

## Exercise on research design

Any successful research project requires careful planning. In particular, it is important to be clear about the objective of the research. Once a clear research objective has been specified then it is possible to establish what questions the researcher needs to answer in order to achieve the objective. These questions may be called the investigative questions. Note that an investigative question is a question that YOU, the researcher, need to answer! It is not a question you necessarily need to ask your research participants. It may not even be a question that your research participants could answer!

With a set of investigative questions in front of you, you now need to think about what you need to do to answer them. What information do you need? From whom? That is to say, you can now start designing your data collection instrument. This could be a questionnaire but in BAM201 we are interested in working with qualitative data, so interviews and focus groups are more suitable data collection instruments for our purposes.

In this exercise you are presented with a number of scenarios. In each case, your task is to specify a clear research objective, establish some investigative questions, and finally design the data collection instrument to suit the scenario. The data collection instrument should be an interview and designing it involves creating an interview schedule of the kind recommended by Gillham (2000). This schedule will contain key questions that cover the core of what you want your interviewees to talk about, and prompts for each question to help you to ensure the interviewee answers the questions as fully as you wish. An example is given at the end of this handout.

### Scenarios

- A. Your client is a Citizens' Advice Bureau (CAB) that has noticed an increasing trend in the number of recent graduates coming to it with debt-related problems. Although the CAB is able to advise these people by drawing on its existing expertise, it wishes to gain a better understanding of the attitudes to debt of university students.

- B. Your client is a cooperative business, owned by its staff (who are known as partners). The cooperative is considering becoming a public limited company (PLC), with its shares listed on the London Stock Exchange. This would mean that the partners would no longer own the business (unless they bought shares) and would simply be employees of the business; but they would all receive a share of the money raised by the initial public offering (IPO) of shares in the business. Your client has already conducted a questionnaire survey among the partners and opinion appears to be very divided on the question of whether the cooperative should become a PLC or not. Your client wishes to understand better the differing views of the partners.
- C. Your client's telesales staff have been complaining that morale is low, and staff turnover in the last year was more than 80%. (The number of staff who quit was more than 80% of the total number of telesales positions.) As a consequence of the high turnover, most current staff have worked for the firm for less than a year. Your client is concerned by this situation.
- D. Your client runs outdoor activities for team-building, such as sailing, orienteering, and assault courses. Its customers are businesses in a variety of industries and of varying sizes. Over the past year, the data collected by evaluation questionnaires completed by delegates on its courses has become steadily less positive. Nothing that the client can identify has changed: its venues, staff and equipment have all remained the same. Your client is concerned and puzzled.
- E. Your client is a business angel who has recently been invited to invest in a business that has strong sales of its fresh organic soups in its locality – Sussex and parts of Hampshire and Surrey. The hope is that the business will be able to expand and make its soups a national brand. Your client wants to gain a better understanding of the characteristics and strength of the brand before deciding whether to invest.

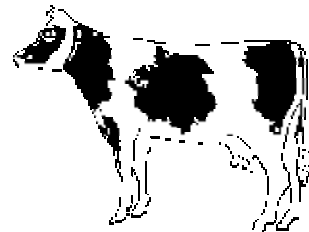
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Your task should be approached in a careful, methodical way. This is the sequence of steps to go through.

1. Define your research objective.
2. Establish your investigative questions and who you will wish to interview.
3. Create an interview schedule containing the questions you will actually use in the interview and prompts for each of your questions.

### Example

Your client is considering launching a newsletter for dairy farmers in Sussex (containing articles about trends in the dairy market) and wants to know whether it will be successful.



The research objective might be specified as follows. The objective of the research is to establish whether Sussex dairy farmers would be willing and able to pay for a new specialist newsletter.

Investigative questions might then include the following. What is the average profit of Sussex dairy farms? How does dairy farm profitability vary around Sussex? How much do Sussex dairy farmers spend on average on market information?

Notice that it would be useless to ask dairy farmers any of these questions, because each farmer will have detailed knowledge only of profits and spending on their own farm. There is a difference between investigative questions and the questions you use in collecting data.

While this example so far has really been about quantitative data, you might also have specified the following investigative question: how do Sussex dairy farmers make use of market information? This question could lead you to collect some quantitative data – how often do they read certain publications? how much of a specific publication do they read? etc. But it might also lead

you to take a more qualitative approach. However, simply asking farmers the investigative question itself is unlikely to be the most helpful thing to do. Rather, you could perhaps use the repertory grid technique, using a variety of specialist dairy farming publications (or websites) as the elements. Alternatively, you could conduct in-depth interviews focusing on how the farmers manage some particular aspect of the business, and prompt them if necessary to see if they make use of market information in the process.

#### Reference

Gillham, B. (2000) *The Research Interview*. London: Continuum