Research Methods for Business Students

Chapter 5

Tang Weijun (Shanghai Jiao Tong University)
Contact

Tang Weijun
Shanghai Jiao Tong University

E-mail:  wj.tang@yahoo.com.cn

URL:  http://www.drtang.org/
Learning points

- Aware of issues related to gaining access and research ethics.
- Able to evaluate a range of strategies to help you to gain access to organizations and to individual participants.
- Able to anticipate ethical issues at each stage of your research process, to help you to deal with these.
- Able to evaluate the ethical issues associated with particular data collection methods.
5.1 Introduction

- Access and ethics are critical aspects for the conduct of research.
- Insufficient attention may therefore be paid to gaining access and even less to the likelihood of ethical concerns arising in relation to the conduct of the research project.
- These are aspects that require careful attention at the outset of any research project.
5.2 Problems associated with access

- Your ability to collect data will depend on gaining access to their source or to appropriate sources where there is a choice. The appropriateness of a source will of course depend on your research question, related to objectives and strategy.
- The first level of access is physical access or entry.
- Gaining physical access can be difficult for number of reasons.
5.2 Problems associated with access

- Why gain physical access is difficult?
  - Organizations or individuals may not be prepared to engage in additional, voluntary activities because of the time and resources required.
  - The request for access and cooperation may fail to interest the person who receives it.
  - The organization may find itself in a difficult situation owing to external events totally unrelated to any perceptions about the nature of the request or the person making, so that they have no choice but to refuse access.
5.2 Problems associated with access

- Physical access to an organization will be formally granted through its management.
- Access may also refer to your ability to select a representative sample of organizational participants in order to attempt to answer your research question and meet your objectives in an unbiased way and to produce reliable and valid data.
5.2 Problems associated with access

- Cognitive access will lead you to gain access to the data that you need your intended participants to share with you in order to understand their social reality and to be able to address your research question and objectives.
- Access is likely to be a problem area, in terms of gaining permission for physical access, maintaining that access, and being able to create sufficient scope to address fully the research question and objectives that guide your work.
5.2 Problems associated with access

- The extent to which feasibility will affect the nature of your research, or at least the approach that you adopt.
- A request to undertake research may involve you seeking access to a range of participants based on an organizational sample.
5.2 Problems associated with access

- Operating as an external researcher is likely to pose problems, so you need to remain sensitive to the issue of goodwill and seek to foster it at each level.
- An internal or participant researcher is also likely to face problems of access to data. And your status in the organization may pose particular problems in relation to cognitive access.
5.3 Strategies to gain access

- The need to identify a feasible research question and objectives, from the perspective of gaining access.
- Personal entry to an organization will be less applicable where you send a self-administered, postal questionnaire to organizational participants, in situations where you do not need to gain physical access in order to identify participants.
5.3 Strategies to gain access

- **Summary of strategies to gain access**
  - Allowing yourself sufficient time
  - Using existing contacts and developing new ones
  - Providing a clear account of purpose and type of access required
  - Overcoming organizational concerns about the granting of access
5.3 Strategies to gain access

- Summary of strategies to gain access
  - Identifying possible benefits to the organization in granting you access
  - Using suitable language
  - Facilitating ease of reply when requesting access
  - Developing your access on an incremental basis
  - Establishing your credibility with intended participants
5.3 Strategies to gain access

- Allowing yourself sufficient time
  - Physical access may take weeks or even months to arrange, and in many cases the time invested will not result in access being granted.
  - If you are able to contact a participant directly, such as manager, and exchange of correspondence may be sufficient to gain access.
5.3 Strategies to gain access

- Allowing yourself sufficient time
  - In the situation where your intended participants are not the same people who grant you physical access, you will need to allow further time to gain their acceptance.
  - Once you have gained physical access to the organization and to your participants, you will be concerned with gaining cognitive access.
5.3 Strategies to gain access

- Using existing contacts and developing new ones
  - The use of known contacts will depend largely on your choice of research strategy and approach to selecting a sample, as suggested by your research question and objectives.
  - You will need to be able to identify the most appropriate person to contact for help, either directly or indirectly.
  - You may consider making a direct approach to an organization in an attempt to identify the appropriate person to contact in relation to a particular research project.
5.3 Strategies to gain access

