“This is a valuable resource written in a way that theological students will understand, and supervisors will appreciate! It takes the student “by the hand” from the formulation of the research topic through methodological positioning and choices and closes with a chapter on supervision expectations. I look forward to prescribing it to my own postgraduate students.”

NADINE BOWERS DU TOIT, Professor - Theology and Development, University of Stellenbosch, editor of *Race, Faith and Inequality amongst Young Adults in South Africa*

“It is very good to see the use of social science methods being developed to aid religious studies and theological research. My hope is that this very practical book, using up-to-date resources, will help to develop this important form of study further.”

ROBIN GILL, Emeritus Professor of Applied Theology, University of Kent, author of the trilogy on *Sociological Theology*

“Upon launching out on research, students and scholars are always on the lookout for good books on research methodology. In Dr Iyadurai’s book, they will find an excellent manual spanning the length and breadth of what they are looking for. I strongly recommend this book to all those engaged in research.”

FRANCIS GONSALVES SJ, President, Jnana Deepa: Pontifical Athenaeum of Philosophy & Theology, author of *God of Our Soil: Towards Subaltern Trinitarian Theology*

"Joshua Iyadurai has been teaching research methods to PhD students in Christian Studies for over a decade. He is an expert facilitator in this hybrid field, helping both theology and religious studies students use social research methods more rigorously and effectively. This book will be immensely helpful to anyone wanting to do research in the field of religion, as well as to those in classes focused on research methods. I highly recommend it."

ROBERT K. JOHNSTON, Professor of Theology and Culture, Fuller Theological Seminary, co-author of *Deep Focus: Film and Theology in Dialogue*

"*Social Research Methods for Students and Scholars of Theology and Religious Studies* is a masterpiece that draws from Joshua's experience of teaching social research for two decades. The book aims to catalyze theological scholarship using social research methods with scientific precision. Scholars, educators, and graduate students will find this text a welcome resource. I highly recommend it!"

DAVID TARUS, Executive Director, Association for Christian Theological Education in Africa (ACTEA), author of *A Different Way of Being*

"This textbook fills an important niche for postgraduate researchers embarking on empirical research in Practical Theology or Religious Studies. Those who have little or no background in the social sciences will find this a clear and well-structured introduction on how to conceive a research project and what methods are available to answer their research questions. Reading this before they embark on their journey could save a lot of problems further down the road."

ANDREW VILLAGE, Professor of Practical and Empirical Theology, York St John University, author of *The Church of England in the First Decade of the 21st Century*

SOCIAL RESEARCH METHODS

SOCIAL RESEARCH METHODS

For Students and Scholars of Theology and Religious Studies

JOSHUA IYADURAI

Marina Centre for Interdisciplinary Studies in Religion
Chennai

SOCIAL RESEARCH METHODS
For Students and Scholars of Theology and Religious Studies

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To
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Preface

"Research can be your hobby if you master research methods," said Dr Sebastian Perriannan in his workshop on social research methodology in 2002 at the University of Madras, Chennai. This statement is contrary to the common perception among students that research is not for everyone but can be done only by top-ranking students, as it is difficult to master research methods. Periannan's idea that research could be a hobby removed my mental blocks against research methods and motivated me to explore in depth the use of social research methods for theology and religious studies. Teaching research methodology became my passion after that.

In his introduction to social research for Christian Studies, Perriannan also led me to realize that people's experiences could be a valid source for sound theological and religious research. Researching lived experiences is common among many disciplines in human sciences and now scholars of religious studies and theology have turned to researching lived religion, lived theology, and lived experience.

Contextual theologies shifted the loci of theological research from the speculative/philosophical to contextual, with a liberative approach. However, contextual theologians assumed the role of patrons of the marginalized and oppressed communities and articulated theologies on their behalf, rather than making them partners in their theological

reflection. Their intentions were well meant and their attempt to see text and reality from below is greatly appreciated. However, most contextual theologians have stopped short of achieving their goals of producing relevant theologies that emancipated the communities because they failed to engage the lived realities of the marginalized and oppressed. These scholars needed to bring data from lived realities to their theological reflection.

Researching lived experience shifts the methodological paradigm from rhetoric and speculation to constructivism in theologizing. Researching lived reality makes one enter the complex social world, where reality is perceived differently by different players. Its hermeneutical tools differ. For theologians to enter the social world to study lived realities, they must adopt the expertise of social sciences. Therefore, studying lived experience leads one to adopt an interdisciplinary approach.

An interdisciplinary approach can open ways to innovate ideas for research, because it lets scholars think originally and be creative. Scholars can move beyond their disciplinary order to create something new.

But what is the need for theology to engage other sciences, one might ask, when its focus is the study of God? Theology is not like other disciplines, it has been argued, because it focuses on God, who cannot be the subject of analysis similar to social structure, a subject of analysis in sociology, or kinship in anthropology. Even so, theology necessarily ranges beyond the nature of God's being to ask: what are God's ways and God's will? These questions force theologians to reflect on human experience in order to understand the activity of God or the Spirit. Theology aims at understanding God's activity in relation to human community and the world. Therefore, theology cannot isolate itself but must engage social sciences to study lived theology or lived religion.

