

## 8

## Selecting a Case

I concluded the previous chapter with my favourite research maxim: 'make a lot out of a little'. If you take me seriously, you will have every chance of producing a thorough, analytically interesting research study. However, a nagging doubt may well remain.

This doubt surfaces in a regular refrain I hear from student researchers. 'I have so few data, only just one case,' they say, 'how can I possibly generalize about it?'

Generalizability is a standard aim in quantitative research and is normally achieved by statistical sampling procedures. Such sampling has two functions. First, it allows you to feel confident about the representativeness of your sample: 'if the population characteristics are known, the degree of representativeness of a sample can be checked' (Arber, 1993: 70). Second, such representativeness allows you to make broader inferences:

The purpose of sampling is usually to study a representative subsection of a precisely defined population in order to make inferences about the whole population. (1993: 38)

Such sampling procedures are, however, usually unavailable in qualitative research. In such studies, our data are often derived from one or more cases and it is unlikely that these cases will have been selected on a random basis. Very often a case will be chosen simply because it allows access. Moreover, even if you were able to construct a representative sample of cases, the sample size would be likely to be so large as to preclude the kind of intensive analysis usually preferred in qualitative research (Mason, 1996: 91).

This gives rise to a problem, familiar to users of quantitative methods:

How do we know ... how representative case study findings are of all members of the population from which the case was selected? (Bryman, 1988: 88)

### GENERALIZABILITY IN QUALITATIVE RESEARCH

For a few writers who see qualitative research as purely descriptive, generalizability is not an issue. For example, Stake refers to the 'intrinsic case study' where 'this case is of interest ... in all its particularity and ordinariness'

(1994: 236). In the intrinsic case study, according to Stake, no attempt is made to generalize beyond the single case or even to build theories.

This is resisted by many qualitative researchers. As Jennifer Mason puts it:

I do not think qualitative researchers should be satisfied with producing explanations which are idiosyncratic or particular to the limited empirical parameters of their study ... Qualitative research should [therefore] produce explanations which are *generalizable* in some way, or which have a wider resonance. (1996: 6)

So, unlike Stake, the problem of 'representativeness' is a perennial worry of many qualitative or case study researchers. How do they attempt to address it? Can we generalize from cases to populations without following a purely statistical logic?

In the rest of this chapter, I will discuss four different but positive answers to this question of how we can obtain generalizability:

- combining qualitative research with quantitative measures of populations
- purposive sampling guided by time and resources
- theoretical sampling
- using an analytic model which assumes that generalizability is present in the existence of *any* case.

### COMBINING QUALITATIVE RESEARCH WITH QUANTITATIVE MEASURES OF POPULATIONS

Quantitative measures may sometimes be used to infer from one case to a larger population. Hammersley (1992) suggests three methods through which we can attempt to generalize from the analysis of a single case:

- obtaining information about relevant aspects of the population of cases and comparing our case with them
- using survey research on a random sample of cases
- co-ordinating several ethnographic studies.

Hammersley argues that such comparisons with a larger sample may allow us to establish some sense of the representativeness of our single case.

However, two of Hammersley's methods are very ambitious for the student researcher. For instance, you are unlikely to have the funds for even a small piece of survey research, while the co-ordination of several ethnographic studies requires substantial resources of time and personnel as well as good contacts with other researchers. Such contacts allowed Miller and Silverman (1995) to apply the comparative approach in describing talk about troubles in two counselling settings: a British haemophilia centre counselling patients who are HIV-positive, and a family therapy centre in the US. In this study, we focused on similarities in three types of discursive practices in

these settings: those concerned with trouble definitions, trouble remedies, and the social contexts of the clients' troubles (see also Gubrium, 1992).

Without such contacts and resources, the student researcher is left with Hammersley's first method: obtaining information about relevant aspects of the population of cases and comparing our case with them. This is more useful because, at its simplest, this method only involves reading about other cognate studies and comparing our case with them. For instance, in my study of HIV counselling (Silverman, 1997b), I compared my counsellor-client interviews with Heritage and Sefi's (1992) data on interviews between health visitors and first-time mothers. Although this had little to do with establishing the representativeness of my sample, it gave a firmer basis to my generalizations about advice sequences in my data (1997b: 124-8).

