

Master's Thesis Seminar 2 in English 25.09.23

METHODS OF RESEARCHING A TOPIC



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Topics discussed today



- Your research questions
- About methods in general
- METHOD EXAMPLES
 - Research interviews
 - Writing as a tool: Autoethnography
 - Observation
 - Documentation
 - Literature Review
 - Research Journal
 - Case Study
 - Surveys
 - Visual Analysis
 - Film Analysis
 - Material Methods
 - Artistic Practice
- Task for next time

TASK FOR THIS TIME

Think about what you want to know through your research/thesis work and formulate a 1-2 sentence question that best describes what you wish to know.

Prepare to present your question and the reasoning for your question to others in the next meeting 25.9.



RESEARCH METHODS



Research methods are:

- **the means** of conducting the research
- a way of proceeding or doing something
- **the tools you use to collect/gather** your data/research material
- **the tools you use to analyse** the collected material



CHOOSING YOUR METHODS

- Think about your research problem – how will the methods you choose help you in finding an answer



CHOOSING YOUR METHODS

- Also - think about your personality, strengths and weaknesses, likes and dislikes



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- Choose a method or methods which you are happy with: this is important in keeping your motivation levels high
 - (if the method makes you feel uneasy, it may hinder the work)

Finding your methods

To find the most appropriate methods for your project, consider:

- What is the purpose of your research?
- What is your time scale?
- What is your budget?
- Are you the only researcher, or will you have others to help you?

Finding your methods

What do you want to know/find/discuss?

- How would it be possible to find the answer? (Explain, argue, make a statement.)

Think!

- research question, ethics, budget, time schedule etc.

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5 questions that help in defining your methods

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What? What is your research?

Why? Why do you want to do the research? What is its purpose?

Who? Who will be your participants?

5 questions that help in defining your methods

Where? Where are you going to conduct your research? F.ex. If you're going to conduct interviews or focus groups, where will you hold them? + ●

When? When are you going to do your research? Is the project possible within your own / your participants time scale?

Selecting suitable methods for your research

Once you have answered the ‘five questions’, you will find clues about what approach suits your project.

- The ‘*how*’ is about the research methods.

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Once you know the methods that suit your research –
study them!

- Books or other sources give you more detailed information on your chosen method
- This is helpful in *designing* and articulating your research
- This gives you better results

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The aim is to show how and why you used them

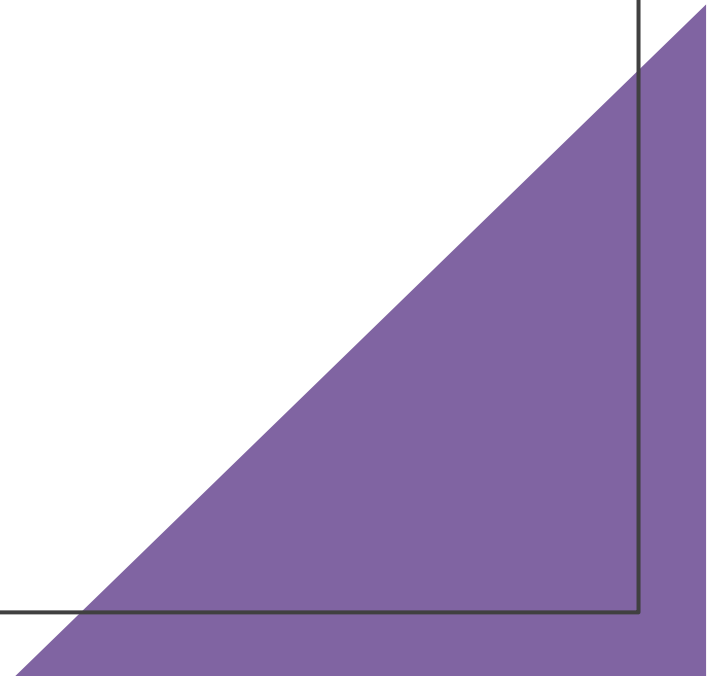
- do not just to describe your methods
- this demonstrates that the research was rigorously conducted

You should be able articulate why you chose a method and how it suits your objective.