In an interdisciplinary approach, theology does not abandon its unique perspectives but incorporates insights from other disciplines to improve its own perspective and offers insights to other disciplinary perspectives. When theology engages social sciences, it retains its position while being open to interacting with the perspectives of social sciences. Theology's primary lens is to understand the social world in relation to God, through Christ. When theology engages social sciences from this position, it guards itself against reductionism, while considering insights from social sciences to have a holistic understanding of the social world in relation to God. Through interdisciplinary approaches, theology can be more intelligible in engaging the world.

Religious studies have turned to researching lived religion by shifting the focus away from defining the universal phenomenon of religion or macro-level questions and looking for universal definitions or normative positions on beliefs and practices. Now scholars of religious studies and social scientists who study religion are interested in exploring how religion is practiced in different cultural contexts. This also paves the way for understanding individuals' experiences and interpretations.

Some theological scholars think that they are not social scientists and hence assume that their field-based study in theology does not require the level of scientific rigor expected in social sciences. But research in every discipline is a scientific endeavor and scientific rigor cannot be compromised in any research.

Field-based studies lacking scientific rigor have little value. Although field-based studies are common in theology and religious studies, the scientific rigor employed in such studies has often been found deficient, as the proficiency of theological scholars in executing social scientific research is a matter of debate. While some field-based studies in theology and religious studies are excellent, many fall short in terms of quality. Let me give you some examples. I was once asked to review a master's thesis on differing views on the doctrine of eschatology. This thesis was a theological study that analyzed various theologians' viewpoints on eschatology. Yet, to my surprise, the methodology chapter was all about qualitative research, with both the student and the supervisor erroneously assuming that an analysis of a theological concept or doctrine equated to a qualitative study. Similarly, I once witnessed a public defense of a PhD dissertation based on a phenomenological study that was filled with statistical analyses. All three examiners questioned the inconsistency between the chosen approach and analysis. These examples underscore the need of providing both students and scholars with clear and reliable information on using social research methods for theology and religious research.

Social Research Methods for Students and Scholars of Theology and Religious Studies results from teaching research methods for more than a decade and supervising and examining a number of dissertations. Teaching research methodology at various institutions has enabled me to understand the minds of students from different cultures.

My students taught me and inspired me to write this book. Keeping the expectations of students from across cultures in mind, I have written this book from the students' point of view so that they could

gain the confidence to design and conduct a study using social research methods and acquire the needed research skills. Therefore, this book will demystify designing and executing a research project and make their research journey enjoyable.

For professors, this book will be a reference tool in supervising and examining dissertations/theses that use social research methods. At the end of a workshop on supervising social research methods, one professor commented to me, "if social research involves all these steps, then we have not produced any scientific research until now." Scholars and professors will find this book helpful in maintaining scientific rigor in their research projects and helping their students in producing dissertations/theses with scientific rigor to contribute knowledge beyond the fields of theology and religious studies.

By writing this book, I would like to achieve the following purposes:

1. To help students and scholars of theology and religious studies to engage in research that would be relevant to the faith communities and society at large
2. To facilitate researching "lived religion" or "lived theology" of the people where religion thrives
3. To encourage interdisciplinary research in the fields of theology and religious studies to contribute knowledge across disciplines
4. To introduce scientific rigor in theological and religious studies research

To achieve the above purposes, *Social Research Methods* is intended to be a guide to students and scholars in designing and carrying out theological/religious studies research using social research methods with scientific rigor. The book follows the process of producing sound research from choosing a topic to writing a research report. It discusses the role of professors in supervising and examining dissertations/theses that use social research methods. I envisage this title being used as a textbook in courses on research methods in the fields of theology, religious studies, and across social sciences dealing with religion.

Chapter 1 provides an overview of research fundamentals and explores the process of selecting a topic for investigation. Chapter 2 is designed to enhance your ability to critically engage with existing literature for your research. In Chapter 3, you will be introduced to various research strategies, including qualitative, quantitative, and mixed methods, and explore different paradigms employed in social research. Chapters 4, 5, and 6 provide guidance on designing qualitative, quantitative, and

mixed methods studies, respectively. In Chapter 7, you will learn the art of crafting a compelling research proposal, while Chapter 8 delves into the intricacies of writing a dissertation/thesis or article for publication. Chapter 9 offers practical guidelines on supervising and examining dissertations/theses that use social research methods and provides insight into the roles played by supervisors and examiners in facilitating a successful research journey.

I hope this book will inspire you to adopt "research as a hobby" to make this world a better place!

Joshua Iyadurai

About the Author

Joshua Iyadurai, PhD
is the founder and director of Marina Centre for Interdisciplinary Studies in Religion (MCISR), Chennai. He is a theological educator and social scientist who is passionate about teaching social research methods in hopes of bringing a paradigm shift in theological research to engage people as a source of constructing theology. His ability to generate a passion for social research among students is one hallmark of his lectures. He has been teaching research methods for more than a decade and supervising students using social research methods for their theological research in several institutions that included the University of Roehampton-online, London, University of Madras, Chennai, and South Asia Institute of Advanced Christian Studies (SAIACS), Bangalore. He has been a resource person for research methods seminars that equip seminary students in using social research methods and workshops to equip faculty for supervising students in using social research methods for their dissertations.