The comparative method used here allows you to make larger claims about your analysis without leaving your library. As Peräkylä puts it:

The comparative approach directly tackles the question of generalizability by demonstrating the similarities and differences across a number of settings. (1997: 214)

In this sense, your literature review (see Chapter 18) has as much to do with the issue of generalizability as with displaying your academic credentials.

## PURPOSIVE SAMPLING

Before we can contemplate comparing our case with others, we need to have selected our case. Are there any grounds other than convenience or accessibility to guide us in this selection?

Purposive sampling allows us to choose a case because it illustrates some feature or process in which we are interested. However, this does not provide a simple approval to any case we happen to choose. Rather purposive sampling demands that we think critically about the parameters of the population we are interested in and choose our sample case carefully on this basis. As Denzin and Lincoln put it:

Many qualitative researchers employ ... purposive, and not random, sampling methods. They seek out groups, settings and individuals where ... the processes being studied are most likely to occur. (1994: 202)

Stake (1994: 243) gives the example of a study of interactive displays in children's museums. He assumes that you only have resources to study four such museums. How should you proceed?

He suggests setting up a *typology* which would establish a matrix of museum types as in Table 8.1. The typology yields six cases which could be increased further by, say, distinguishing between museums located in small and big cities - bringing up the cases to twelve. Which cases should you select?

TABLE 8.1 A typology of children's museums

Programme type	Type of museum		
	Art	Science	History
Exhibitory	1	2	3
Participative	4	5	6

Source: adapted from Stake, 1994: 243

You will be constrained by two main factors. First, there may not be examples to fit every cell. Second, your resources will not allow you to research every existing unit. So you have to make a practical decision. For instance, if you can cover only two cases, do you choose two participatory museums in different locations or in different subjects? Or do you compare such a museum with a more conventional exhibit-based museum?

Provided you have thought through the options, it is unlikely that your selection will be criticized. Moreover, as we see below, how you set up your typology and make your choice should be grounded in the theoretical apparatus you are using. Sampling in qualitative research is neither statistical nor purely personal: it is, or should be, theoretically grounded. To improve your understanding of this point, you could now attempt Exercise 8.1.

## THEORETICAL SAMPLING

Theoretical and purposive sampling are often treated as synonyms. Indeed, the only difference between the two procedures applies when the 'purpose' behind 'purposive' sampling is not theoretically defined.

Bryman argues that qualitative research follows a theoretical, rather than a statistical, logic: 'the issue should be couched in terms of the generalizability of cases to *theoretical* propositions rather than to *populations* or *universes*' (1988: 90, my emphasis).<sup>1</sup>

The nature of this link between sampling and theory is set out by Jennifer Mason:

theoretical sampling means selecting groups or categories to study on the basis of their relevance to your research questions, your theoretical position ... and most importantly the explanation or account which you are developing. Theoretical sampling is concerned with constructing a sample ... which is meaningful theoretically, because it builds in certain characteristics or criteria which help to develop and test your theory and explanation. (1996: 93-4)

Theoretical sampling has three features which I discuss below:

- choosing cases in terms of your theory
- choosing 'deviant' cases
- changing the size of your sample during the research.

### Choosing cases in terms of your theory

Mason writes about 'the wider universe of social explanations in relation to which you have constructed your research questions' (1996: 85). This theoretically defined universe 'will make some sampling choices more sensible and meaningful than others'. Mason describes choosing a kind of sample which can represent a wider population. Here we select a sample of particular 'processes, types, categories or examples which are relevant to or appear within the wider universe' (1996: 92). Mason suggests that examples of these would include single units such as 'an organization, a location, a document ... [or] a conversation'.

Mason gives the example of a DA study of gender relation as discourses which construct subjects of gender relations. In this approach, as she puts it: 'you are ... unlikely to perceive the social world in terms of a large set of gender relations from which you can simply draw a representative sample of people by gender' (1996: 85).

