

MR401 - Philosophy and Approaches to Research

Module aim:

MR401 is designed **to present to you an intellectual framework common to all kinds of research endeavour**. If you come to understand this framework you can then position yourself within it, in other words you can establish your own intellectual stance. Once you have achieved that degree of intellectual awareness the process of completing a research degree becomes a more achievable task, quite simply because you understand where you are positioned intellectually in broad terms. This will also allow you to grow in academic confidence. You will not establish your intellectual position within the aforementioned framework without a good deal of careful thought and time. **The first step is to be aware of the framework itself** and to understand its component parts, the choices available within those parts, and the consequences of making certain kinds of choices.

The framework is made up of a number of component parts. Firstly, there are philosophical theories of knowledge called **epistemologies**. Researchers choose a particular epistemology (for example the most commonly used in research is the theory of knowledge underpinning the natural sciences which is called 'positivism'). This is theory about how the world works. Adopting such a theory allows researchers to make claims as to what is in the world. Such claims are **ontological** because they define the nature of what is possible in that particular world.

Whilst epistemology and linked ontological claims constitute the philosophical foundations of the research process, there are other kinds of theory which are resident within particular intellectual disciplines. These theories, which are comprised of interrelated sets of abstractions, **constitute the basic tool used by researchers to theorise about empirical evidence (data) or about other theories**. This kind of intellectual abstraction is often called 'formal theory'. At the level of doing a research degree you are going to have to manipulate such theory and use it as an intellectual tool so as to generalise about your findings, that is what theorising is. As stated, such theories are linked to disciplines, so for example physics has theory at a cosmological level and also at the level of the sub-atomic structure of existence.

The second kind of basic tool available to researchers is the concept. **Concepts are analytic devices which act as a bridge between theorising and empirical data**. Concepts also tend to be situated within particular disciplinary fields. So for example in physics at the level of maximum abstraction there are the concepts of 'dark matter' and 'black hole' and other concepts at the other end of the spectrum in terms of physical size such as protons, neutrons etc. The picture becomes a bit more complicated when one realizes that researchers can theorize about concepts. So for example the concept of 'crime', which has generated many theories within criminology or forensic psychology.

Establishing your epistemological position, justifying your ontological claims, theorising and conceptualising, these constitute the core intellectual processes of doing a research degree which MR 401 is designed to foster an awareness and understanding of.

MR401 is also designed to **alert you to the task of orientating yourself within your particular field of study**. This means you working to identify your position within particular bodies of literature, for example on cross cultural comparisons of perceptions of management styles in the hospitality industry, or the physiological explanations for knee injuries amongst female footballers, or the impact of ecological theories on 21st century poetry. Understanding where and how your research is situated with a particular field of study allows you to understand the intellectual platform for your own research and the contribution your research will make to the general field; the latter being the hallmark of a UK research degree

A further feature of MR401 focuses on communicating to you the structure and component parts of a research thesis and how these parts interrelate and make an analytic and cohesive whole (one which forms a substantial piece of cogent intellectual work). **The purpose here is to make you aware of how such a long piece of research writing is held together via components which are common to many research fields (e.g. Introduction, data analysis etc) and those which are particular or idiosyncratic**. Again, such awareness is important. Without it, even the most able students tend to get 'lost' or confused for long periods of time.

Following this focus on understanding how the structuring of research is achieved, MR401 will examine the arguably even more creative process of how to create an analytic **form** from empirical data (interviews, surveys, film clips, texts, measurements, paintings, poems etc etc) or from a combination of theories. **A form which maximises your analytic momentum and contributes your original contribution to the structure of your thesis**.

The final objective of MR401 is to portray to you how you should go about constructing your research questions and how those questions interrelate with your research objectives. This **is a vital part** in the process of you identifying the salient issues which form the core of your intended research, and one without which your research **cannot proceed**.

All of the above parts of MR401 are designed to orientate you to the academic structures and processes which surround you as you engage with doing a research degree. Moreover, they are also designed to stimulate a particular kind of analytic thinking in you and place great emphasis on that thinking generating **research momentum**.

Module activities:

What follows are **a number of tasks** which are linked to aims of the course outlined above. In order to make the best possible use of the course content and the time spent in class, you should **work through these tasks prior to the course teaching**. That way you come to the course prepared able to make a contribution to debate about the salient issues of doing research and thus gain intellectually from the course.

1. Writing a thesis will require you to construct a particular kind of thought structure which will be much larger than you have done in your academic endeavours so far. How are you going to do that?

Task: Read Chapter 3 by Dunleavy (2003) and consider what form of structure might be best for your research project.

2. One of the first parts of the research process that will occupy you the development of an understanding of the field(s) of literature that your research will be situated within.