He authored *Transformative Religious Experience: A Phenomenological Understanding of Religious Conversion* and has contributed several book chapters and articles on religious conversion.

He is available for leading research methods seminars for students and workshops for faculty to supervise and examine dissertations/theses using social research methods. He can be contacted at www.jiyadurai.com

Chapter 1

CHOOSING A TOPIC

Theology was once considered the queen of sciences but is now largely confined within its domain, with a few exceptions. For centuries, theological research methods have been confined largely to reflection and speculation; a common perception is that theological research stays largely disconnected from the church and the followers of the faith. More recently, theological researchers have found that social research methods make it possible for them to be relevant. They can address real-world problems because the methods enable them to engage people as a source of theological research.

Field-based studies in theology and religious studies have lacked scientific precision. Steve Bruce (2018), Professor of Sociology at the University of Aberdeen, finds quantitative studies dealing with religion, lacking in scientific accuracy. This is also true of the quantitative studies done in theology. Only in the recent past, has some interest been shown to use qualitative research in theology and religious studies; however, this is being challenged by many who are influenced by the positivist paradigm.

Using social research methods also enables theological and religious scholars to readily work across disciplines, a current trend in research, and so pursue interdisciplinary or cross-disciplinary or multidisciplinary approaches to solve problems. Social research methods can provide bridges for theology and religious studies to interact with other disciplines.

The goal of education is passing on knowledge and the goal of research is advancing knowledge. Advancing knowledge is a scientific

process that requires scientific rigor; scientific rigor in research requires researchers to know the basics of research and the research process. Students and scholars from the fields of theology and religious studies cannot compromise on scientific rigor. This chapter will help you with the basics of research and the steps involved in choosing a topic.

Research

The term research could mean different things to different people: People use Google to search for information, companies conduct market survey to launch a product, organizations do research to solve a problem, journalists do research to report to the public, and so on. But academic research is a scientific process to produce knowledge. Before we continue, let us be clear about what research is not.

- Research is not collecting information on a topic.
- Research is not finding information that is hard to find.
- Research is not logically compiling information on a topic by referencing the sources.
- Research is not covering all aspects of a topic and writing a book on it.
- Research is not solving a practical problem.

Research may include some of these steps, but research is much more (Booth et al. 2016; Leedy and Ormrod 2015). Therefore, it is critical to understand what research is.

Research is an investigation designed to solve a problem, or to discover something that is not known in a field of study by answering a question or a set of questions. The steps in a criminal investigation have some helpful parallels to the steps in academic research. An officer investigating a murder would collect and analyze evidence from various sources to solve the mystery. She would try to find answers to the following questions:

- Who was the victim?
- Who committed the murder?
- When was the crime committed?
- How was the crime committed?
- What was the motive for the crime?
- How does the murder compare to other murders in the area?

To collect evidence, she would visit the crime scene, interview eyewitnesses and anyone else connected to the crime, have crime technicians gather items and other forms of evidence from the crime scene, and take photographs of it. The investigator would examine databases and social media for relevant information. She would then examine the autopsy report, the forensic report, and the evidence. Then she would analyze the data seeking to answer the questions and assemble the facts that let her solve the mystery. Finally, she would write a report so the case could be argued in a court of law.

Similarly, a researcher investigates a particular issue in a field of study to find a solution or answers, but this time, to a conceptual problem or to questions, which have not been explored. A researcher often undertakes a study because they have begun to wonder about an issue or a phenomenon and were unable to find satisfactory answers in the existing literature. To resolve the mystery of the unknown, the researcher asks a question or a set of questions about the unknown and collects data and analyses them to answer the questions.

Denise F. Polit and Cheryl T. Beck, in *Essentials of Nursing Research*, (2010, 4), define research as a "systematic inquiry that uses disciplined methods to answer questions and solve problems. The ultimate goal of the research is to develop, refine, and expand a body of knowledge." This definition of research is common to all disciplines.

"Systematic inquiry" in the above definition means scientific study, the use of methodical steps and procedures to collect credible data and analyze it. Scientific inquiry is objective; in other words, is free of personal biases. However, no research is free from subjectivity because "subjectivity is an integral part of your way of thinking that is 'conditioned' by your educational background, discipline, philosophy, experience and skills." Contrarily, bias is a "deliberate attempt to either conceal or highlight something" (Ranjit Kumar 2011, 5-7). Scientific inquiry requires researchers to guard against bias at every stage of the research process to maintain objectivity.

Researchers must use the procedures that are accepted as methods in their field of study. Researchers in natural sciences follow experimental methods accepted in their disciplines. Biblical scholars adopt suitable approaches that are accepted in biblical studies to examine a text. Similarly, when you use social science methods for theological or religious studies, you are bound by the approaches and methods that are used in social sciences to maintain scientific rigor. For interdisciplinary research, you can creatively combine methods from other disciplines.