So in qualitative research the relevant or 'sampleable' units are often seen as theoretically defined. This means that it is inappropriate to sample populations by such attributes as 'gender', 'ethnicity' or even age because how such attributes are routinely defined is itself the *topic* of your research.

As an example of theoretically defined sampling, Bryman uses Glaser and Strauss's discussion of 'awareness contexts' in relation to dying in hospital:

The issue of whether the particular hospital studied is 'typical' is not the critical issue; what is important is whether the experiences of dying patients are typical of the broad class of phenomena ... to which the theory refers. Subsequent research would then focus on the validity of the proposition in other milieux (e.g. doctors' surgeries). (1988: 91)

We can understand better the theoretical logic behind choice of a sample in a further example of a study of police work. Say you are interested in the arrest and booking of suspects (see Miles and Huberman, 1984: 37-8). You are now confronted with a series of choices which relate to:

- the particular setting to be studied
- the elements or processes on which you will focus
- how you might generalize further.

Let us look at each of these in turn.

#### SETTINGS

In independent, unfunded research, you are likely to choose any setting which, while demonstrating the phenomenon in which you are interested, is accessible and will provide appropriate data reasonably readily and quickly. In the police study, this might well lead you to study the police station rather than a squad car, the scene of the crime, the suspect's residence or hangout. In the police station, at the very least, you will keep warm and dry, you will

be safe and you can expect several arrests and bookings on any visit. However, so far you are being guided by quite practical influences.

#### THE RESEARCH FOCUS

In focusing your research, you necessarily are making a theoretically guided choice. By opting to focus on particular individuals, events or processes, you are electing particular theoretical frameworks. For instance, a focus on differential behaviour between police officers and suspects with different characteristics may draw on some version of the structural determinants of action. Conversely, a focus on how laws are interpreted in practice (cf. Sudnow, 1968b), may derive from a concern with the creative power of common-sense interpretive procedures.

#### GENERALIZING FURTHER

When your study is wedded to other studies which share your theoretical orientation, a single police station may provide enough data to develop all the generalizations you want about, say, how common-sense reasoning works. However, if you have a more 'structural' bent, it may now be necessary to widen your sample in two ways: first, to add more observations of arrests in this police station; and second, to compare it with other stations, perhaps in a range of areas.

In all these cases, the sample is not random but theoretical: it is

designed to provide a close-up, detailed or meticulous view of particular units which may constitute ... cases which are relevant to or appear within the wider universe. (Mason, 1996: 92)

### Choosing 'deviant' cases

Mason notes that you must overcome any tendency to select a case which is likely to support your argument. Instead, it makes sense to seek out negative instances as defined by the theory with which you are working.

For instance, in a study of the forces that may make trade unions undemocratic, Lipset et al. (1962) deliberately chose to study a US printing union. Because this union had unusually strong democratic institutions it constituted a vital deviant case compared with most American unions of the period. Lipset's union was also deviant in terms of a highly respected theory which postulated an irresistible tendency towards 'oligarchy' in all formal organizations.

So Lipset et al. chose a deviant case because it offered a crucial test of a theory. As our understanding of social processes improves, we are increasingly able to choose cases on such theoretical grounds.

### Changing the size of your sample during the research

So far we have been discussing theoretical sampling as an issue at the *start* of a research study. However, we can also apply such sampling during the

course of a piece of research. Indeed, one of the strengths of qualitative research design is that it often allows for far greater (theoretically informed) flexibility than in most quantitative research designs. As Mason puts it:

Theoretical or purposive sampling is a set of procedures where the researcher manipulates their analysis, theory, and sampling activities *interactively* during the research process, to a much greater extent than in statistical sampling. (1996: 100)

Such flexibility may be appropriate in the following cases:

- As new factors emerge you may want to increase your sample in order to say more about them.
- You may want to focus on a small part of your sample in early stages, using the wider sample for later tests of emerging generalizations.
- Unexpected generalizations in the course of data analysis lead you to seek out new deviant cases.