Task: Read chapter 1 by Hart (2001), and then identify which fields of literature are apposite to your research and identify the main means of interrogating that literature available to you.

3. If you want to do a research degree you need to consider the philosophical assumptions underpinning your research position. Without such an understanding your position cannot be established analytically.

Task: Read the Introduction to Crotty (1998) and then consider what your own epistemological position is or might be?

4. Again if you want to obtain a research degree you will have to theorize your empirical material (data/evidence) or theorize about theories (meta theory). Different disciplines have different approaches to theory.

Task: If you are in social sciences read the introduction to Harrington (2005). If you are in the Humanities read the introduction to Harrington (2005). Alternatively, if you are a natural scientist, read the chapter by Yeadon (2005). Once you have done this, you should consider – what do you understand theory to be? Where are you going to obtain theories to use in your research?

5. Whilst there are philosophical positions and theories in research what is also needed are concepts which provide the link between theory and data.

Task: Read Chapter 5 by Layder (1998) or in the case of natural scientists the chapter by Yeadon (2005), and then consider what kind of concepts will be useful to you in your particular study. Where are you going to find such concepts?

6. When you get data/evidence (this can be numeric, interview transcripts, film texts, literary texts, archival material etc.,) you then have to interrogate it and then fashion from it an analytic narrative. This constitutes the really 'creative' part of your thesis.

Task: How are you going to do that? What kinds of narratives are already available to you in your particular research field? Read Chapter 9 by Hammersley & Atkinson (2009) on ethnographic writing. How much of what they say pertains to your kind of research? How

much does not? If it does not what kinds of narratives are available to you in your research field?

Key texts:

Crotty, M. (1998) *The Foundations of Social Research*, London: Sage.

Dunleavy, P. (2003) *Authoring a PhD*, Basingstoke: Palgrave.

Hammersley, M. & Atkinson, P. (2009) *Ethnography: principles in Practice*, London: Tavistock.

Harrington, A. (2005) *Modern Social Theory*, Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Hart, C. (2001) *Doing a Literature Search*, London: Sage.

Layder, D. (1998) *Sociological Practice*, London: Sage.

Yeadon, M.R. (2005) 'What are the limitations of experimental and theoretical approaches in sports biomechanics?', pp.133-143, in M. McNamee (ed.) *Philosophy and the Sciences of Exercise, Health and Sport*, London: Routledge.

ii) Skills

By the end of the module students should have developed skills in:

- a) Communications and literacy: at a level to engage in dialogue with their peers and the wider scholarly community and be able to disseminate their understanding to the academic and wider communities.
 - b) The systematic understanding of the context and approaches to research within the researcher's field of study.
 - c) The construction of appropriate research questions and the scoping of a research proposal that will form part of the basis for the student's RD1.
 - d) Critical analysis, evaluation and synthesis of new and complex ideas.
 - e) Independent learning and working: through the assessment and reading
 - f) Working with others: team-working skills will be developed through class-based problem-based learning and discussions.
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Assessment:

5000 word essay (detailed brief to follow)

MR402 Methodologies and Methods

Module aim:

MR402 is designed to complement the content of MR401. Whilst the latter course is concerned primarily with the intellectual processes of doing research (which require high levels of abstraction such as adopting an epistemological position, theorising, constructing a thesis structure etc), MR402 is focused upon the more directly practical issue of choosing and engaging with particular research methods. The course will explain what those methods can do, and arguably more importantly, what **they cannot do for you**. It will also portray the connections between methods and the wider methodological framework outlined in MR401.

The course content is comprised of two specific themes. On the one hand there are sessions which focus upon particular kinds of methods. For example there are sessions on methods of gathering qualitative data such as interviewing and participant observation. These methods constitute the main techniques for constructing ethnographic accounts. In addition there are sessions on quantitative techniques such as the design and analysis of sample-based surveys. On the other hand there are sessions which focus on the textual analysis, and the benefits and drawbacks of mixing methods.

In nearly all the sessions a good part of the allotted time will be devoted to the class being presented with actual data (obtained from research). **Students will then be expected to carry out collective group analysis of the data they have been working with and present their findings and ideas at the end of each session.** The purpose of this form of pedagogy is to you exposure to real research data, a process within which you are also presented with the complexity and challenges of understanding the material and a demystification of **how** data is collected and **how** it is analysed.

MR402 is designed to orientate you to both the methods of acquiring data and the techniques available for analysing that data. Moreover, it is designed to stimulate a particular kind of analytic thinking in you and places great emphasis on that thinking generating **research momentum**.

Module activities:

What follows are **a number of tasks** which are linked to the components parts of the course outlined, above. You should **work through these tasks prior to the course teaching**. That way you come to the course prepared and able to make a contribution to debate about the salient issues of doing research and thus gain intellectually from the course.