The goal of academic research is to produce knowledge. Your research may develop or refine or expand the current knowledge in your field of study, as stated in the above definition. In addition, research may lead to a better understanding of the practices and advancement of knowledge in a profession (Kumar 2011). Denise F. Polit and Cheryl T. Beck (2018, 33) revised their definition: "The ultimate goal of formal research is to gain knowledge that would be *useful for many people*" [emphasis added]. Now researchers are also interested in the application of new knowledge in their academic pursuit.

New knowledge offers new ways of understanding a practical problem. Therefore, research solves "a conceptual problem not by doing something to change the world but by answering a question that helps us understand it better" (Booth, Colomb, and Williams 2008, 53). In turn, researchers or practitioners could apply the new knowledge to resolve a practical problem.

Therefore, research is an investigation that deploys scientific methods for collecting credible data and analyzing them to answer questions and solve conceptual problems by producing new knowledge. The new knowledge could be new insights or modified or refined forms of the current knowledge presented in the literature, to enhance human life.

Social Research

In theological circle, "empirical research" is a term commonly used to refer to social research or field-based research. Theoretically, "empirical rsearch" refers to quantitative research because of its philosophical foundation on empiricism. However, "social research" is a broader term that embraces quantitative, qualitative, and mixxed methods research strategies.

Social research studies people and their world and produces new knowledge concerning the social world by adopting approaches and methods that are accepted in the social sciences. Social research is a scientific investigation that collects and analyzes data from the field to answer questions with evidence. This method is valuable for scholars of theological and religious studies because it lends itself to producing knowledge that may be applied to make life better.

However, social research may be undermined by theological scholars because theological research has generally been confined to analyzing theological concepts rhetorically or philosophically or reflectively.

Theology is preoccupied with defining abstract theological concepts accurately. A story about the irrelevance of theological research to lay people was attributed to Tony De Mello, a Catholic spiritual trainer. The story goes like this. There was an emergency in an aircraft and the pilot asked everyone to pick up a parachute and jump as the plane was about to crash. Everyone jumped. One man landed on a tree. He felt relieved that he was alive and had landed safely. But he did not know where he was. He called out to a passerby. The man stopped and looked up to see where the voice was coming from. The man on the tree asked, "Could you please tell me where I have landed?" The passerby replied, "You have landed on top of a tree." Immediately the man on the tree asked, "Are you a theologian?" The passerby wondered how a stranger could have recognized him to be a theologian. So, he asked, "Yes! I am a theologian. But how did you, a foreigner, recognize me?" The man on the tree answered him, "You gave me an accurate answer but not a useful one." This story reflects the condition of theological research, which is preoccupied with offering definitions of theological terms and doctrines. But many times, they are not relevant to the real life of people.

Modernity had enthroned reason as the only arbiter of knowledge, and it was largely guided by positivism and empiricism. The emergence of postmodernism opened the way for scholars to consider lived experience, art, and intuition as the sources of knowledge for which social research methods provide the needed approaches and techniques. Thus, theological/religious studies incorporating social research can contribute knowledge to fill in gaps in knowledge and solve real-world problems.

Because people practice religion in social contexts, theologians and religious studies scholars are called to research them in their social world to understand religion. When we research the social world, we interact with social sciences to conceptualize the topic. Therefore, the current trend in theological research is studying real-life issues and human problems to understand them and offer theological perspectives.

Still, social research is not new to the field of theology. As early as 1933, J. Waskom Pickett (1933) did a study on the conversion movements in India by using social research methods and published his book, *Christian Mass Movements in India*. Social research enables theological scholars to address issues related to the context and examine them to enlighten the academia and public with a better understanding and improve human life. A discussion for the need to engage social research for theology and religious studies is beyond the scope of this chapter.

Research in theology and religious studies cannot continue to be done as pure research aiming only to produce knowledge for the sake of knowledge. Rather, it must aim at producing new knowledge that could be applied to improve the services offered to the faithful and enhance the religious beliefs and practices of a religion. A field-based study enables scholars to produce this type of knowledge because it allows the researcher to learn from the participants of the study in their natural environment. Field-based research involves collecting and analyzing numerical or narrative data from the field. Field-based research, if used in theology and religious studies, will lead to a better understanding of the world of the followers of a religion, cater to their needs effectively, and make the world a better place. For example, a pastoral theology student could do social research to understand the effects of alcoholism in a family by interviewing the spouse and children who are affected. This may allow the student to come up with deeper insights when designing a model to provide pastoral care to such families. Such a model would be relevant to the cultural context because it was developed based on the lived experience of the families.

In academic research, the end result—producing knowledge that could be applied to enhance human life—depends on the quality of the researcher's starting point. It depends on the quality of the research topic.