Remember: the approach used must also give an answer the research question

METHOD

EAXMPLES



RESEARCH INTERVIEWS

- Help you explain, understand and explore research subjects' opinions, behavior, experiences and phenomenon
- A qualitative research method that involves a well-planned and executed series of questions and answers
- Similar to focus groups and surveys when it comes to gathering information from the target group.
- See e.g., on the interview method: *The SAGE Handbook of Interview Research: The Complexity of the Craft* (2012) available through Aalto Primo.

STRUCTURED INTERVIEWS

- Rigid structure, often used in quantitative research
- Questions are pre-decided according to the required detail of information
- The interviewer asks a series of questions and ticks' boxes with the response
- Closed-ended questions are included to understand user preferences from a collection of answer options
- Open-ended questions can be included to gain details about a particular section in the interview
- Often generates reliable results and is quick to execute.

Challenges:

- Limited scope of obtained results. Respondents are forced to select from the provided answer options.
- Adhering to the list of questions despite how interesting the conversation is

SEMISTRUCTURED INTERVIEWS

- Aims at gathering specific information which can be compared and contrasted with information gained, by asking the same questions in each interview
- Offers a flexible structure, while maintaining the research guidelines
-> other important information can arise and be followed
- Employs an interview schedule - a list of specific questions or a list of topics/themes to be discussed. Questions are prepared beforehand, which provides time to prepare and analyze the questions

Challenges:

- Participants may question the reliability due to the flexibility
- Comparing two different answers becomes difficult as no two questions will have the exact same structure or result.

UNSTRUCTURED INTERVIEWS

- Attempt to achieve a holistic understanding of the interviewees' point of view or situation
- In-depth, usually described as conversations held with a purpose and an underlying subject in mind
- No guidelines for the researchers to follow, they can approach the participants in any ethical manner to gain as much information as they possibly can for their research topic

Challenges:

- how to tactfully steer someone back from totally irrelevant digressions?
- a great deal of data which can be difficult to analyse

OTHER TYPES OF INTERVIEWS

Object (oriented) interview:

- A form of semi-structured interview where a material object is employed to understand the sensual, tactile, material and embodied ways in which social lives are lived and experienced by the interview participants.
- The idea is that the conversation should follow the insights that emerge from the object observed.
- Additional guiding questions may be used to support the observations
- See e.g., Woodward, S. (2016) Object interviews, material imaginings and 'unsettling' methods: interdisciplinary approaches to understanding materials and material culture

Walking interview:

- Interviews which are conducted on the move
- The method is used e.g., as a way of understanding senses of place, of how social networks are contextualised and reproduced spatially
- Can give the participants a greater degree of control in the research
- The participant gets to show rather than describe the environments researched
- Allows to place events, stories and experiences in their spatial context and this can help participants to articulate their thoughts

- See e.g.,: Clark & Emmel (2010), Using Walking Interviews

FOCUS GROUPS

- Called discussion groups or group interviews
- A number of carefully recruited people are asked to come together in a group to discuss a certain issue
- The discussion is led by a moderator or facilitator who introduces the topic, asks specific questions, controls digressions and stops break-away conversations
- discussions are recorded, analyzed systemically and reported appropriately

QUESTIONNAIRES

- Can be thought of as a kind of written interview
- Closed-ended questionnaires are used to generate statistics in quantitative research
- Open-ended, long-form questions offer the respondent the ability to elaborate on their thoughts. Used in qualitative research, includes a blank section for the respondent to write in an answer
- Often a combination of both types is used— e.g. *how many* people use a service and *what they think* about that service
- A questionnaire may or may not be delivered in the form of a survey, but a survey always consists of a questionnaire.

