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Finding Your Data

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In this chapter ...

The backbone of every research project is the collection of data which a researcher has identified as worthy of analysis. Interviews, survey questionnaires, publically available information and audio-visual material are all potential sources of data to a researcher. Collecting data can, however, be a daunting experience, either because you have too little data or because what looked like a rich dataset has turned into a nightmarish sense of data-overload. It is therefore helpful to spend time thinking about where you will look for data. Evaluating data sources will save valuable time and resources, leading to better analysis and more robust results. What constitutes good practice when collecting data is very much dependent on the research tradition within which your project is placed. How do different research traditions define and use data? For those scholars whose work you are engaging with closely, where did they source their data? This chapter will help you evaluate data quality, consider ways in which different sources of data be combined and will provide practical advice on data collection. By following the advice offered here, you will collect data that is relevant to your research methodology, insightful and create the opportunity for you to build high quality insights.

The chapter consists of four main sections:

- Data in different research traditions
- *Primary and secondary data* (what kinds of data can we employ in a research project, differences between primary and secondary data)
- *Collecting data* (negotiating access for primary data collection, evaluating the quality of secondary data)
- *Data triangulation* (using multiple sources of data).

Data in different research traditions

Elsewhere in this book, we have established that research is a broad term which covers a range of different views of what constitutes knowledge and whether social realities are fixed or constructed. Each of these traditions has developed accepted practices in terms the nature of data and approaches to both data collection and data analysis (see Chapters 4, 6 and 9). For the moment, we would simply assert that what is considered 'data' within the different epistemological traditions varies widely.

On the one hand, the natural sciences are often based on a view (*positivism*) which assumes an objective world that exists independent of the researcher; one that is based on universal laws of human nature and social reality (Patton and Appelbaum, 2003). From within this worldview, research designs which seek, for example, to verify hypotheses using statistical generalizations (Guba and Lincoln, 1994) seem entirely reasonable. As a result, management research within such a tradition would feature data gathered in the form of large-scale surveys, questionnaires and other methods which entail the quantification of a phenomenon, e.g. examining the amount, intensity or frequency of something (Valsiner, 2000, Ketokivi and Choi, 2014). Wherever possible, data within this epistemological tradition is gathered in specific ways that are intended to allow generalizations across populations.

At the other end of the epistemological spectrum, other research traditions begin with the premise that for researchers to understand complex social phenomenon, they should consider the subjective experiences of participants (Sandberg, 2000), which Weber defines as *verstehen* (Weber, 1964). This view of research highlights the socially constructed nature of our experience, where, in simple terms, our perceptions are shaped by our own past experiences, the views of influential others, etc. So-called social constructionism (Luscher et al., 2006, Berger and Luckmann, 1966) is a well established research tradition in its own right, but is very different from the kinds of scientific, factual and objective orientation of a positivistic research tradition. Researchers using qualitative data in the form of narrative (text) such as interviews transcripts, observations and documents (Patton, 2002) could then perform their analysis under either tradition, with interview data being regarded as objective or subjective according to the research tradition being adopted. More constructionist epistemological traditions

aim to uncover the complexity of everyday life through ‘thick descriptions’: accounts of personal experiences, views, emotions, processes, etc. (Suter, 2011).

Whereas research traditions differ significantly in terms of how the researcher views the world, most research puts significant value on rigorous data collection and analysis process (Suter, 2011), regardless of whether the research process places the researcher as outsider or insider, objective or subjective, etc.

Primary data

We now turn our attention to types of data. Primary data is original data, generated for the specific purposes of a research project, such as transcripts from interviews that you have conducted yourself, questionnaires from a survey which you have organized for your research, etc. (Bryman and Bell, 2007). When starting a research project, there are many sources from which you can draw your data, such as interview transcripts, documents, audio-visual material or public sources such as newspapers, websites, etc. (Baxter and Jack, 2008). In essence every source of information that is relevant to your research question is a potential form of data (Bryman and Bell, 2007). In general data can be numeric, textual, visual or a combination of the above (Blaxter et al. 2001). The following list covers the main types of primary data each researcher can choose from:

- Questionnaires
- Surveys / web-based surveys
- Transcripts of interviews
- Field notes from focus groups
- Observations
- Charts, maps, tables or diagrams
- Archives, including documents, reports, etc.
- Ethnography, photos
- Diaries
- Results from experiments

Of course, which of these types of data you choose will depend upon the wider methodology and philosophical orientation that you are adopting as a researcher, as well as the purpose and nature of the research projects you are conducting. As described earlier, an empirically-oriented piece of research from the interpretivist or social constructionist tradition would likely be aiming to understand the underlying processes of a phenomenon as experienced by social actors themselves. Therefore, this would probably rely on qualitative primary data (such as interviews, documents and observations). For example in a longitudinal case study research of Singapore Airlines, Heracleous and Wirtz (2014) collected qualitative data (observations and in depth interviews) as their primary source in order to explore the airline's strategic processes for sustainable competitive advantage over time. In this context, primary qualitative data (personal accounts from employees as well as observational data from the researchers) collected over a period of 10 years, uncovered subtle insights about the underlying processes within the organization and how these processes shaped the company's strategy.

On the other hand, a researcher following a positivist tradition would most likely gather primary data in the form of quantitative surveys, questionnaires or perhaps databases. Following such a research approach, Schneider et al. (2005) examined data occurring from a large survey in 56 supermarket departments. In their quantitative analysis the researchers tested three hypotheses on the correlation between different organizational processes, customer satisfaction and overall sales. The construction of a conceptual model that hypothesises linkages, effects and causal mechanisms, and the subsequent gathering of data to test these hypotheses rely on data; yet both the data and the analytical process vary from one research tradition to another.

In the examples above we see how different types of primary data (qualitative data such as those resulting from interviews and observations and quantitative data such as those resulting from large scale surveys) support different types of research. Whereas these distinctions are clear in most cases, it is possible that an individual research project can span some of these boundaries, opening new ways of researching. As one simple example, questionnaires may feature both Likert scale questions and free text sections providing the researcher with both can qualitative and quantitative data. Mixed method research designs are increasingly common.