Starting with Research Interest

In order to sustain your motivation through to the end of the research, your research topic must emerge out of your interests (Kumar 2011). Before you start any research, you may already know what area of interest you want to explore. If you have multiple areas of interest, you will want to assess in consultation with the literature, which one is most likely to let you find a suitable topic. You may identify your interest in a practical problem from a social/cultural context. Your research interest might relate to your church, institution, ministry context or workplace, socio-cultural or political context, personal experience, course work, or the literature.

Once you identify your interest, locate it in a broad field of study or subject area and then choose an area of the subject and identify a topic. Then do a preliminary search to determine the viability of pursuing your research interest further. Identify the key terms associated with your topic and search in Google Scholar and online encyclopedias to

get an overview of what research has been done on your topic. Explore your topic for intellectual controversies, relevancy to your context, and viability. Search journals, conference papers, and reviews of the latest books to ascertain trends in researching your interest.

Narrowing Down Research Interest

If you have a broad topic, it may not be viable, so you will need to narrow it down to help you determine the direction of the topic and identify the focal point of your research. Funneling exercises are useful for helping narrow your research interest. The first level of funneling is identifying the general area of your interest and the second level deals with the particular interest related to the general interest. The third level brings out the specific aspect of the particular interest. The fourth narrows the topic to the essential aspect to be focused on in the study, while the fifth locates the precise aspect of the study. With this information, you can create a title that captures all levels of the funnel to indicate the focal point of your research topic. See examples in the figure.

In addition to using the funneling exercise, you can ask several questions to further focus your topic. This will help you identify sub-areas associated with your topic, so you can choose specific aspects for your investigation. The following questions could help you:

- What would I like to know about this topic?
- What are some controversies about this issue in my social/cultural/political context?
- What aspects of the literature are fascinating to me?
- What aspects of the literature are unimpressive to me?
- What would scholars want to know about this topic?
- What would religious leaders/priests/missionaries/preachers/anyone involved in religious activities want to know about this topic?
- What do I not yet know about this topic?
- How can I extend my knowledge on this topic?

The answers will also help you think through your research topic from different angles and gain more clarity in formulating your research questions. Once you are clear about the focus and the aspects to be covered in your research, you can formulate research questions.

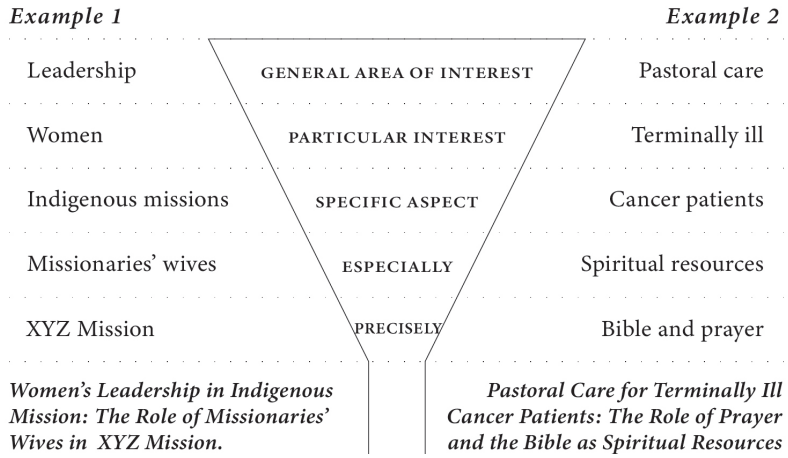

Figure: Funneling Exercise for Narrowing Topics

Formulating Research Questions

Research questions are conceptual or abstract questions that a research project intends to answer and are generally formulated based on the literature. As a first step, you raise a question on the topic of your interest. A good research question with a single focus will help you to collect appropriate data for answering the question and solve a problem (Booth, Colomb, and Williams 2008). If you start your research without a research question, you may end up finding many answers without knowing what the question is.

A research question is a question that is researchable, precise, and able to produce theoretical knowledge (Alvesson and Sandberg 2013). A precise research question defines the focal point of the study and avoids ambiguity. A research question that is formulated from literature can produce new knowledge in the context of the existing knowledge. It is advisable to develop one primary or central question and four or five sub-questions. A research question cannot be answered with a yes or no and it should set a stage for investigation.

The research question determines the path and the destination of your research. Research questions will guide you in searching the literature, choosing a research design, determining the kinds of data required, identifying participants for your study, analyzing the data, and writing up your findings and results (Bryman 2016). In addition, research questions will keep you focused. Without a research question, you will collect a range of data related to your topic and will find it difficult to

reach a conclusion (Bryman 2016). Research questions determine the questions you will ask your research participants in interviews or surveys; their answers, in turn will help you answer your research question (Smith, Flowers, and Larkin 2009). Thus, research questions are crucial for the successful completion of your research project. In addition, they help readers understand the essence of your research.

There is no one way to develop a question on a topic. You are free to raise a question in your own way, either drawn from the literature or context, but it must mirror the focus of your study. You might turn the title developed from the funneling exercise into a primary/main question. Based on the chosen research strategy, you may need one primary research question with several sub questions or several main questions.

