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A guide to writing a sound research proposal

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Abstract

This paper aims to provide a theoretical framework for the students who are about to write their research proposal, with the aim of a non-scientific method of acquiring knowledge based on the description given by Bless et al. (2013). This paper first provides a definition of the research process and goes further to provide a distinction between a scientific and non-scientific research approach. That is followed by an overview of what scientific research ought to be. A suggested template of the research proposal is then given, providing a brief description of each heading and sub-headings.

Keywords: scientific, non-scientific, intuition, rational, proposal.

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Guía para escribir una propuesta de investigación sólida

Resumen

Este trabajo tiene como objetivo proporcionar un marco teórico para los estudiantes que están a punto de escribir su propuesta de investigación, con el objetivo de un método no científico de adquirir conocimiento basado en la descripción dada por Bless et al. (2013). Este documento primero proporciona una definición del proceso de investigación y va más allá para proporcionar una distinción entre un enfoque de investigación científica y no científica. Esto es seguido por una visión general de lo que la investigación científica debería ser. Luego se proporciona una plantilla sugerida de la propuesta de investigación, que proporciona una breve descripción de cada encabezado y subtítulos.

Palabras clave: científica, no científica, intuición, racional, propuesta.

1. INTRODUCTION

Human beings by their very nature consistently seek to acquire knowledge about issues affecting their lives, their surroundings, and the world they live in. They do this by asking questions and then find answers to those questions. According to Bless et al. (2013) there are

two methods of acquiring knowledge, namelyNon-scientific method, and Scientific method.

2. WHAT IS RESEARCH

I would define research as the collection of information or the process in which knowledge is acquired in either a scientific or non-scientific manner.

3. NON-SCIENTIFIC METHOD

This section aims to give clarity of what is meant by a non-scientific method of acquiring knowledge based on the description given by Bless et al. (2013).

You would recall as a kid that you used to ask your parents many questions simply because you felt they knew it all. You believed whatever your parents told you to be the absolute truth. Even if you questioned their answers they had the final say and you took it as such.As you grew up you also started looking up to certain people, for example, people such as Martin Luther King, Nelson Mandela, the Pope, your Church leaders, your Kings, Chiefs, and other respected

members of your respective communities. For example, you go to church with the hope that what the pastors, and priests tell you about heaven is true and you take that to be the absolute truth. Bless et al(2013) refer to this type of non-scientific method as the method of authority.

In some communities, people acquire information about their future prospects from people like Sangomas, fortune tellers, traditional healers, and so forth. For example, in the Zulu culture the Sangoma could instruct his subject to slaughter a cow so as to appease the ancestors. The subject would do that because he or she believes what the Sangoma is saying is true. The reason why people sort the services of such people is that they are believed to be having supernatural powers. Bless et al (2013) call this method of acquiring knowledge the mystical method.

The point is that in all the above cases the people from which information is acquired are viewed to be superior and are rarely questioned. As we know such people of high standing are not saints, and Nelson Mandela attested to that. They also make mistakes, which means that the information obtained from them may at times be incorrect. It also suggests that their judgment may at times be wrong.

People also acquire information using what is referred to as intuition. Intuition can perhaps be described as the “sixth sense”. You probably have heard that term before, it is difficult to explain it,

however, implies that a person makes a decision based on one's personal feeling about the situation. As you probably know one cannot use another person's sixth sense. Therefore, decisions based on intuition cannot be relied upon as they cannot be replicated. Bless et al. (2013) call this method of acquiring knowledge the intuitive method.

We also know that people acquire information by using sheer wisdom. You might have heard people saying:

- bird of a feather fly together
- out of sight out of mind
- like father like son

These statements seem to be true, however there may be others which very much contradict them. To a person that is keen in acquiring knowledge these words of wisdom can be confusing. Bless et al.(2013) call this method of acquiring knowledge the conventional wisdom.

You probably know that human beings also use reasoning in acquiring information. For example, if Mr Smith's weight is equal to that of Mr Big'sand Mr Smith's weight is also equal to that of MrMedium's then through logic human beings can conclude that MrBig's weigh is equal to Mr Medium's. That is like saying your enemy's enemy is your friend. What is important in this method is that

logic is supreme and decisions are reached without using human senses,i.e. you do not observe, smell, hear, or do anything else you just apply logic. This method of acquiring information is called by Bless et al. (2013) the rational method.