Alasuutari has described this process through using the analogy of an hourglass:

a narrow case-analysis is broadened . . . through the search for contrary and parallel cases, into an example of a broader entity. Thus the research process advances, in its final stages, towards a discussion of broader entities. We end up on the bottom of the hourglass. (1995: 156)

Alasuutari (1995: 155) illustrates this hourglass metaphor through his own study of the social consequences of Finnish urbanization in the 1970s. He chose local pubs as a site to observe these effects and eventually focused upon male 'regulars'. This led to a second study even more narrowly focused on a group where drinking was heavier and where many of the men were divorced. As he puts it: 'Ethnographic research of this kind is not so much generalization as extrapolation . . . the results are related to broader entities' (1995: 155).

### GENERALIZABILITY AS PRESENT IN A SINGLE CASE

The fourth and final way of thinking about how we generalize in qualitative research is far more radical than our earlier alternatives. According to this approach, since the basic structures of social order are to be found anywhere, it does not matter where we begin our research. Look at *any* case and you will find the same order.

For this linguistically inspired approach, the possibility something exists is enough. As Peräkylä suggests:

Social practices that are possible, i.e., *possibilities of language use*, are the central objects of all conversation analytical case studies on interaction in particular institutional

settings. The possibility of various practices can be considered generalizable even if the practices are not actualized in similar ways across different settings. (1997: 215)

Peräkylä illustrates his argument by the example of his own study of AIDS counselling in a London teaching hospital (Peräkylä, 1995). This study focused on specific questioning practices used by counsellors and their clients. As he puts it:

As possibilities, the practices that I analyzed are very likely to be generalizable. There is no reason to think that they could not be made possible by any competent member of (at least any Western) society. In this sense, this study produced generalizable results. The results were not generalizable as descriptions of what other counsellors or other professionals do with their clients; but they were generalizable as descriptions of what any counsellor or other professional, with his or her clients, *can* do, given that he or she has the same array of interactional competencies as the participants of the AIDS counselling sessions have. (1997: 215-16)

As the most cogent proponent of this view once put it: 'tap into whomsoever, wheresoever and we get much the same things' (Sacks, 1984: 22). Sacks had a strategy of working with any data that crossed his path. This clearly conflicts both with the standard approach of quantitative social scientists, who usually work with random samples from particular populations, and with the common defensiveness of their qualitative brethren about the representativeness of the cases that they study.

Sacks's lack of defensiveness on this issue stems from his argument about the obvious pervasiveness of the social forms (or what he calls the 'machinery') with which he is concerned. For example, Sacks notes the ability of a child to learn a culture from very limited contacts and of the sociolinguist Whorf to build a Navajo grammar from talking to just one person (1992, Vol. 1: 485).

The pervasiveness of structures which these examples suggest implies to Sacks that it does not matter what data you select. As he argues:

Now if one figures that that's the way things are . . . then it really wouldn't matter very much what it is you look at - if you look at it carefully enough. And you may well find that you [have] got an enormous generalizability because things are so arranged that you *could* get them; given that for a [societal] member encountering a very limited environment, he has to be able to do that, and things are so arranged as to permit him to. (1992, Vol. 1: 485)

However, apprentice researchers have to be very cautious about simply parroting Sacks's 'solution' to the problem of the generalizability of research findings. This solution is really only appropriate to the most basic research on social order guided by theoretically sophisticated positions like Sacks's own conversation analytic (CA) approach (or, perhaps, French structuralism). If you are interested in this sort of research, you should now attempt Exercise 8.2.

Within CA, following Sacks:

the baseline assumption is that the results are or should be generalizable to the whole domain of ordinary conversations, and to a certain extent even across linguistic and cultural boundaries. (Peräkylä, 1995: 214)

However, Peräkylä notes that even this depends on the type of CA research:

Even though the most primordial conversational practices and structures – such as turn-taking or adjacency pairs – are almost universal, there are others, such as openings of telephone calls (see Schegloff, 1986; Houtkoop-Steenstra, 1991; Lindström, 1994), which show considerable variation in different cultures. This variation can only be tackled through gradual accumulation of studies on ordinary conversation in different cultures and social milieux. (1995: 214)

Peräkylä's observation about the need for comparative work shows that even the most potentially radical approach, like CA, has to take seriously the issue of the empirical generalizability of its findings. Sometimes, an appeal to 'possibilities' will be sufficient. Often, however, other examples will be required.