- Using existing contacts and developing new ones
  - You may consider using the Internet to send a written request to such a person.
  - Contact a broker or a gatekeeper
    - Suggesting approaching an organization's personnel manager because this person will have contacts across the organization and can therefore be very helpful in terms of facilitating access.
5.3 Strategies to gain access

- Providing a clear account of purpose and type of access required
  - Providing a clear account of your requirements will allow your intended participants to be aware of what will be required from them.
  - Establishing your credibility will be vital in order to gain access.
5.3 Strategies to gain access

- Overcoming organizational concerns about the granting of access
  - Concerns about the amount of time or resources that will be involved in the request for access.
  - Sensitivity about the topic.
  - The confidentiality of the data that would have to be provided and the anonymity of the organization or individual participants.
5.3 Strategies to gain access

- Possible benefits to the organization of granting you access
  - A discussion may allow them to think through an issue and to reflect on the action that they have adopted to manage it.
  - The intention would be to provide each of your participants with something of value and to fulfill any expectations about exchange between the provider and receiver of the research data, thereby prompting some of those whom you approach to grant access.
5.3 Strategies to gain access

- Possible benefits to the organization of granting you access
  - Where access is granted in return for supplying a report of your findings it may be important to devise a simple contract to make clear what has been agreed.
5.3 Strategies to gain access

- Using suitable language
  - Some researchers advise against referring to certain terms used in relation to research activity when making an approach to an organization for access, because these may be perceived as threatening or not interesting to the potential participant.
  - Use of language will depend largely on the nature of the people you are contacting.
5.3 Strategies to gain access

- Facilitating ease of reply when requesting access
  - The inclusion of a simple pro forma for recipients of your written requests for access to use generally ensures a reply.
  - It may not be suitable in all cases, and should be designed to fit the research method being used.
5.3 Strategies to gain access

- Developing your access on an incremental basis
  - Reference has been made above to the strategy of achieving access by stages:
    - The first stage involved a request to conduct interviews.
    - The next stage involved negotiating access to undertake observation.
    - The final stage was in effect an extension to the second stage and involved gaining permission to tape-recorded the interactions being observed.
5.3 Strategies to gain access

- Developing your access on an incremental basis
  - There are potentially a number of advantages related to the use of this strategy.
  - Using an incremental strategy at least gains you access to a certain level of data.
  - As you establish your credibility, you can develop the possibility of achieving a fuller level of data.
5.3 Strategies to gain access

- Developing your access on an incremental basis
  - A further advantage may follow from the opportunity that you have to design your request for further access specifically to the situation and in relation to opportunities that may become apparent from your initial level of access.
  - But the incremental process will be time consuming, and you need to consider the amount of time that you will have for your research project before embarking on such a strategy.
5.3 Strategies to gain access

- Establishing your credibility with intended participants
  - Just because you have been granted entry into an organization, you will not be able to assume that those whom you wish to interview, survey or observe will be prepared to provide their cooperation.
5.4 Research ethics

- Define research ethics

  - Ethical concerns will emerge as you plan your research, seek access to organizations and to individuals, collect, analyze and report your data.
  
  - Ethics refers to the appropriateness of your behavior in relation to the rights of those who become the subject of your work, or are affected by it.
5.4 Research ethics

- Define research ethics
  - The conduct of your research may be guided by a code of ethics. A code of ethics will provide you with a statement of principles and procedures for the conduct of your research.
  - You may also be required to submit your research proposal to a faculty or institutional research ethics committee.
5.4 Research ethics

- Define research ethics
  - Researchers need to be sensitive to the way in which the granting of access affects this type of relationship.
  - In addition, as a research in an organizational setting you will need to remain sensitive to the fact that your presence is a temporary one, whereas the people from whom you collect data will need to work together after you depart.
5.4 Research ethics

- Nature and scope of ethical issues in business and management
  - Ethical issues that affect the research process generally
  - Ethical issues during the design and initial access stages
  - Ethical issues during the data collection stage
  - Data protection and research
5.4 Research ethics

- Ethical issues that affect the research process generally
  - Privacy of possible and actual participants
  - Voluntary nature of participation and the right to withdraw partially or completely from the process
  - Consent and possible deception of participants
  - Maintenance of the confidentiality of data provided by individuals or identifiable participants and their anonymity
  - Reactions of participants to the way in which you seek to collect data
  - Effects on participants of the way in which you use, analyze and report your data
  - Behavior and objectivity of the researcher
5.4 Research ethics