OBSERVATION METHODS

- Gives the researcher a better understanding of what is happening in the culture and lends credibility to one's interpretations of the observation
- Observations of the phenomena are made as and when they occur
- Can be structured or unstructured:
 - Structured data collection is conducted using specific variables and according to a pre-defined schedule
 - Unstructured observation is conducted in an open and free manner with no pre-determined variables or objectives

TYPES OF OBSERVATION

Direct observation - used in areas such as health and psychology.

- A method of collecting evaluative information in which the evaluator watches the subject in their usual environment without altering that environment

Participant observation – used to study and understand a specific community, culture or context, usually also involves active engagement in the activities of the research **participants**.

- The researcher has to immerse themselves in the setting where their respondents are, while taking notes and/or recording.

Ethnography (participant observation conducted in anthropology): ‘the recording and analysis of a culture or society, usually based on participant-observation and resulting in a written account of a people, place or institution’ (Simpson & Coleman 2017).

- Ethnographical methods are often used in art and design research.
- See more more on observation & ethnography, e.g.,:
 - Jorgensen (1989) Participant Observation
 - Atkinson et al. (2001) Handbook of Ethnography

DOCUMENTATION

Documentation means any *communicable* material that is used to describe, explain or instruct regarding some attributes of an object, system or procedure.

- Includes using notes, research journaling (written or recorded), drawings, material examples, photographs, audio & video recordings as research material
- Important to find suitable way to document your research -> think about the context you work in and the way to document: writing, drawing, recording etc.
- The documents should be analyzable in some ways (content analysis, reflexive writing etc.)

AUTOETHNOGRAPHY (Reflexive writing)

- A form of qualitative research in which an author uses self-reflection and writing to explore anecdotal and personal experience and connect this autobiographical story to wider cultural, political, and social meanings and understandings.
- Used in various disciplines e.g. communication studies, performance studies, education, literature, anthropology, sociology, history, psychology, theology, marketing, business, arts education, etc.
- Uses researcher's personal experience to describe and critique cultural beliefs, practices, and experiences.

- Acknowledges and values a researcher's relationships with others
- Includes the use of methodological tools and research literature to analyze experience, may require comparing and contrasting personal experience against existing research.

Challenges: overemphasis on narration vs. analysis and cultural interpretation, exclusive reliance on personal memory as a data source, ethical standards regarding others in self-narratives

See more in e.g.,: Adams, et al. (2014) Autoethnography

Research Diary

- a written record of the researcher's activities, thoughts and feelings
- kept throughout the research process from design, data collection and analysis to writing and presenting the study
- Aids reflexivity in the research process
- allows to keep a detailed record of the research process and of your personal reflections and research insights
- gives context to the research progress and possible new questions emerging from the research
- aids in justifying the choices made during the research

LITERATURE REVIEW

A comprehensive summary of previous research on a topic.

- Surveys scholarly articles, books, and other sources relevant to the area of research
- Should enumerate, describe, summarize, objectively evaluate and clarify this previous research
- Establishes your own view of the literature on the topic. Shows how your research is informed through the literature, and how it develops through or goes beyond the literature you have used.

Things to consider:

- Whether your sources are current
- Find a focus and organize accordingly, e.g: chronologically, by trend, thematically or methodologically.

CASE STUDIES

- A comprehensive method incorporating multiple sources of data to provide detailed accounts of complex research phenomena in real-life contexts.
- The subject of the research is studied as an example of a real live phenomenon, within the context in which it happens.
- Best applied when the research addresses descriptive or explanatory questions: i.e. what happened, how, and why?

Yin (2003) identifies three types of case studies:

- **Exploratory:** the case study is used to define questions and hypotheses – or to test out a research procedure – for a further piece of research, such as a large-scale survey.
- **Descriptive:** the case study is used to describe a particular phenomenon within its context. It can be used to expand on a particular theme unearthed by a survey.
- **Explanatory:** the case study explores cause-effect relationships, and/or how events happen.

Case Studies as observation:

Case Studies are a type of observational research that involve a thorough descriptive analysis of a single individual, group, or event.