## CONCLUDING REMARKS

In this chapter, I have set out various strategies which you can use to defend your research against the charge that it 'merely' depends upon a single case. My overall message is that there is usually no need to be defensive about the claims of qualitative research. As Howard Becker argues:

Sampling is a major problem for any kind of research. We can't study every case of whatever we're interested in, nor should we want to. Every scientific enterprise tries to find out something that will apply to *everything* of a certain kind by studying a few examples, the results of the study being, as we say 'generalizable' to all members of that class of stuff. We need the sample to persuade people that we know something about the whole class. (1998: 67)

Following Becker, sampling troubles quantitative researchers too. Indeed, as we have seen, the relative flexibility of qualitative research can improve the generalizability of our findings by allowing us to include new cases after initial findings are achieved.

The crucial issue here seems to be thinking through one's theoretical priorities. Providing that you have done that and can demonstrate a research design driven by those priorities, nobody should have cause for complaint.

So the secret seems to be to substitute theoretical cogency for the statistical language of quantitative research. In this sense, as Alasuutari has suggested, perhaps 'generalizability' is the wrong word to describe what we attempt to achieve in qualitative research. As he puts it:

Generalization is ... [a] word ... that should be reserved for surveys only. What can be analyzed instead is how the researcher demonstrates that the analysis relates to things beyond the material at hand ... *extrapolation* better captures the typical procedure in qualitative research. (1995: 156–7)

## SUMMARY

In this chapter, I have discussed four positive answers to the question of how we can generalize from qualitative data:

- combining qualitative research with quantitative measures of populations
- purposive sampling guided by time and resources
- theoretical sampling
- using an analytic model which assumes that generalizability is present in the existence of *any* case.

## NOTE

- 1 As Clive Seale (personal correspondence) has pointed out, theoretical sampling may have more to do with generating theories than with empirical generalization. I take up Seale's point at the end of this chapter in relation to Alasuutari's argument that the idea of empirical generalization 'should be reserved for surveys only' (1995: 156).

## Further reading

The most thorough book on this topic is Clive Seale's *The Quality of Qualitative Research* (Sage, 1999).

Other useful discussions are: Jennifer Mason, *Qualitative Researching* (Sage, 1996), Chapters 5–7; Pertti Alasuutari, *Researching Culture* (Sage, 1995), Chapter 12 'Generalization'; and Howard Becker, *Tricks of the Trade* (University of Chicago Press, 1998) Chapter 3 'Sampling'.

Robert Stake's chapter 'Case studies' is a good account of the conventional qualitative methods position on generalizability (in N. Denzin and Y. Lincoln (eds), *Handbook of Qualitative Research*, Sage, 1994). Anssi Peräkylä's chapter 'Reliability and validity in research based upon transcripts' is an excellent, more specialist treatment (in David Silverman (ed.), *Qualitative Research*, Sage, 1997).

**Exercise 8.1**

Imagine that you have the resources to study *four* cases of the phenomenon in which you are interested. Following my discussion of Stake (1994; see Table 8.1), draw up a typology to indicate the universe of cases potentially available. This typology should include between six and twelve possible cases.

Now explain why you propose to select your four cases in terms of the logic of purposive sampling.

**Exercise 8.2**

Using conversation analysis, Harvey Sacks has argued: 'tap into whomsoever, wheresoever and we get much the same things' (1984: 22).

Consider how far your own theoretical model might allow you to use Sacks's argument to justify working with a very small dataset.

## 9

## Writing a Research Proposal

According to Janice Morse (1994), qualitative research is difficult to sell to funding agencies. This is because:

- Qualitative research is unstructured.
- The results of qualitative research are unpredictable.
- The outcome is uncertain (1994: 227).

How, then, can one convince funders to support a piece of qualitative research? Or a potential university supervisor to support your research proposal?

To answer these questions satisfactorily means shifting away from your own concerns and thinking about the questions that the reader(s) of your research proposal will be asking. Many of these questions are set out in Table 9.1.

