

Chapter 1

How to Design a Research Plan for a Thesis in Social Sciences

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This chapter presents the process of how a research work should be conceived in the mind of a novice researcher who wishes to do a doctoral thesis in social sciences. A logical-deductive scheme is followed, which guides the process of designing a research plan. The three most common mistakes made by novice researchers are emphasized. The first is starting the research without delimiting the subject and the object of study. The second mistake stems from the actual context in which initial decision-making is carried out without having received sufficient research training. The third mistake is to confuse key aspects such as the design and the structure of the document. This work provides keys to defining the initial plan by concisely explaining the parts of the design and their types and providing a basic outline of the structure of the written work.

INTRODUCTION

This chapter presents the process of how a research work should be conceived in the mind of a novice researcher who wishes to carry out a doctoral thesis in social sciences.

In the vein of Allan & Skinner (2020), a lot of research has been published by researchers with experience, but not so much about how to plan a research from the beginning, since the learning process that senior researchers have is the result of accumulated experience. This chapter aims to accelerate this learning process when planning the research.

Given the current context, it is interesting to mention that doing a doctoral thesis does not in all cases consist of carrying out a work with numerous pages that presents a rigid outline. Increasingly, there is the possibility of writing a thesis through a compendium of publications in journals or books, even conference communications, including in the field of Social Sciences (Mason & Merga, 2018; Rigby & Jones, 2020).

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Authors such as Rigby & Jones (2020) refer to the practical aspects and possibilities of a thesis through a compendium of publications, given that in recent times there has been the growing pressure to publish as a more strategic rather than scientific objective, for researchers to be promoted. In addition, Rigb & Jones (2020) talk about the change in the way of measuring the quality of a thesis, from its evaluation as a monograph to its impact on citations, which is not possible if the results have not been published.

However, even in the case of a thesis carried out through a compendium of research works, each of these individual publications must be assembled around a common axis and adhere to what is referred to in this work.

Specifically, in this chapter a logical-deductive scheme is followed in which the inexperienced researcher is guided through the process of designing a research plan to carry out a doctoral thesis (or some partial research work leading to it) starting with their first decisions.

Emphasis is placed on the three commonest mistakes made by novice researchers, aspects considered obvious to somewhat more experienced researchers. The first refers to starting the research without properly delimiting the subject and the object of study. The second mistake stems from the current context of social science research within many of the new doctoral programs, in which initial decision-making is carried out without necessarily having received sufficient research training. The third mistake is to confuse key aspects such as the design and the structure of the written work, something assumed by the senior researcher but not by the novice one.

This work is a useful basic guide for young researchers who are faced with the blank paper and do not know the ins and outs of the academic world. In the first place, the process is explained from the beginning, giving especial importance to the initial phase of the research, highlighting the importance of ideas as sources of inspiration for a research work, their possible origin, and the need to specify them in a topic and specific research object.

The parts of a research design are briefly explained below. Emphasis is placed on the importance of understanding that research design does not begin with the definition of the objectives, hypotheses, and variables, but with the precise description of the object of study and its justification, which will later lead to the definition of the objectives, hypotheses, and variables to be taken into account for the choice of the method of analysis.

Finally, it is noted that the design of the work is not exactly the same as its structure. Design encompasses decisions about the methods and techniques to be used and is comparable to what can be called a work plan. Structure is the next step, and this is specified as being the parts that the written document will have. The structure of research is explained, and a basic scheme is provided that necessarily involves dividing the work into parts, ranging from the introduction, theoretical framework, field work, results, and conclusions, ending with the cited bibliography, which will be reflected in the index of the doctoral thesis.

Therefore, the objectives of this chapter are as follows:

Objective 1: Guide the selection process of a research theme, from the idea to its realization as an object of study.

Objective 2: Differentiate the main parts of the research design.

Objective 3: Teach how to develop the design and structure of the investigation.

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