There is no single way to conduct a case study, so researchers use a range of methods from unstructured interviewing to direct observation.

See more on the Case Study Method in e.g.,: Yin (2014 [1994]) Case study research : design and methods.

VISUAL RESEARCH METHODS

- Are mostly qualitative research methods that use visual materials as part of the process of generating evidence in order to explore research questions
- These include the use of both generated (researcher and/or participants) as well as found visual materials such as: images, maps, drawings, photographs etc.
- Are used to explain visual culture in a specific context and how visual materials are used as representational/symbolic and communicative acts or activities
- see: e.g., Rose, Gillian (2016), *Visual Methodologies*

FILM ANALYSIS

The process in which a film is analyzed in terms of mise-en-scène, narrative, cinematography, sound, editing etc.

-> to look at generic conventions or authorial features, and the use and function of different aspects of film

- Different types, such as:
 - *semiotic analysis* where the focus is on meanings, metaphors and analogies conveyed
 - *narrative analysis* which focuses on examining the elements of the story, such as narrative archs, character development, plot
- See more in e.g.,: Bateman (2011) Multimodal Film Analysis : How Films Mean

'MATERIAL METHODS'

An umbrella term coined to describe methods that draw from the materiality of things to generate data that include:

1. Methods that are used to understand material culture and materiality
 - these draw from traditional methods such as interviews or ethnographic observation, but adapted towards observing with things
 - e.g., object-oriented interviews, cultural probes
2. Methods of researching with things
 - These include new creative methods that examine the multi-sensory, embodied, visual and material dimensions of things
 - e.g., speculative/participatory design, play, arts-based methods

- See more in: Woodward (2020) Material Methods: Researching and Thinking with Things

+ ARTISTIC PRACTICE AS METHOD

- The artistic practice itself, or parts of it, are used as method to investigate a phenomenon related to the practice
- Often other methods are used to gather additional data (e.g., research diary, documentation, auto-ethnography etc.)
- **See also lecture on artistic research from MA seminar 1!**



USEFUL SOURCES:

Handbooks and how-to guides on specific methods and methodologies, Aalto primo/learning services offer plenty. E.g.,:

- SAGE RESEARCH METHODS DATABASE: <https://methods-sagepub-com.libproxy.aalto.fi/>
- -> gives access to a huge database of research methods, e.g., handbooks on the interview method, material methods, visual methods etc.

Task for next meeting D.L. 9.10

Choose 1–2 leading methods related to your own research and explain why you chose them.

Also describe what kind of information you think these methods will provide.

Submit your answers by the d.l. by emailing them to: susanna.suurla@aalto.fi

SLIDES FROM PREVIOUS YEARS

HISTORICAL RESEARCH

- Studies the meaning of past events in an attempt to interpret the facts and explain the cause of events, and their effect in the present events.
- Involves developing an understanding of the past through the examination and interpretation of evidence.
- The aim is to find evidence, analyze its content and biases, corroborate it with further evidence, and use that evidence to develop an interpretation of past events that holds some significance for the present.
- The research relies heavily on primary historical data and less frequently on secondary historical data.

HISTORICAL RESEARCH sources and methods

Historical method is the collection of techniques and guidelines employed to research and write histories of the past.

Primary sources:

- Created during the time period researched or at a later date by a participant or observer in the events (e.g. memoirs). Often reflect the individual viewpoint of a participant or observer through oral or written testimony.
- Found e.g. in public records or legal documents, minutes of meetings, newspapers, diaries, letters, artifacts such as posters, billboards, photographs, drawings, papers, audio and video recordings (radio & tv programs), photographs, works of art, architecture, literature, and music and even web sites.
- Located in archives or special collections (universities, local history societies, museums or privately owned collections)

Secondary sources:

- Scholarly interpretations and critiques of the historical period of interest that you are studying.
- Secondhand accounts of events, oral or written
- Found in textbooks, encyclopedias, journal articles, newspapers, biographies, media such as film or tape recordings