TABLE 9.1 Questions a research proposal must answer

- |   |  |
|---|--|
| 1 | Why should anyone be interested in my research?                      |
| 2 | Is the research design credible, achievable and carefully explained? |
| 3 | Is the researcher capable of doing the research?                     |

Source: adapted from Marshall and Rossman, 1989: 23

How can you properly (and successfully) answer these questions?

- Be practical
- Be persuasive
- Make broader links
- Aim for crystal clarity
- Plan before you write.

Each of these suggestions are explained below.

**BE PRACTICAL**

One way to persuade non-specialists, Morse suggests, is to show the specific ways that your research can address a social problem or solve an organizational trouble (e.g. staff turnover).

Such a concern with practical problems cannot be shrugged off even if you are proposing to do a purely academic piece of research with no expectation that it will be read outside the university. Academic funding bodies are increasingly demanding practical pay-offs as well as analytic insights. For instance, Kelly (1998: 112) quotes a policy statement by the body that funds social science PhDs in the UK:

Any lingering public perception of social science as a source of irrelevant, introverted and incoherent output is set for radical alteration ... In future, research which makes a difference to the health and wealth of the population, rather than merely supports 'ivory tower' academic excellence, will be the ESRC's priority. (Student Information: Economic and Social Research Council, 1996)

The issue of *audiences* for your research is discussed further in Chapter 24. However, if what you are proposing is 'basic research', i.e. a study deriving from debates and concepts internal to social science, then all is not lost. You can strengthen the persuasiveness of your case by showing non-specialists why they ought to take your ideas seriously. One way to do that is to write a persuasive proposal as explained below.

### BE PERSUASIVE

It is easy to get very wrapped up in the subject and think that, because we are convinced of the particular value of our research, others will be too. The way in which the proposal is presented can enable the reader to appreciate what you are planning to do. (Kelly, 1998: 121)

Kelly is reminding us that, in framing a research proposal, one must think first of the audience who is going to read it (and judge it). This means that it should set out to convince such readers that this is something worth supporting:

The first principle of grantsmanship is to recognize that a good proposal is an argument ... for the researcher's project. The proposal must make a case to the granting agency that the research question is interesting [and] that the study is important ... Thus the proposal must be written persuasively. (Morse: 1994: 226)

Morse is suggesting that you try to 'sell' your proposal. This means that you must recognize that the craft of selling (your proposal, yourself) is not incongruent with working in a university. 'Ivory towers' were never so isolated as the term suggests!

However, this persuasiveness must be balanced with a realistic understanding about what you can achieve within a few years as a single researcher. Like any good salesperson, do not oversell your goods!

### MAKE BROADER LINKS

Realism need not mean that you must present your research as entirely a narrow, anaemic exercise. Even if you cannot cover every aspect of the field

yourself, you should demonstrate your understanding of the broader implications of your proposed research.

One way to do that is to hint at a wider context:

place the problem in context to show, for instance, that 'when we understand this, we will be able to work on that'. (Morse, 1994: 227)

Of course, you will be studying very few cases or maybe only a single case. Be positive about the gains as well as the losses of this! Show how a relatively small database will enable you to conduct an in-depth analysis (see Chapters 8 and 13). And argue that your case can indicate far larger phenomena:

The writer must show how, in examining a specific setting or group of individuals, she is studying a case of a larger phenomenon. (Marshall and Rossman, 1989: 12)

### AIM FOR CRYSTAL CLARITY

The proposal should use language and terminology that is understandable to an intelligent lay person as well as to a subject expert. (Cryer, 1996: 15)

Although it is tempting to seek to display your newly acquired technical jargon, bear in mind that your proposal is likely to be read, in the first instance, by a faculty member who is not a specialist in your area of the discipline. So never be content with a proposal which can look like a stream of (perhaps undigested) theories or concepts. Always aim for clear language that describes your research in a way that non-specialists can comprehend.

As Morse suggests, this means that you should resist the temptation to lapse into pure jargon: 'because some of the reviewers will be from other disciplines, the proposal writer should assume nothing and explain everything' (Morse, 1994: 227).