- Ethical issues during the design and initial access stages
  - One of the key stages at which you need to consider the potential for ethical problems to arise is when you seek initial access.
  - The nature of participant consent
    - See figure 5.1 in page 133
5.4 Research ethics

- Ethical issues during the data collection stage
  - The data collection stage is associated with a range of ethical issues. Some of these are general issues that will apply to whichever method is being used to collect data. Other issues are more specifically related to a particular method of collecting data.
  - Once participants have agreed to take part in your research, they still maintain their right to privacy.
5.4 Research ethics

- **Ethical issues during the data collection stage**
  - During the data collection stage, objectivity means making sure that you collect your data accurately and fully – that you avoid exercising subjective selectivity in what you record.
  - Confidentiality and anonymity have also been shown to be important in terms of gaining access to organizations and individuals.
  - Use of the Internet and email during data collection will lead to the possibility of serious ethical, or netiquette, issues related to confidentiality and anonymity.
5.4 Research ethics

- Ethical issues during the data collection stage
  - The ability to explore data or to seek explanations through qualitatively based methods means that there will be greater scope for ethical and other issues to arise in relation to this approach to research.
  - The relatively greater level of control associated with qualitatively based research methods should be exercised with care so that your behavior remains within appropriate and acceptable parameters.
5.4 Research ethics

- Ethical issues during the data collection stage
  - The use of observation techniques raises its own ethical concerns. The boundaries of what is permissible to observe need to be clearly drawn.
  - Where access is denied after being requested you may have no other choice but to carry out covert observation – where this is practical.
  - One group who may consider suing a covert approach are those of you whom we refer to as internal or practitioner-researchers. There are recognized advantaged and disadvantages associated with being an internal researcher.
5.4 Research ethics

- Ethical issues related to the analysis and reporting stages
  - The maintenance of your objectivity will be vital during the analysis stage to make sure that you do not misrepresent the data collected.
  - The ethical issues of confidentiality and anonymity also come to the fore during the reporting stage of your research.
  - Embarrassment and even harm could result from reporting data that are clearly attributable to a particular individual.
5.4 Research ethics

- Ethical issues related to the analysis and reporting stages
  - Where you are aware that your findings may be used to make a decision that could adversely affect the collective interests of those who were your participants, it may be ethical to refer to this possibility even though it reduces the level of access that you achieve.
5.4 Research ethics

- Ethical issues related to the analysis and reporting stages
  - This discussion about the impact of research on the collective interests of those who participate brings us back to the reference made above to the particular ethical issues that arise in relation to the analysis of secondary data derived from survey research.
5.4 Research ethics

- Data protection and research: an introduction
  - Personal data should be finely protected.
  - You should instead seek advice that is appropriate to the particular circumstance of your research project where this involves the collection and processing of personal data.
  - Further category of personal data:
    - Racial/ethnic origin, political opinions, religious, trade union membership etc.
5.5 Summary

- Access and ethics are critical aspects for the conduct of research.
- Different types and levels of access have been identified that help us to understand the problem of gaining entry:
  - Physical access
  - Continuing access
  - Cognitive access
5.5 Summary

- Feasibility has been recognized to be organizations and to intended participants within them have been described and discussed.
- Research ethics refer to the appropriateness of your behavior in relation to the rights of those who become the subject of your work or are affected by the work.
- Potential ethical issues should be recognized and considered from the outset of your research and be one of the criteria against which your research proposal is judged.
5.5 Summary

- Ethical concerns are likely to occur at all stages of your research project: when seeking access, during data collection, as you analyze data and when you report them.
- Qualitative research is likely to lead to a greater range of ethical concerns in comparison with quantitative research, although all research methods have specific ethical issues associated with them.
5.5 Summary

- Ethical concerns are also associated with the power relationship between the research and those who grant access, and the researcher’s role (as external researcher, internal researcher).
- The use of the Internet and email to collect data may also generate ethical concerns.
5.5 Summary

- The introduction of data protection legislation has led to this aspect of research assuming a greater importance and to a need for researchers to comply carefully with a set of legal requirements to protect the privacy and interests of their data subjects.
The End

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THANK YOU!

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