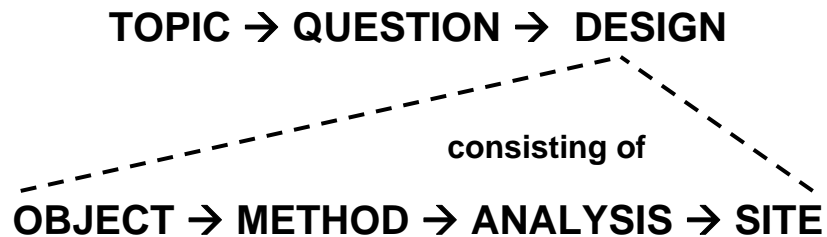


Seven Key Concepts in Social Research

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These seven concepts figure in almost all social research. Their order of flow is logical, but it is not always the order that is followed in practice. One should, however, be able to reconstruct this order retrospectively – before one begins gathering data

1. TOPIC

The research topic is the general subject of your research: what it is about. It describes an area of interest about which one might ask any number of questions. “Religious social activists” is a topic; so are “the spiritual lives of religious social activists” (to name two of the topics that I have investigated). The key distinction here is between an area of interest and a specific question that one hopes one’s research will answer.

2. QUESTION

A research question is the key element in any serious research. Typically growing out of the scholarly literature, it asks a specific question about one’s topic of interest. For example: my social activist research has taken up such questions as: “What formal motives do religious social activists report for engaging in their work for human betterment?”; “What sorts of elements do Catholic social activists use to express their identities as both Catholics and as activists?”; “What resources do religious social activists sustain their commitments and their communities?”. Such questions are not only more specific than are research topics; they are also grounded in specific scholarly literatures. They use concepts from those literatures and reflect on the adequacy of both the concepts and the literatures for understanding the topic in question.

3. DESIGN

The Research Question determines your research design. Most dissertations use a descriptive design. Some use a correlational design. A few use a true case study design. Any of these can be either qualitative or quantitative. A very few dissertation use an action research design. (See the *handout “Varieties of Research Design”*.)

Research designs combine our final four concepts into a coherent whole

4. OBJECT

A research object is the kind of thing that one is looking for in one's research. Different sorts of things have different metaphysical statuses. Much of my research on social activists, for example, seeks their opinions. As such opinions exist "in their heads", so to speak, I must ask my informants questions. As I am more interested in "deep" opinions than in "shallow" opinions, much of my research involves interviews.

I am also, however, interested in things about which my informants are not necessarily conscious. I thus observe their behavior, seeking to locate patterns that are beyond their awareness.

5. METHOD

Research method comes after one knows the kind of thing one is looking for – i.e., the research object. Different methods produce different objects. One cannot, for example, gather deep opinions from a survey nor deduce people's intentions from their overt behavior. See the handout "How to Choose a Research Method" for guidance about the relationships between research methods and research objects.

6. ANALYSIS

Once one has chosen ones object and method, one knows what kind of data the research will produce. Only then can one choose how that data should be analyzed. Some methods generate data suitable for quantitative analysis. Others generate qualitative data. There are, however, several different kinds of each, and one's analytic scheme depends on what type one has.

This is usually pretty clear with quantitative data: for example, one doesn't typically run cross-tabs with small data sets, because cross-tabs require a large number of measurements for meaningful comparisons. But qualitative data also come in several types. For example, hermeneutic interviews must be analyzed for meaning, while phenomenological interviews must be analyzed for experiences. There's no one-size-fits-all.

7. SITE

The research site is the place where one does one's investigations. Except for ethnographies, one usually chooses a site based on one's research question and the method one can use to generate data there. This makes sense, because one cannot find answers to all research questions in every site. (Ethnographers often start with a site, and then find interesting questions to ask there. But this is very hard work.)

My current "site" for social activist research is a Los Angeles-based network of activists, most of whom know one another but few of whom work for the same organizations.