4. SCIENTIFIC METHOD (EMPIRICAL METHOD)

This is probably the section the researcher needs to understand even more than the first one because conducting research is actually a scientific method of acquiring knowledge. It is important to note that scientific research is also known as empirical research. You probably know that if you throw a brick into the swimming pool it will sink and that through observation you know that if you throw a piece of paper into the same swimming pool it will float even if it is the same size as the brick you threw in first. This method of acquiring knowledge is called by Bless et al. (2013) the empirical method. The empirical method is also referred to as the scientific method.

I can define the scientific methodas the method of acquiring knowledge through facts that have been logically collected and analysed, and not through intuition, mystical sources, or rational methods. It is a method that does not accept a statement as fact simply because the superiority of the person who makes it, but accepts it as fact if it is based on testable facts.

5. CHARACTERISTICS OF A SCIENTIFIC RESEARCH

Many authors such as Bless et al. (2013),Weathington et al. (2010),Sekaran (2003), and others have provided what they felt are characteristics of a sound scientific research and these are the following: Purposiveness, rigour, testability, replicability, precision and confidence, objectivity, generalizability, parsimony, and ethical consideration. For the purposes of clarity, these are briefly discussed below.

Purposiveness: Scientific research is conducted for a specific purpose which is why the researcher has to provide the aim(s) and objective(s) of his or her study. The aim or purpose of the study must be clearly stated in a precise and unambiguous manner.

Rigour: by rigour it is meant that the researcher must conduct the research in the most efficient manner, for example, the sampling procedure used must be the most efficient of the available sampling procedures, the research instrument used must be the most efficient of all the available instruments, and so forth.

Testability: by testability it is meant that the answers to the research questions must be easy to test. It also means that the data obtained using the research instrument can be tested.

Replicability: scientific research (empirical research) must be replicable if conditions and other factors are the same or similar. By that it is meant that it must be repeatable. In other words, if another researcher were to be subjected to the same factors and the environment he or she must reach the same results that were reached by the first researcher. In emphasizing this point Weathington et al. (2010) refers to this replicability as public verification.

Precision and confidence: the manner in which the data is collected and how the researcher gets to the answers to the research questions must be such that one has confidence it is indeed the result of the research.

Objectivity: by objectivity, it is meant that the researcher's bias must not intrude in the research process. It means that the researcher's own views must not interfere with the research process.

Generalizability: it must be borne in mind that in most cases, scientific research involves using a sample and therefore the results obtained from the sample must be such that they can be generalized to the entire population. Put differently this means that results obtained in a particular

situation are such that they can be generalized to other similar situations.

Parsimony: by parsimony it is meant that the scientific research must be simple and data obtained must be reduced to only that which is important and relevant.

Rationality: by rationality, it is meant that in scientific research there has to be a link between cause and effect. It means that the result(s) must make sense. There must be a rational conclusion.

Systematicobservation: When conducting research the researcher is effectively observing what is happening outside his or her body. In doing so the researcher must do it in a systematic and logical manner not haphazardly.

Ethical considerations: scientific research must be conducted having observed all the ethical considerations that need to be met when conducting research.There are a number of ethical considerations that need to be taken into consideration when conducting research. It is important to note that ethical considerations that need to be observed may also depend on whether the research is conducted on animals or humans. It must be borne in mind that both animals and

humans have rights and that those rights ought to be respected.

6. STEPS IN FORMULATING THE RESEARCH PROPOSAL

The first step in writing a sound academic research is to formulate a research topic. I argue that formulating a research topic must not be rushed, but must be systematically approached. It is my view that most students do not give themselves enough time thinking about the research topic mainly because it looks like a very simple and straightforward process.

Step 1: understanding a research topic as a process

First of all it is important for the students to realize that formulating a research topic is a process**.** Once students accept this fact,they will then realize that as a researcher one does not just formulate a topic, but follows a few steps.There is no set chronological order that must be followed in formulating a research topic but students are advised to start off by identifying their area of interest.

Step 2: identify your area of interest

Sometimes what interest you as a researcher is based on your past experiences, sometimes present experiences. You may also be interested in an area that is a bit foreign to you. It does not matter whether an area you have chosen is based on your personal experiences what matters is whether that area is researchable. Secondly, what matters is whether within your chosen area there is something to research about.