1. Research requires us to engage with culture and often requires us to make sense of our own and others' understanding of who we/they are and how we/they fit into the world. Doing research requires awareness about self and others.

Task: Read Chapter 1 'What is textual analysis' by Alan McKee (2003) and create a definition of a 'text' and consider the role of interpreting texts in your work.

2. The methods you use in your research are not separate from your wider methodology so you need to understand that relationship.

Task: Read Chapter 2 by King & Horrocks (2010) and consider what methods (of data collection and analysis) you might use in your research and how these are connected to particular epistemological positions.

3. Interviews are a staple method in lots of research carried out in the social sciences and the humanities and they demand much thought and preparation before they are executed.

Task: Read Chapter 5 by O'Reilly (2012) and consider what skills are necessary for you to carry out qualitative interviewing effectively.

4. Some research methods are designed to capture and interrogate data of great breadth (e.g. surveys) whilst in contrast other kinds of approaches such as ethnography are concerned with capturing and understanding the depth of human behaviour.

Task: Read Chapter 3 (particularly pp.58-71) of Brewer (2000) and consider how much depth of data you are likely to need to acquire in your research. How 'ethnographic' is your project likely to be? A little or a lot and in either case you are going to have to justify your degree of involvement in terms of depth or not.

5. The greater the involvement the researcher has with his/her research subjects the greater need for researcher skills and the greater the stresses of such kind of 'involved' fieldwork.

Task: Read Chapter 4 of Hammersley & Atkinson (2009) and then consider how involved are you likely to be with your research respondents? What is the relationship between your likely degree of involvement and costs or benefits to yourself and your research?

6. Ethnographic or as it is often called qualitative data is arguably a lot more elusive to categorise and analyse than numeric data.

Task: Read Chapter 2 of Coffey & Atkinson (1996) and then consider your own research project. What kind of data do you intend to accumulate? How are you going to organize it? Once you have organized the data how are you going to analyze it?

7. Many less experienced researchers assume that because their research focus lies in a 'soft' area quantitative methods will have little to offer them, while others believe that statistical methods offer 'right or wrong' answers to research questions.

Task: Read chapters 1 of Balnaves and Caputi (2001) and consider the extent to which the approaches outlined there might be of relevance to your own current and future work, and to what extent you are likely to encounter them in your reading of the literature. (If in this process you identify examples of published literature which utilise these methods, please bring an example with you to the taught session.)

8. In order to capture the complexity of your research area you may consider mixing your research methods.

Task: Read Roslyn Cameron's (2011) 'Mixed Methods Research: The Five Ps Framework' and consider the appropriateness of applying mixed methods to your intended research.

Key texts:

These are all available either on the University's Moodle site for this module or via electronic journals. The majority of the texts (not Cameron) are also available in the original book versions which can be located via the University's Learning Catalogue.

Balnaves, M. and Caputi, P. (2001) *Introduction to Quantitative Research Methods: An Investigative Approach*, London, Sage.

Brewer, J.D. (2000) *Ethnography*, Buckingham: Open University Press.

Cameron, R (2011) 'Mixed Methods Research: The Five Ps Framework', *Electronic Journal of Business Research Methods*, vol. 9, issue 2, pp 96-108. Available through University of Gloucestershire Library Catalogue (online journal).

Coffey, A. & Atkinson, P. (1996) *Making Sense of Qualitative Data*, London: Sage.

Hammersley, M. & Atkinson, P. (2009) *Ethnography, Principles in Practice*, London: Routledge.

King, N. & Horrocks, C.. (2010) *Interviews in Qualitative Research*, London: Sage.

McKee, A (2003) *Textual Analysis: A Beginners Guide*, London: Sage.

O'Reilly, K. (2012) *Ethnographic Methods*, London: Routledge.

Module learning outcomes:

a) Knowledge and Understanding

Researchers who have successfully completed this module will:

1. be able to contextualise the choice, design and implementation of methods relative to research philosophies and methodologies

2. have a critical appreciation of the strengths and weaknesses of a range of research methods in specific research projects
3. be able to select and use appropriate research methods to meet specified research objectives
4. be able to reflect critically on the role and power of the researcher in managing research projects in a range of multi-disciplinary contexts.
5. be able to examine critically their own and other researchers' use of research methods.
6. ethical approaches to research.

b) Skills

By the end of the module researchers should have developed skills in:

1. The selection and justification of research methods for use in their own research.
 2. The creation of responses to problems and the development of new approaches in new situations.
 3. Self-reflexivity
 4. Independent learning and working: through the assessment and reading
 5. Working with others: team-working skills will be developed through class-based problem-based learning and discussions.
 6. The use and location of a wide range of primary source material relevant to their research.
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Assessment:

5000 word essay (detailed brief to follow)