

### III. RECENZIJOS

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### **THE RESEARCH PROCESS IN THE SOCIAL SCIENCES**

**THOMAS, Gary 2010. How to do Your Research Project. A Guide for Students in Education and Applied Social Sciences. London: SAGE Publications. 254 p. ISBN 978-1-84787-442-9**

Gary Thomas introduces an innovative textbook to the burgeoning literature on research methods. The book provides students, scholars, and practitioners with a comprehensive overview of how to do a research project in social sciences.

This book comprises a preface and ten chapters that coherently cover the process of planning and conducting social scientific research.

In the preface, the author states that the book is based on his experience as a researcher and supervisor with the aim of providing a background of information surrounding the complexities of doing research in order to “encourage satisfaction and pleasure” in the research process (p. ix). The book is innovative in the sense that it places a special emphasis on the research process, rather than focusing on a discrete explanation of methods or methodologies.

The first chapter of the book *Your Introduction: Starting Points* serves as a framework for a novice researcher and discusses how to start a research project. The introduction, according to the author, is an important starting point where the researcher sets the scene to the research project. It should identify the research idea that will frame the entire project. Thomas explains that ideas usually come from the curiosity of the researcher who is challenged to find out something new, evaluate something, test if something works or to improve one's practice. Later, the author argues that to pose the right research questions is a vital task for the researcher to guide the approach to research. The author explains that research questions should meet two main criteria: preciseness and ‘doability’. Preciseness refers to the answerability of the questions, whilst ‘doability’ deals with the accessibility of information. The author suggests that social research is often called recursive or iterative research, meaning that the inquirer will be involved in reviewing, revising, rethinking and changing his or her project as it progresses. Therefore, the research questions and title of the thesis are ‘prima facie’ (on the first appearance) and they can be changed.

What is perhaps most valuable for students is that the author punctuates his book with dozens of illustrative examples. For example, Table 1.1. is useful to understand how different forms of evidence match with posed questions, and what kind of evidence is reliable and robust.

The second chapter of the book deals with the project management aspects of research. The author contends that it is crucial to set a timetable for the thesis and systematically perform all activities according to a specified time-line. For students, he gives a clear view of how to apportion time for each element of their research project. Thomas also recommends having exact schedules of work with a responsible approach to do “little and often”.

The third chapter provides a consistent overview on the literature review that is considered one of the most substantial elements in scientific research. The author demonstrates that well-handled literature review presents valuable background contexts based on previous work undertaken in the research area. The literature review also shapes the research questions and provides some direction for methodological choices. The credibility of sources and their types have been thoroughly addressed in this chapter. The author also maintains an emphasis on critical awareness when writing a literature review. He highlights that it is particularly important to outline some positive and negative perspectives of the theories in the academic field. Even the most persuasive theoretical concepts and ideas should be open to scrutiny from other perspectives. An important piece of advice for thesis writers is the author’s view that a literature review should be a coherent narrative that tells a persuasive story rather than a list.

In the fourth chapter, Thomas recommends refining the research questions if it is necessary. He argues that the literature review might present various views, findings and ideas that can be useful in taking the research in different future directions. At this stage, the researcher is expected to start thinking about the methods and methodologies that will help to answer the research questions posed.

The fifth chapter titled *Deciding on an Approach: Methodology and Research Design* discusses the centrality of research design. Thomas explains that the ‘research design’ or ‘methodology’ can be interchangeably used in the research papers. This plan should consider such issues as theoretical assumptions and discussions of chosen methodologies or methods. This chapter introduces some research paradigms, for example, positivism and interpretivism. The author provides a detailed description of each theory and its practical application in the research field. The writer explains ‘ologies’ (epistemology and ontology) which are mainstays in most methodological textbooks, because these terms bring an understanding to problems amongst young researchers. What is very helpful from the students’ point of view is a relaxed and simple explanation of terminologies, each illustrated with practical examples. The author admits that social scientific research has been facing challenges based on the ‘qualitative-quantitative’ debate, however it seems that he contests that there is a strict dichotomy between qualitative and quantitative paradigms. He indicates that both qualitative and quantitative research can complement each other.

The sixth chapter aims to cover the most well profiled research designs, like action research, case study, comparative study, ethnography, evaluation, experiment, longitudinal

study, and cross-sectional study. He explains that each has its own procedural rules. These are explained and supported, very helpfully, using a variety of examples and illustrations to outline their advantages and drawbacks and areas of application. Also, practical advice for best practice is given in each case.

Validity and reliability are issues which are discussed by the author, and he explains what counts as valid and reliable in a knowledge creation process. The author also convincingly reminds us to consider issues of sampling, generalizability, positionality and triangulation when choosing design frames.

In the seventh chapter, Thomas sets out to describe how ethical principles are particularly important in conducting research. He presents the view that when conducting social scientific research, the researcher's involvement with people is usually inevitable, therefore such ethical principles as free participation, the right to refuse to participate, avoidance of psychological and physical harm, and the respect of individual privacy, reputation and confidentiality should be addressed. What is particularly useful for researchers is the author's clear explanation and concrete examples of ethics procedures and forms.

The eighth chapter reviews a myriad of research methods. At the beginning, the author provides useful advice to be creative and imaginative in selecting the right methods to gather data. He suggests that if the researcher is interested in life histories of school veterans, he or she can choose, for example, conventional methods of interviewing participants, and draw a timeline of events relevant to the lifespan of the project to stimulate the participant's memories (Figure 8.1). Therefore, this can serve "to jog memories and help put things in the right place" (p. 159). Next, the author thoroughly explains the types of interviews and interviewing procedures available. Later, some basic suggestions are given as to how to construct questionnaires to collect "words or numbers or both" (p. 173). Observations are presented as to the most significant tools in selecting data in the social scientific research field. This fact is reinforced with the argument that careful and systematic observations of some phenomena or behaviour equip the researcher with the opportunity to be an "integral part of the situation" that allows him/her to get rich insights about the researched phenomena. Quantitative methods, like tests and statistics, allied to the positivistic philosophy of enquiry are also outlined.

The ninth chapter provides an overview of data analysis methods. He suggests, for instance, that an interpretative researcher can adopt a thematic approach to capture, organise and analyse data. Specific themes or categories that emerge from a constant comparison of data are the most significant blocks of information on which the analysis will be build. Such data analytical methods as network, discourse and content analysis are discussed in this chapter. The author briefly presents some statistical procedures that can be used in social research to analyse data. Consequently, Thomas presents the final stage in dissertation writing: the discussion. Here, the writer clearly states that the research questions, findings and literature review should be combined into one coherent narrative. Moreover, we should remember to be critical of others, and ourselves, or, as Thomas says, we should always remember the "duty of doubt" (p. 228).

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The tenth chapter focuses on how to write a conclusion. The author emphasizes that a conclusion is a brief synthesis of the research project. It should summarize the findings and present recommendations for participants or policy makers. It should also encompass the weaknesses and alternative methods of the research project, and the guidelines for future research.

Overall, this book is a useful guide for students and research practitioners in the field of social science. The most noticeable strength of this book is that it is both easy to read and accessible. The book is grounded in the actual and practical world between a supervisor and a student. The chapters of the book are well-written, clear, and precise and are well-exemplified. Therefore, I think that this book should be added to compulsory readings for students who conduct research in education and applied social science.