The sub-questions relate to the different aspects or areas to be covered in your study. To develop them, first identify the sub-areas and aspects from the literature that you want to investigate and formulate sub-questions related to the primary question. Do not try to cover all aspects of the topic but choose only three or four and base the sub-questions on your interest or theory. You could also break the primary question into sub-questions that guide your study of various sub-areas such as perspectives, concepts, and groups of people. At the end of the research, the answers to the sub-questions, taken together, will answer the primary question (Punch 2016). Box 1 presents examples of research questions.

Developing your primary research question and sub-questions is not a linear but a cyclical process. Because the literature plays a key role in formulating the questions, as you read, you may prefer to shift your focal point or cover the aspects that you had not thought of earlier. In that case, you may need to modify the title, primary questions, and sub-questions accordingly.

You can be creative in formulating your research questions. You can challenge the assumptions of the existing studies to generate alternative explanations. You can compare different theoretical assumptions and identify the inconsistencies among them through the lens of your preferred position. Such inconsistencies might provide a lead to formulating research questions that might generate interesting theories (Alvesson and Sandberg 2013). This approach is relevant for interdisciplinary theological/religious research, where researchers critically engage literature from social sciences and come across inconsistencies from a

Box 1: Examples of Research Questions

Example1

Women's Leadership in Indigenous Mission: The Role of Missionaries Wives in XYZ Mission

The primary research question could be one of the following:

- What is the role of missionaries' wives in indigenous missions?
- How do missionaries' wives contribute to indigenous mission leadership?
- What is the role of women in indigenous missions?

The sub-questions could be:

- How do missionaries' wives perceive indigenous missions?
- How do they perceive their role as missionaries' wives?
- How do they perceive their role as a homemaker?
- How do they get involved in indigenous missions?
- What is the leadership structure created by indigenous mission agencies for missionaries' wives to involve in the mission?
- How are missionaries' wives being perceived by the indigenous people?

Example 2:

Pastoral Care for Terminally Ill Cancer Patients: The Role of Prayer and the Bible as Spiritual Resources.

The primary research question could be one of the following:

- What is the role of prayer and the Bible as spiritual resources for terminally ill cancer patients?
- How do prayer and the Bible help terminally ill cancer patients?
- How do terminally ill cancer patients find prayer and the Bible as spiritual resources?

For this topic, we could have the following sub-questions:

- How do terminally ill cancer patients perceive their condition?
- How do they make sense of their faith in this condition?
- How do they use the Bible while facing the eventuality of death?
- How and what do they pray?
- How could a pastoral care model be developed by incorporating the Bible and prayer as spiritual resources for terminally ill cancer patients?

All the sub-questions in these two examples directly relate to the primary questions.

theological or religious perspective. It can also work in reverse, where inconsistencies are found among theological/religious assumptions from social scientific perspectives. Such approaches may open a new direction for generating interesting theories/theologies based on alternative assumptions.

It is not always necessary to base your research questions on the literature; you can base them on observation or intuition (Vanderstoep and Johnston 2009), your experience, concerns, context, and so on. If you find aspects that apply to your cultural context but are not found in the literature, you may formulate suitable research questions to examine in your research. "Producing new and good research questions means that there are no predefined answers available; new questions offer starting points for new answers" (Alvesson and Sandberg 2013, 63). By engaging social sciences, theological research has ample avenues to raise new questions, break new ground, set new directions, and find new theories or answers.

See Chapter 7 for formulating research questions for qualitative, quantitative, and mixed methods research.

Hypothesis

A hypothesis is a prediction of the relationship between variables. A variable is a measurable attribute or characteristic of an individual or object or a phenomenon. Quantitative research uses a hypothesis to test a theory or to generalize the results to the population. Experimental studies, which measure variables and compare the results between two groups, begin with hypotheses. However, survey research and qualitative research, which are the more commonly used methods in the fields of theology and religious studies do not require the use of hypotheses.

To test a hypothesis, you need to create a research or alternative hypothesis that predicts that a relationship exists between the variables and a null hypothesis that claims that there is no statistically significant relationship between the variables. The research/alternative hypothesis is the one that you aim to support in your research. The null hypothesis is denoted as H_0 and we denote the alternative hypothesis as H_1. The alternative hypothesis is assumed to be false until the null hypothesis is rejected. See Chapter 5 for more on hypothesis testing.

Qualitative research does not start with a hypothesis but rather ends with generating several hypotheses. In the fields of theology and

religious studies survey research and qualitative research are common, which do not require hypotheses.

Defining a Research Problem

Once you have formulated the research questions, you will need to define a research problem, a statement that identifies the gaps in the literature and justifies the need for your study. Without defining the research problem, you may come up with several solutions, without knowing what the problem is. In such instances, researchers end up with a data dump and struggle to conclude (Booth et al. 2016).

As noted, your research does not solve a practical problem or resolve an issue in the real world, because a practical problem is not a research problem. If you have identified a practical problem you want to address, you must conceptualize it by critically engaging the literature.

