Development of Research Proposal

Research Proposal –

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WHAT IS A RESEARCH PROPOSAL?

- The proposal describes:
  - What the proposed research is about?
  - What is trying to achieve and how it will go about doing that?
  - What will we learn from that?
  - Why it is worth learning?
- The three most basic questions useful in guiding development of proposal:
  - What? What is the purpose of the research? What are we trying to find out?
  - How? How will the proposed research answer these questions?
  - Why? Why is this research worth doing (or funding)? Or, what will we learn, and why it is worth knowing?

CHECKLIST OF POSSIBLE SECTIONS FOR RESEARCH PROPOSALS

- Title and title page
- Abstract
- Introduction: area and topic, background and context, statement of purpose
- Research questions: general and specific
- Conceptual framework, theory, hypotheses (if appropriate)
- The literature
- Methods: design – strategy and framework, sample and sampling, data collection – instruments and procedures, data analysis
- Significance
- Limitations and delimitations (if appropriate)
- Consent, access and human participants' protection
- References
- Appendices (e.g. timetable, budget, instruments, etc.)

ABSTRACTS AND TITLES

- An abstract is a brief summary, whether of a proposal or a finished study.
- Abstracts play an important in the research literature, and they are required in proposals (usually), in dissertations and in research articles in most referred journals.
- Abstracts and titles are at the heart of the hierarchical indexing system for the research literature, which becomes more and more important as the volume of research continues to build.
- This indexing system enables researchers first to scan a title, to see if they need to go further into a project.
- If so, they can go to the abstract, which will tell them more, and perhaps enough. If they need to go still further, the last chapter (for example, of a dissertation) will often contain a summary of study and its findings, in more detail than the abstract. They can then go to the full report if they need still more detail about the research.

ABSTRACTS AND TITLES

- Good abstract writing requires the skill of saying as much as possible in as few words as possible.
- For a proposal, the abstract needs to deal with two main issues:
  - What the study is about and aims to achieve (usually best stated in terms of its research questions), how it intends to do that.
- For a report, the abstract would need three main sections: the above two, and a third which summarizes what was found.
- The abstract should give an overview not just of the study itself, but also the argument behind the study, and this should run through these sections.
- Together with the title, the abstract is written last, since it is difficult to summarize what has not yet been written.

ABSTRACTS AND TITLES

- Titles also have importance in the research literature indexing process, as indicated.
- Therefore a title should not just be an afterthought, nor should it use words or phrases which obscure rather than reveal meaning.
- The title should convey as much information as possible in as few words as possible.

INTRODUCTION AND CONTEXT

- There are many ways a topic can be introduced, and all topics have a background and a context.
- These need to be dealt with in the introduction, which sets the stage for the research.
- A strong introduction is important to a convincing proposal. Its purpose is not to review the literature, but rather to show generally how the proposed study fits into what is already known, and to locate it in relation to present knowledge and practice.

INTRODUCTION AND CONTEXT

- In the introduction, there should be a clear identification of the topic area, and a general statement of purpose, and these can lead later into the research questions.
- Specific features of the proposed study can also be identified here, as appropriate: for example, if personal knowledge or experience form an important part of the context, or if personal knowledge or experience form an important part of the context, or if preliminary or pilot studies have been done, or if the study will involve secondary analysis of existing data.

INTRODUCTION AND CONTEXT

- For qualitative proposals, two other points apply here.
  - One is the first general evaluation question: what is the position behind this research? This can be answered in general terms, to orient the reader early in the proposal.
  - The other is more specific: where on the structure continuum is the proposed study?
- This strongly influences later sections of the proposal.
- If a tightly structured qualitative study is planned, the proposal can proceed along similar lines to the quantitative proposal.

INTRODUCTION AND CONTEXT

- If a more emergent study is planned, where focus and structure will develop as the study proceeds, this point must be made clearly.
- In the former case, there will be general and specific research questions.
- In the latter case, there will only be general orienting research questions.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

- General and Specific Research Questions
  - Empirical research is driven by research questions.
  - One way to get to research questions is to identify a research area and topic, and then develop questions within that area and topic, working deductively from general to specific questions
  - Another is more inductive to begin with some specific questions, and to work from these back to more general questions.
  - General research questions guide our thinking, and are of great value in organizing the research project, but they are not themselves specific enough to be answered.
  - Specific research questions ideally follow from the general question(s). They direct the empirical procedures and they are the questions which are actually answered in the research.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

- The Role of Research Questions
  - Research questions are central, whether they are prespecified or whether they unfold during the project.
  - They do five main things:
    - They organized the project, and give it direction and coherence.
    - They delimit the project showing it boundaries.
    - They keep the researcher focused during the project.
    - They provide a framework for writing up the project.
    - They point to the data that will be needed.

CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK, THEORY AND HYPOTHESES

- A conceptual framework is a representation, either graphically or in narrative form, of the main concepts or variables, and their presumed relationship with each other.
- It is usually best shown as a diagram.
- Some sort of conceptual framework is often implicit as the question development stage proceeds.
- Often it helps in the development of the research questions to make this conceptual framework explicit.
- In those cases, development of the development of the research questions and the conceptual framework goes hand in hand.
- The direction of thinking may be from conceptual framework to the research questions, or vice-versa, or they may interact with each other in some reciprocal way.

CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK, THEORY AND HYPOTHESES

- A conceptual framework can help us with the following:
  - It brings clarity and focus, helping us to see and organize the research questions more clearly.
  - It helps to make explicit what we already know and think about the area and topic.
  - It can help considerably in communicating ideas about the research; therefore it can simplify the preparation of the research proposal, and also can also make it more convincing.
  - It encourages selection, and assists in focusing and delimiting thinking during the planning stage.

THE LITERATURE

- The proposal needs to be clear on the position taken with respect to the literature in the proposed study.
- There are three possibilities:
  - The literature is reviewed comprehensively in advance of the study, and that review is included as part of the proposal.
  - The literature will be reviewed comprehensively ahead of the empirical stage of the research, but that review will not be done until the proposal is approved. In this case, the nature and scope of the literature to be reviewed should be indicated,
  - The literature will deliberately not be reviewed prior to the empirical work, but will be integrated into the research during the study, as in the grounded theory. In this case, the nature and the scope of the literature should be indicated.

THE LITERATURE

- For some qualitative proposals, the literature may be used in sharpening the focus of the study, and to give structure to its questions and design.
- If so, this should be indicated, along with how it is to be done.
- In all cases, the researcher needs to connect the proposed study to the literature.

METHODS

- Design, strategy and framework
  - For basic quantitative designs (experimental, quasi-experimental, and correlation survey designs) or variations of them, the conceptual framework may be shown here instead of earlier.
  - In qualitative studies, the location of the study along with the structure continuum is particularly important for its design.
  - Qualitative designs such as case studies (single or multiple, cross-sectional or longitudinal), ethnography or grounded theory may overlap, and elements of these strategies may be used separately or together.

METHODS

- Design, strategy and framework
  - Qualitative studies vary greatly on the issue of the predeveloped conceptual frameworks, and the position of the study on the matter should be indicated.
  - A fully or partly predeveloped framework should be shown.
  - Where one will be developed, it needs to be indicated how that will be done.
  - This will interact with data collection and analysis, and may be better dealt with there.

METHODS

- Sample
  - The three key sampling issues for quantitative research are the size of the sample, how it is to be selected and why, and what claims are made for its representativeness.
  - The qualitative proposal should deal with the questions of who or what will be studied, and why.
  - The sampling strategy is important for both types of studies, and its logic needs to be clear.
  - Where the sampling strategy itself is emergent, as in theoretical sampling, this needs to be explained.

METHODS

- Data collection
  - The two matters here are the instruments (if any) which will be used for data collection, and the procedures for administering the instruments.
  - If a quantitative study proposes to use instruments which already exist, and information about their psychometric characteristics is available, it should be reported.
  - If the instruments are to be developed, the steps for developing them should be shown.
  - If a qualitative study proposes to use instruments (for example, observation schedules, structured interviews), the same comments apply.

METHODS

- Data collection
  - Less structured qualitative data collection techniques should be indicated and discussed, especially in terms of the quality of the data issues.
  - For both quantitative and qualitative studies, the procedures proposed for data collection should also be described, and the description should show why these data collection should also be described, and the description should show why these data collection activities have been chosen.
  - Possible threats to the validity of the data can also be indicated here.

METHODS

- Data analysis
  - Quantitative proposals should indicate the statistical procedures by which the data will be analyzed.
  - Similarly, the qualitative proposal needs to show how its data will be analyzed, and how the proposed analysis fits with the other components of the study.
  - If applicable, both types of proposal should indicate what computer use is planned in the analysis of data.

SIGNIFICANCE

- The particular topic and its context will determine the study's significance.
- There are three general areas for the significance and contribution of the study: to knowledge in the area, to policy considerations and to practitioners.
- The first of these, contribution to knowledge, is closely tied to the literature in the area.
- One function of the literature review is to indicate the gaps in the knowledge in the area, and to show how this study will contribute to filling those gaps.
- This has to be set against the position taken on the literature.

LIMITATIONS AND DELIMITATIONS

- Any study has limitations, and they should be noted in the proposal, which should argue nonetheless for the importance of the work.
- Delimitation means the drawing of boundaries around a study, and showing clearly what is and is not included.
- This is sometimes useful in avoiding misunderstanding by the reader.

CONSENT, ACCESS AND HUMAN PARTICIPANT'S PROTECTION

- Issues arising early in a project:
  - Worthiness of the project
  - Competence boundaries
  - Informed consent
  - Benefits, costs, reciprocity
- Issues arising as the project develops:
  - Harm and risk
  - Honesty and trust
  - Privacy, confidentiality and anonymity
  - Intervention and advocacy

CONSENT, ACCESS AND HUMAN PARTICIPANT'S PROTECTION

- Issues arising later in, or after, the project:
  - Research integrity and quality
  - Ownership of data and conclusions
  - Use and misuse of results

REFERENCES

- List of the references cited in the proposal.

- Useful links for advice on citation and referencing formats:
- http://www.uwsuper.edu/research/proposal-development/citation-help.cfm
- http://people.uncw.edu/elliotts/359_Research_Proposal_Guidelines_Sp_2012.pdf
- https://owl.english.purdue.edu/owl/resource/560/12/

APPENDICES

- This section may include any of the following:
  - A timetable for the research
  - Letters of introduction or permission
  - Consent forms
  - Measuring instruments
  - Questionnaires
  - Interview guides
  - Observation schedules
  - Examples of pilot study or relevant work already completed