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Data and Case Study Research in Accounting and Finance

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By this stage in your research you will have identified your research focus and defined your research questions. Attention should next be turned to how you plan to gather the necessary data to meet the requirements of your research project. Before collecting any data, however, it is important to carefully consider the issues related to the data collection process. Without careful consideration and adequate planning, it is easy to become somewhat overwhelmed by the amount of information that can be collected and end up 'drowning in data' (Berg and Lune, 2013, p.53) or to find yourself in the opposite situation of being unable to collect a sufficient amount of data because of a lack of appropriate sources. The first step in thinking about data, then, is to identify appropriate sources and plan how you are going to capture the required data from these sources. Different areas of accounting and finance research have different traditions for conducting research, which will have a direct impact on the researcher's choice of data collection method. One method of collecting data, the case study approach, is a methodological process that utilises a wide range of data sources and techniques. The strengths, difficulties and practicalities of using this approach in a research project are discussed below in order to give you an opportunity to assess the applicability of this approach to your particular research focus and questions.

Data and different research traditions

Within accounting and finance research there are a diverse range of approaches that can be employed when carrying out research and, as a result, there is a plethora of collection techniques that are applicable to this type of research. The selection of a particular method of data collection is motivated by several factors. At the centre of this decision is your view of what constitutes knowledge and your consideration of the nature of social reality. Space restrictions prohibit us from embarking on a full discussion of these issues; however, in previous chapters, consideration has been given to the various viewpoints that may underpin accounting and finance research and which result in the myriad approaches that are employed in that research. It is important to note at this stage how these viewpoints influence your choice of research focus and questions, and thus have a direct impact on your choice of research method. To demonstrate this point we will take one example, alluded to in Chapter 1, of financial accounting research, which can be split into the two traditions of realist research and relativist research. The methodologies applied across these approaches will vary widely; those approaching financial accounting research from the realist tradition will be more likely to take a viewpoint that lies towards the positivist side of the Methods Map (displayed in Chapter 4) and will favour methods that seek to verify hypotheses using statistical generalisations (Guba and Lincoln, 1994), thus making them more likely to adopt quantitative research methods. On the other hand, the views of researchers whose outlook is born of relativism lie closer to the interpretivist approach to conducting research; these researchers would likely be aiming to understand the underlying processes of a phenomenon as experienced by the social actors themselves and will favour qualitative methods of inquiry. In short, the approach you take in carrying out your research and the data sources that you select will depend upon the wider methodology and philosophical orientation that you adopt as a researcher, as well as the purpose and nature of the research projects you are conducting.

Sources of data

Moving on from your ontological and epistemological beliefs, there is a further important decision at the inception of your research project that you must address; this concerns the data sources that you intend to draw on in the course of your investigation. There are two main types of data that are used in accounting and finance research: primary and secondary. These can each be used singularly or, in certain situations, there may be greater benefit to be had in combining both types of data. This is discussed further in the sections below.

■ Primary data sources

We will first consider primary data sources, as these constitute the most common type of data used in accounting and finance research. Primary data sources are materials that provide first-hand evidence concerning the topic under investigation. As a researcher, they allow you to get as close as possible to the source of the event or phenomenon under study. As such, primary data sources cover a wide range of materials and methods. These materials can be in written or non-written form. The following table contains some, but not all, types of primary source that have been utilised in accounting and finance research, many of which are captured within the methods discussed in later chapters of this book.

Table 5.1: Sources of primary data

Written primary sources	Non-written primary sources
Annual reports	Audio recordings
Interview transcripts	Video recordings
Field notes from focus groups	Oral histories
Diaries, journals and memoirs	
Newspapers (written at the time of the event)	
Photographs	

Your choice of data sources will depend upon the wider methodological and philosophical orientation that you adopt as a researcher, as well as the purpose and nature of the research projects you are conducting, as described earlier. These issues will impact on the relevant unit of analysis; that is, the identification of who the correct person(s) or organisation(s) are for your current research project (Ghuri & Grønhaug, 2005). Naturally the number of variables present here means there are a wide variety of potential topics and viewpoints to be considered; there is a plethora of primary data collection sources applicable to accounting and finance research, which results in the uptake of a number of different methodological approaches. These range from qualitative methods, such as case study methods (see below), interviews, focus groups and ethnography (Chapter 7) and archival and oral history sources (Chapter 6), to quantitative data gathering methods (Chapter 9).

Once you have identified a primary data source, it is important to carefully consider the implications of your choice before embarking on data collection. Problems during the data collection process may halt progress in your research project and should be accounted for in advance so that they can be mitigated when they arise. With that in mind, Table 5.2 includes a summary of some of the strengths and difficulties associated with primary data sources.