A research problem is a conceptual statement based on the literature about the issue under investigation, such as missing or inadequate information on a topic. Ronald Jacobs (2011, 127) defines research problems as "artificial entities that come together only through the intense efforts of the researcher, who has identified a gap in information or understanding within a topic." A research problem is a statement about a concern related to the gaps in the literature.

As you engage with the literature keep in mind that various types of gaps exist. Anthony Miles (2017, 2) identifies seven gaps. I have relied on Miles' taxonomy of research gaps to offer the following classification.

Knowledge Gap

The absence of information about a phenomenon or a particular aspect of a topic or deficient information in the literature. This occurs because either no studies have been done or the number done was insufficient to explain a problem. You may have a hunch about a problem from your experience and find that no study offers the expected explanation.

Disciplinary Gap

The absence of holistic understanding of a problem because of the absence of studies from a particular disciplinary perspective. With the growing interest among scholars to provide a holistic understanding of a phenomenon, identifying disciplinary gaps is vital. Unlike social sciences,

which examine real-world problems, few studies in theology or religious studies examine real-world problems. Therefore, you are likely to find a disciplinary gap from the perspective of theology or religious studies for many real-world problems.

Theoretical Gap

A lack of theories explaining a phenomenon or conflicting explanations about a phenomenon that are offered by various theories. A discrepancy among the theories provides a gap to examine the "explanatory power of one theory over the other" (Jacobs 2011, 133). A theoretical gap is found when a theory fails to explain a current phenomenon or is not pertinent for addressing a particular aspect of the phenomenon. For example, social influence theory explains religious conversion as a social process in a group context minus spiritual dimension, but it failed to explain conversion in isolation where the convert does not join any group (Iyadurai 2015).

Relationship Gap

A lack of research about relationship among certain variables in existing studies. This may occur because the studies have not identified certain variables or had considered them insignificant. But you may want to consider them significant enough to be worth investigating by establishing a relationship gap in the literature.

Methodological Gap

The absence of a philosophical worldview in examining a problem. A methodology is based on a philosophical assumption or worldview that guides research. In other words, a methodology is an approach or paradigm or perspective, or lens adopted by researchers in researching a problem. The philosophical worldview includes broad approaches such as a) deductive or inductive reasoning; b) the four paradigms of social research (postpositivist, constructivist, transformative, and pragmatic); and c) other theoretical approaches like feminism or indigenous. You can look for worldview gaps among the current studies and then investigate the issue using a different lens.

Analytical Gap

A lack of sufficient analysis of a problem because not enough methods were used. When studies have used only one type of analysis, for example,

quantitative (statistical) or qualitative (thematic), then an analytical gap exists and usually results in an insufficient understanding of the problem. A different method of analysis could yield a better understanding of a problem.

Sampling Gap

A lack of diverse sampling, which occurs when studies have used similar samples but not with different people or different kinds of data. When a theory is tested or extended by adopting the same type of samples, it may not offer any breakthroughs or establish the relevance of the theory to a different set of people. A study using a different kind of sample could show whether a theory is relevant for a different sample, which could yield new insights into understanding a phenomenon or pave a new direction for future research.

Contextual Gap

The lack of diverse enough findings, which occurs when the research sites of studies are narrow. To find possible contextual gaps, search the literature to see whether the studies were largely conducted in North America or Europe or Asia or Africa. With the postmodern turn in research, contextual factors became key elements in generating knowledge. Now theories based on the Western context are being challenged from postmodern perspectives such as indigenous, transformative, pragmatic, feminist, postcolonial viewpoints, and so on. Designing a study to take contextual factors into consideration could result in new ways of understanding a problem.

Theory-Praxis Gap

A difference between the claims of theories and the actual practice in real life. A theory, for example, may say pastors as counselors should not offer prescriptive suggestions to members. However, in practice, in the non-Western world, people look up to pastors as an authority to tell them what to do. You can look for such inconsistencies between the claims of a theory and practices in real-world.

By critically engaging the literature you can identify any one or more of the gaps mentioned above. You might identify these kinds of gaps by reflecting on your experience or observation in view of the literature. The greater the number of gaps you identify, the greater the significance of your research is likely to be.

Research problem for professional doctoral research is a real-world problem in ministry practice. Therefore, you describe the problem or issue in ministry with details of contextual factors to offer clarity on what your research is about. Also, you must present the theory/theology/explanation that you plan to apply in your research to solve this problem by referring to the literature.

Developing a Title

A title guides the researcher in advancing to the intended destination. The research title is an "orienting device" (Creswell and Creswell 2018, 63) for the reader and the researcher. In the early stages, you may want to adopt a working title to help you and others understand the focal point of the study. You may modify the title as you progress in reviewing the literature.

Formulate a title that indicates one or more of the following:

- A specific focus of research
- Relationship among variables
- Significance
- Methodological approach
- Location of the study

Use keywords in the main title and the subtitle should expand the main idea to identify a specific aspect of the study.

A title should not be too broad or too narrow. You must have a valid reason for every word that appears in your title. Your title must be precise and clear. Avoid starting a title with phrases like: "A study of," "A critical study," "An Examination of," "An Analysis of," and so on. Avoid redundant words and use only the keywords (Creswell and Creswell 2018).

