ten years the Economic and Social Research Council has developed its *Training Guidelines* (ESRC, 2005), and is becoming

increasingly firm about requiring courses on professional skills in the programmes that it recognises. More recently, some of the other UK Research Councils have begun to demand the inclusion of similar topics as part of the education of research students.

This introductory chapter begins with a consideration of what it might mean to be a professional social scientist and then summarises the content of the following chapters.

How to become a professional social scientist

The idea of a 'professional' social scientist is rather a new one. Most learned societies for the social sciences were founded during the middle of the last century (exceptions are the Royal Geographical Society, founded in 1830, and the British Psychological Society, 1901), and these foundations marked the start of the idea that there were distinct social science disciplines, although not yet professions. It was not until the 1960s and the widespread employment of social scientists in central and local government, and later in business, that one could begin to consider social science as a profession as well as an academic vocation.

For this reason, what it means to be a professional social scientist is much less well defined than is the case, for example, for a lawyer, architect or doctor. Clearly, there is much professional knowledge involved, such as one might learn in a first degree or Masters. But just possessing a degree would not seem to be sufficient. In addition, one needs to gain entry to a community of practice (Brown and Duguid, 1991), in which one can call upon and be respected by one's fellow professionals. This is often explicitly recognised in training for a PhD where, as well as an 'original contribution to knowledge', it is expected that candidates will have begun to make links with other researchers in their particular field of social science, perhaps by attending conferences and giving presentations about their work.

Professional social scientists, then, are people who use their social science knowledge in their everyday work and who are also linked into a network with other social scientists. Many social scientists also try to contribute to social science in some way: through formulating new knowledge, perhaps, but also by passing on the ideas of social science to others through teaching or writing. If being a professional social scientist is seen as a set of linked activities, rather than as describing the qualities of a person, it becomes clearer why there are some specific skills involved in becoming

one. These skills can be learned in much the same way as one can learn about social science concepts or methods. It is the various skills that are needed to be a professional social scientist that are described in the following chapters.

Each of the chapters follows a similar pattern: a general overview of the topic, some detailed advice, a short retrospective section from a graduate student reflecting on his or her own personal experience, and a selection of readings for pursuing the topic in more depth.

An essential preliminary to doing any social scientific research is to conduct a review of the literature. This has two primary functions: to ensure that your research question has not already been answered in a previous study, and to relate your research to what has gone before, so that it contributes effectively to a growing body of knowledge. The literature review is an essential chapter in any dissertation or PhD thesis and will inform the writing of project research reports. However, while anyone can gather together a few relevant articles and review them, there is considerable skill in doing the job properly. In Chapter 2, Annette Boaz shows how one should set about a review in a systematic manner, first defining the topic, locating sources, evaluating the quality of the sources, synthesising what they say and finally reporting the results. If you carry out a review in this way, there is some chance that you will identify all the significant prior work and, importantly, be able to explain and justify the method you used to do so.

One new type of source for previous literature is the internet, which provides an immensely rich, but also tricky resource for researchers. The internet also offers a wholly new site for data collection. In Chapter 3, Nina Wakeford shows how the world wide web can be used to search for existing literature, both of the conventional published kind, but also in the form of databases of citations and surveys. She also describes how the internet can be the basis for primary data collection through observation of the traces of internet users revealed in email, chat rooms, blogs and websites. Many of the traditional techniques of the social scientist, such as standardised surveys, interviews and even focus groups, can be adapted for use over the internet, as this chapter explains.

Internet research introduces some ethical issues additional to those encountered in more conventional research sites. In Chapter 4, Mark Israel examines the range of ethical questions likely to be raised in all types of social science research and describes the increasingly tightly regulated processes of obtaining ethical approval. He begins by considering the main areas where ethical dilemmas occur: consent, confidentiality and

privacy, harm, and relationships with subjects, organisations and institutions. He then reviews the current structures of ethics governance in the United Kingdom and compares them with the structures to be found in the USA and the Commonwealth. Finally, he shows how to prepare a submission to a research ethics committee in preparation for developing a funded research proposal.