By explaining everything, you will have demonstrated the ability to think (and write) clearly. Not only is this the way to write a research proposal, it is also the best indicator that your research itself will be organized in a clear and logical way:

A sloppily prepared proposal will, at best, send a message to the agency that if it funds the proposal, the research may also be sloppy. (1994: 226-7)

For instance, your objectives 'should be clear and it should be easy to decide whether they have been achieved or not' (Kelly, 1998: 117). The ways to achieve this are:

- Be concise (there is no reason why a proposal for a piece of student research should be more than 500 words).
- Use short, simple sentences.
- Use headings as in Table 9.2.

TABLE 9.2 A Structure for a Qualitative Research Proposal

1	Title
2	Abstract (further advice on titles and abstracts is found in Chapter 17)
3	Background or introduction: e.g. contemporary debates in social policy and social science
4	Statement of purpose or aims: the research question ('The intellectual problem(s) I may help solve through this research is (are) . . .')
5	Review of the relevant literature: showing the importance of the project in the context of the classic or definitive pieces of research in this area
6	Methods: description of case(s) chosen, procedures for data collection and data analysis in terms of (a) their appropriateness to your theoretical orientation and (b) how they satisfy criteria of validity and reliability (see Chapters 7 and 13)
7	Ethical issues (see Chapter 15)
8	Dissemination and policy relevance: explain how you will communicate your findings (see Chapters 16 and 24)
9	Timetable: indicating the length of time to be devoted to each stage of the research
10	References: use a standard system like the Harvard system. <sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Harvard system: in the main body of your text (not in footnotes), give surname of author, followed by date and page reference. In your references, give author (with initials), date, title, place of publication, publisher and page references (for articles or chapters).

Source: adapted from Morse, 1994: 228; Kelly, 1998: 115–21; Rudestam and Newton, 1992: 18

## PLAN BEFORE YOU WRITE

The writer must show that the design is the result of a series of decisions that she made because of knowledge gained from the . . . literature. (Marshall and Rossman, 1989: 13)

Not only must the proposal demonstrate that it is based on an intelligent understanding of the existing literature, it must show that you have thought about the time you will need to conduct each stage of the research from obtaining access to writing up your data analysis. So, as Sara Arber notes, your research proposal will partly be judged by how you state you are going to use your time:

You need to adopt a systematic and logical approach to research, the key to which is the planning and management of your time. (1993: 33)

Kelly (1998: 120–1, adapted here) offers an example from an interview study planned to last 32 weeks:

- Week 2 Submit proposal to University Ethical Committee.
- Week 6 Draw up sample.
- Week 8 Begin interviews.
- Week 15 End interviews.
- Week 23 Complete data analysis.

Week 26 First draft sent out for comments.

Week 32 Submission of final report.

We are not born with a natural ability to prepare research timetables! To help you plan such a timetable, seek the assistance of a trusted teacher in your department. Failing that, seek out an existing research student. With their help, make a list of all the options available in relation to your research problem, method and case(s) to be studied. Now you are in a better position to write a reasoned research proposal that explains the actual choices you have made.

Table 9.2 provides a model structure for such a proposal. When you have read it, you should attempt Exercise 9.1.

## SUMMARY

When preparing a research proposal, try to find answers to *three* questions:

- 1 Why should anyone be interested in my research?
- 2 Is the research design credible, achievable and carefully explained?
- 3 Is the researcher capable of doing the research?

You can answer these questions better by following *five* principles:

- Be practical
- Be persuasive
- Make broader links
- Aim for crystal clarity
- Plan before you write.

## Further reading

A research proposal is crafted according to the level of your research. Beginning researchers should turn to: Moira Kelly, 'Writing a research proposal', in C. Seale (ed.), *Researching Society and Culture* (Sage, 1998), pp. 111–22.

At PhD level, a useful reference is: Pat Cryer, *The Research Student's Guide to Success* (Open University Press, 1996), Chapter 2.

Beyond the PhD, you should consult: Janice Morse 'Designing funded qualitative research', in N. Denzin and Y. Lincoln (eds), *Handbook of Qualitative Research* (Sage, 1994), pp. 220–35.