Considering the Feasibility of a Study

Assessing the feasibility of your intended research involves foreseeing the hurdles you may encounter at different stages in the process. If you cannot resolve an obstacle at a later stage, it will be difficult for you to change the topic. Therefore, you must be very clear about the viability of your proposed study in its early stages. To assess the feasibility of your research topic, ask the following questions:

- Can I find the necessary literature?
- Will I have access to the data?

- Are there any ethical/moral issues that would hinder data collection?
- Do I have the needed skills? If not, will I be able to acquire them to execute the research successfully?
- Is it possible to complete the research within the available period?
- Do I have the financial resources to complete the research?
- Will the topic remain "alive" over the period of research and beyond?

If you can answer these questions satisfactorily, you will reduce the risk of facing hurdles in executing your research.

Research Ethics

Research ethics are the principles that govern how researchers treat participants, the data, and the works of others. The fundamental principle in research ethics is honesty. Ethics in social research is about the relationship between the researcher and the participants when engaging with people as the primary source of collecting data. Research ethics are concerned with how participants are treated, and how the data are managed to avoid causing any harm to people. While your research may not harm participants physically, it might embarrass them because of the disclosures of their private life or disturb them emotionally or violate their privacy (Booth et al. 2016). Observing the principles of research ethics will help you avoid any potential risk for participants.

Principles of Research Ethics

The basic principles of research ethics are:

1. The researcher must inform the potential participants about the purpose and nature of the research in non-specialist's language to obtain informed consent. "Informed consent means that participants have adequate information about the study, comprehend the information, and have the power of free choice, enabling them to consent to or decline participation voluntarily" (Polit and Beck 2018, 139).
2. Participants must be given the right to withdraw from the research at any time.
3. Participants must be given the right to decline to answer any question.

4. Steps must be taken to avoid intrusion into participants' privacy by not collecting sensitive information that is beyond the scope of the research.
5. All deceptive practices used to obtain data are unacceptable.
6. Anonymity and confidentiality must be protected.
7. Participants must not be exposed to any risk or harm due to the research.
8. Extra care and protection to be taken to avoid harming vulnerable participants.

Ethical Parameters for Collecting Data

For collecting data through a survey or interviews or observation, the following parameters are to be followed:

- Obtaining informed consent from adults participating in research.
- Obtaining permission from a responsible person to have vulnerable persons participate in your research. Vulnerable persons include children or terminally/seriously ill patients or victims of substance abuse or survivors of other forms of abuse.
- Considering your subordinates or your students or anyone under your supervision as potentially vulnerable persons. The possibility of being coerced into participating in your research is high. Therefore, take special care to include them in your research without using any form of coercion.
- Obtaining prior permission from authorities or gatekeepers to conduct a study in an institution/church/community.
- Not sharing recordings of raw data with anyone else.
- Protecting identifiable information.
- Storing research project data safely and securely for a minimum of 5 years.
- Not disrupting participants' activities while doing participant observation.
- Respecting the cultural beliefs and practices of the community or institution or church while collecting data.
- Omitting names from field notes.
- Obtaining ethical approval for doing covert research. Such research is permitted to understand a problem, which is

otherwise not possible to study.

For using existing data, the following parameters apply:

- You may use documents, reports, statistics, and so on that are available in the public domain or provided by government and institutions with open access.
- You must obtain written permission from appropriate authorities to access and use data that are protected by an authority.
- You must maintain confidentiality and proprietary requirements set by the authority.

Many institutions have an ethics committee to approve the research proposals of students. The purpose is to ensure that your research causes no harm to research participants and to protect the institution. It also prevents you from researching without addressing ethical issues that may damage the value of your research and your reputation.

In cases where an institution does not have a separate ethics committee, your doctoral committee or department faculty may function as the authority to give ethical approval for research projects. You must know the requirements set by your institution and meet them to get its approval. Ethical approval is a must before proceeding to execute your research project.

In addition to the above, as with all research and writing, research ethics requires you to avoid plagiarism, which is a breach of academic integrity.

Chapter Summary

This chapter defined, research as systematically searching for credible data and analyzing them to solve conceptual problems by answering research questions, and introduced you to social research that studies people and their world. Social research adopts approaches and methods that are accepted in social sciences to produce new knowledge concerning the social world to make life better.

You have learned the basic steps in choosing a topic that involves narrowing your research interest to a specific topic by using the funneling exercise, formulating research questions and hypotheses, defining a research problem, developing a research title, and assessing the feasibility of your research. In addition, this chapter introduced you to the importance of research ethics, ethical principles, and ethical parameters for collecting data.

Review Questions

1. What is research?
2. What is social research?
3. How do I start with my research interest?
4. How do I narrow down the interest to a topic?
5. How do I formulate research questions?
6. What is a hypothesis?
7. What is a research problem?
8. How do I develop a title for my research?
9. How do I determine the feasibility of my research?
10. What are the ethical concerns in social research?

Further Help

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