Once the researcher has identified the area of interest he/she needs to interrogate issues within that area. Issues may vary from organization to organization and from country to country. It is therefore important to clearly identify where your area of interest is located. Some organizations have more than one branch and your area of interest could be in one of the branches not in all of them. In such a case clearly identify where your actual area of interest is domiciled.

Step 3: identify the actual location of your area of interest

It must be borne in mind that different organizations have different departments or sections. In the case of big companies, some even have different subsidiaries. It is extremely important to clearly know exactly where within the organization your area of interest rests. Even in social research situations, the

researcher's area of interest would fall under a specific category, for example, it could relate to politics within a particular area.

Step 4: conduct a preliminary research aroun d your area of interest

Read a little bit about your area of interest. This can be done by making use of materials such as academic journal articles, newspapers, books and electronic media. Some students mistake this to mean spending most of their time in the library. That should not be the case in this day and age where there are so many search engines. As a tip look at the references at the back of any relevant journal article you find and read them as well. These references will give you an idea of how little or abundant the information around your area of interest is. While browsing through the journal articles see if there is an issue that you feel strong about.

It is not always possible to read all journal articles during your preliminary research around your area of interest. It is suggested that students must read the abstracts of the articles. That would save students a great deal of time.

Step 5: identify an issue revealed by your preliminary research that you feel strong about

This would help the researcher narrow the scope to a manageable size. This will also give the researcher a clue as to which research method(s) will be appropriate for the study.

Step 6: formulate your research topic

Once you have done the above four steps I argue that you are more likely to be formulate your research topic.

Suggested format of the research proposal

1.1.Introduction

In this section of the proposal, the researcher is actually setting the scene about the whole research topic or title. There are many ways to do this. I can only say information given here must be of a general nature but relevant to the phenomenon being studied. Let us say the researcher wants to write about the failure of Manchester United Football Club to win the premier league in the past 5 years. The introduction could be the general history of Manchester United Football club. It could go further to mention the successes of the club and eventually mention its failures which are basically what the research is all about. This section effectively provides one with the background

information about the study. Using the above example the background information could include information about the actual failures the research is all about. Looking at areas of interest like who were the team members, which cups did they fail to win, which ones they won, why the team is thought to be failing and so forth. I guess this must point to the problem at hand. As the researcher, you need to identify important aspects that a reader ought to know about the study at hand. The information contained in this section should flow with information provided in chapter 2.

1.2.Theoretical framework (literature review)

Theoretical framework tends to talk about dependent variables and independent variables. Using the above example the theoretical framework could involve theory on the best practices that teams in the past have used to win cups, and produce competitive players. For example, existing theory could suggest that players need to train three times a day if they need to achieve their maximum potential. It must be remembered that there are theories that have been written on different topics. This section of the research project identifies such theories. These theories, if possible, are compared to other theories. They should not necessarily support each other, they could be oppositesvery well. When such theories have been identified the researcher must then look at the study at hand and then make a

decision as to whether or not it falls within anyone of them. If so it is advisable that such is indicated.Boote & Beile (2005) provide some strategies that can be used to review the literature. In their article, the authors provide tips and how they can be used by the researcher to write a good literature review.

1.3.Motivation of the study

I argue that in this section the researcher must attempt to answer anyone of the following questions:

- What motivated you to conduct this study?

- What made you conduct this study?

- What are the reasons for conducting this study?

The answer(s) to these questions must be a very compelling one. It must be an answer that would compel one to undertake a research project.

1.4. Significance of the study

In this section, the researcher must clearly state how the study is going to be of importance in terms of contributing to the body of

knowledge research and or contributing to solving a particular problem.

1.5. Problem statement

The problem statement must be precise and straight forward to the point. It must be brief just a few lines or paragraph. The problem statement, also known as the statement of the research problem is the foundation of your research work. It must be clear and formulated having taken into account the aim of the study.

1.6.Aim(s) of the study

A study is conducted for a particular aim or purpose. The aim of the study ought to be clear and straight forward to the point. It follows, therefore that the aim of the study can be given in very few words or sentences for it to be precise enough. The aim of the study is also referred to as the purpose statement. It is therefore advisable that when students write their purpose statement i.e. the aim of the study they start their sentence with the words:

- The purpose of this study is to …….

- The aim of this study is to….. ……

- This study aims to…….