Researchers always grumble about the amount of time they spend writing proposals for projects, rather than doing research, but as Keith Punch shows in Chapter 5 on developing and writing proposals, so long as one knows the basic rules about what to include, writing good proposals can be a creative and satisfying task – especially if you then get the money. As he points out, the secret of a good proposal is to present a logical argument that meets the reader's expectations about what should be requested and why that is necessary in order carry out the research. The question to be addressed in the research must be clearly specified and the methods to be used must be laid out in a way that convinces the reader, that is, those in control of the funding, that the research will yield valid, reliable and significant results.

Once you have gained project funding, you will need skills in project management. These skills can also be very helpful if you are a lone researcher, for example, doing research for a higher degree. Linda McKee and Jonathon Tritter offer a wealth of advice in Chapter 6. They observe that managing a project is likely to call on skills in negotiation with participants, supervisors and funders, as well as time management and estimating and managing the use of resources. One of the critical factors is ensuring that there is adequate communication between all those involved. Another is being clear about what outputs are expected from the project and how these will be created. And since sometimes, even with the best managed projects, things go wrong, it is a good idea to lay out some contingency plans.

It is increasingly recognised that the results of research count as 'intellectual property' and consequently have a legal status. Researchers may need to protect their work against others' attempts to purloin it, for example by copying reports wholesale, or may need to counter the refusal of sponsors to allow results to be published. In many universities, some intellectual property belongs not to the researcher, but to the institution. For these reasons, it is essential to understand the laws that protect and assign intellectual property. In Chapter 7, Alison Firth outlines the meaning of intellectual property rights and explains what you can and cannot do, not only with conventional reports, but also with databases and collections. She also explains how you can register your rights and how employment and research sponsorship contracts can affect them.

While most projects will need to disseminate their results to a wider range of audiences than just the research community, it is still the case that every project, no matter how large or small, is required to publish its findings in the academic literature before the results are treated as having any scientific validity. In Chapter 8, Nigel Fielding outlines the structure of a typical dissertation or thesis and what should go into each section or chapter. He describes how academic reports get written and identifies some of the problems that new authors are likely to have to overcome. Writing policy-relevant reports can have unexpected perils, as well as the gratifying feeling that you are contributing to the policy process. He includes a case study that examines some examples of the problems and rewards that he experienced when reporting his own controversial research.

Nowadays, in addition to contributing to the academic literature, the results from social science research are often distributed through press releases, lectures at workshops, presentations at conferences and on websites. In Chapter 9, Rowena Murray describes the audiences that these different modes of reporting can reach, and how the work you present needs to be tailored for each medium and each audience. She begins by describing how to select a journal and how to target your writing to the journal's requirements. She explains how to construct a proposal to a book publisher and emphasises that a book is very different from a thesis. Writing for the media (newspapers, magazines and the 'trade press') demands not only a distillation of your message but also a quite different style of writing from the usual academic repertoire. She concludes with some advice about making effective verbal presentations. Throughout, the message is that it is necessary to 'translate' your findings into forms appropriate for the audience you are trying to reach.

It is very common for postgraduates to contribute to undergraduate tutorials. In many departments, postgraduates are an essential part of the teaching mix and one that is welcomed by undergraduate students. But all too often, postgraduates are thrown in at the deep end without much in the way of training or mentoring. In Chapter 10, David Mills redresses the balance by offering some good advice about how to make your first steps as a teacher. He also addresses the important question of whether you should accept the task when it is offered, or reject it as a distraction from your studies.

Finally, in Chapter 11, Jeanette Holt considers the career paths that will open up for you as a social scientist with a postgraduate qualification. A job as an academic in a university is the dream of some postgraduates, but it can be a tough and poorly paid career. This chapter outlines the many alternatives, from social research in government and private sector organisations, to jobs where social science is a useful but not

essential background, such as social work. Even when you have selected the kind of job you want, there are still the hurdles of finding a vacancy and getting a job offer. The chapter therefore also takes you through the processes of locating jobs, preparing a persuasive CV and making an application.

Social science is becoming more and more indispensable to the functioning of society. Social policy has nowadays to be 'evidence-based', and that evidence is the product of social science research. Media commentators rely on social science for many of their critiques. Advertising and market research techniques rely on the results of social science research. Social science informs the work of charities and non-governmental organisations about their policies. In all these areas, the contributions of professional social scientists are needed. We, the authors of the chapters in this book, hope that it will help to make your path to becoming a social scientist easier and more certain.