1.7 Objectives of the study

The objective(s) of the study, in my opinion, is what the researcher will investigate or determine in order to achieve the aim of the study. In most studies, researchers have more than one objective. In such cases, I advise that students must write these objectives in clear and concise statements.

1.8 Research question(s)

In most cases the research questions are crafted by converting the objectives of the study into questions. In other words the research questions are the objectives of the study put in question form. Tashakkori & Creswell (2007) can provide some ideas on how the nature of research questions could be explored.

1.9 Research method employed

In this subsection of the proposal the researcher is expected to indicate the method used in collecting the data. As authors such Creswell (2014),Babie & Mouton (2007), Gomm (2008) and many other research methodologies as a concept is very wide. For the purposes of a proposal,I argue that the researcher should limit himself or herself to indicating whether the research

method was qualitative, quantitative or combination of the two (mixed research method) and then provide a brief description of the chosen method.

1.10 Population of the study and sample of the study

The population of the study is crucial because the whole research is about the population of the study. Research is conducted to find answers about the population. The sample is equally important in that it is the actual members of the population that participate directly in the study. Therefore, both the population and sample of the study must be clearly stated.

1.11 Research instrument

It is important to indicate which research instrument was will be used and how it will be administered. For example, if the questionnaire was used: was it self-administered or the researcher administered it, the type of questions asked and so forth.

1.12 Data collection and analysis

In this section the researcher must briefly indicate how the data will be collected and analysed. Tesch (1990) and Tashakkori &

Creswell (2007) provide suggestions on how qualitative and quantitative data can be analysed.

1.13 Structure of your dissertation (chapter outline)

The structure of the dissertation is nothing else but a brief description of the chapters of the dissertation and it is pretty much the same to all dissertations subject to minor differences. For example, most dissertations have six or seven chapters. In cases where the dissertation has seven chapters, it is often because of literature review being divided into two chapters. Generally speaking chapter 1 is the overview of the entire dissertation/thesis, chapter 2 is the literature review, which provides secondary data about the topic under study and related fields, chapter 3 provides the research methodology employed, chapter 4 provides the data that was collected, Chapter 5 provides a discussion on the findings of the study, chapter six then provides the recommendations and conclusion of the dissertation.

1.14Ethical consideration

The following are an example of some of the ethical considerations that researchers must observe:

Each participant of the study:

- Must be informed of what the study is all about.

- M6ust be informed that participation in the study is voluntary.

- Must be informed that he/she can withdraw from the study at any time during the research should he/she wish to do so and that withdrawal from the study does not carry any punishment.

- Must be informed that confidentiality would be maintained.

- Must be made aware of how information would be kept and how it would eventually be discarded.

- Must be treated with respect and dignity.

- Must be spoken to in a manner that is not derogatory.

- Must be informed that there would be no harm to him/her.

- Must not be deceived.

- Must be informed if there is any reward for participating in the study.

The above list is not exhaustive, it serves as an example of the most observed ethical considerations. Boote and Bell (2005) provide a broader discussion on ethical considerations.

1.15. The work plan/schedule

The work plan must be realistic. It must provide all the steps that the researcher will go through and the targeted time frame. For example, the researcher must indicate when the proposal will be presented or submitted, show how long it will take to write each chapter. Provision must be made for making corrections. An indication as to when the gatekeeper's permission will be obtained must also be indicated, followed by an indication as to when ethical clearance will be requested from the research committee. All of these steps must culminate in the submission of the draft and final report. The main point is that the researcher must be very realistic. Remember supervisors are not always available to attend the researcher's work as an when it is submitted. This tends to extend the period well beyond what the student had anticipated.

1.16. Budget

The budget must indicate the cost of conducting the entire study. This includes the buying of equipment such as cameras, laptops, tape recorders and others. The cost to be incurred while

traveling to the location of the study must be indicated. The main point is that the budget must be realistic.

1.17. Limitations of the study

The researcher needs to give an indication of what he/she thinks will limit his/her study. In most cases, limitations include time and financial constraints. Of course, once the researcher starts conducting the research he/she will practically experience the limitations and they ought to be clearly stated in the final report.

1.18. Conclusion

This paper attempted to provide the basic information that a person who is not a seasoned researcher can use as a guide when writing a sound proposal. While the author made an attempt to include more journals, most materials on a research proposal and dissertation writing are in book form. It is hoped that students will benefit from the paper.

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