THINKING ABOUT RESEARCH IN THE SOCIAL SCIENCES AND HUMANITIES

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INTRODUCTION

In a recent issue of *Tribhuvan University Journal*, Damoder Gyawali described the various stages of the research process and provided an example of the way in which a research project in the discipline of Geography could be defined, operationalised and written up. While I agree with much of his depiction of the research process, the general definition of research that he provides is open to criticism and debate. In this article, I will take issue with Damoder Gyawali's general view of research, and move on to develop a number of points he makes with which I am in general agreement. I will argue and develop the following major points:

1. That research cannot, as Damoder Gyawali suggests, be regarded as simply "a careful study or investigation in order to discover new facts or information" or that "The main purpose of research work is based on finding facts and truth". This view seriously underestimates the significance of theory in the process of research, and leads to an overemphasis of the empirical dimensions of research. I will suggest that thinking about research as the search for 'new facts' - as though facts exist in isolation from the world of theory - can have deleterious effects for the researcher (and particularly the beginning researcher) approaching the research process.

2. That the two most difficult stages of the research process are: (1) Definition of the research problem and; (2) Writing the first draft. Gyawali has, in my view, correctly identified the importance of clear definition of the research problem to the eventual success of the research project. I will suggest some additional techniques which can be used to facilitate clear and speedy definition of the research problem. I will also discuss some techniques which can be used to overcome the difficulty of writing the first draft, a stage in the research process with which many researchers have problems. (Gyawali; 1996)

THINKING ABOUT RESEARCH, THINKING ABOUT THEORY

Gyawali's description of the research process is helpful insofar as he portrays research as a process involving a number of interrelated stages. The very act of thinking about research in this way - that is, as a process which can be divided into smaller

stages or functions - is a very useful corrective to an excessive concentration on the content of research. Many researchers, especially beginning reserchers, are so preoccupied with the content of their research (often with the collection of something called "facts"), that they neglect the importance of thinking about how and why they will do their research. In other words, they neglect the process side of research, and this is an inefficient way of proceeding. If the researcher spends time thinking about how research is done in general, and how he/she does research in particular, better progress will be made and many of the doubts and insecurities, which inevitably arise in doing research, will be minimised as the researcher develops a personal approach which is adapted to his/her personality and theoretical orientation.

However, while I agree with Gyawali's depiction of research as a process, I cannot agree that research either "starts with observation" or that the "main purpose of research work is based on finding facts and truth". Research does not start with observation; it starts with theory and a theoretical conception of the research problem. Neither is research based simply on the discovery of facts, if "facts" here are conceived as existing independently of theory. While Gyawali has not elaborated his definition of reserch, it is clear that his understanding of research is premised on an empiricist epistemology.

> In empiricist epistemologies . . . the correlation between the realm of discourse [knowledge] and the realm of objects is conceived as being effected through the agency of the experience of one or more human subjects. Knowledge is though to be reducible to, or more generally, susceptible of evaluation in terms of basic statements which designate what is given to the experience of human subjects. (Hindess, Hirst; 1977)

As Hindess and Hirst demonstrate, empiricism, like all epistemologies, involves a circular and dogmatic form of reasoning. Empiricism is premised on the experience of the human subject as the criterion against which all claims to knowledge are evaluated; the human subject is endowed with faculties which allow him/her to experience reality, and thus know it. Experience (or observation) is, for empiricism, a privileged level of discourse which is immune from query. However, if the question is posed how we can know that experience is indeed that which creates knowledge, empiricism responds that experience tells us that experience creates knowledge. This is a purely self-referential response, one which is circular and dogmatic in that it relies on a privileged level of discourse (that is, assumptions which are beyond question and which cannot be empirically demonstrated save by recourse to those very assumptions). Empiricism employs these assumptions to make the claim, a spurious claim in my view, that knowledge derives from observation; that is, the social science researcher can observe (experience) 'reality' in a manner unprejudiced, not only by personal values and biases, but by the theoretical preconceptions and orientations of theory. In other words, observation is supposedly the neutral and value-free starting point of research.

The social scientist, from this perspective, approaches the observation of reality as though a blank slate, one from which all values and theoretical preconceptions have been erased. This is just not possible. Without preconceptions, deriving from theoretical perspectives or values or both, the observer would not know what to observe or how to observe it. As Karl Popper has pointed out, all observations and all observation statements are theory dependent. I would go further to argue that, not only is theory prior to observation, it provides the questions which can be posed and indeed anticipates the sorts of answers which will result from observation; theory also provides the techniques for observation and experimentation, as well as the criteria for evaluating evidence and assessing the scientific character of the conclusions which are drawn from observation. Observation, rather than being the starting point for research, is itself embedded in theory and is reliant on theory. (Popper; 1972)

A number of important implications for the researcher flow from this view of the social sciences and humanities. First, it is important for the researcher to explore the theoretical terrain of the intellectual area within which he/she intends to research. The purpose of this is to acquire a familiarity with the various discourses (theoretical frameworks or paradigms) which exist in that area and to identify where he/she stands in relation to these discourses. For example, the sociologist may elect to observe social structure from the point of view of a Marxist or stuctural-functionalist paradigm, and the choice will determine quite different ways of defining the research problem and the methodological approaches adopted. Second, the literature review, which looms for some researchers as an enormous and daunting task, can be made easier if the researcher has a clear appreciation of where he/she is located theoretically. The object of the literature review is not merely to assemble the host of documents and texts which supposedly deal with the issue of concern to the researcher, but to evaluate them. A significant dimension of this evaluation is to organise the literature into a hierarchy of significance. Some documents/texts are more significant than others in terms of their relevance to the research problem; some are more significant in terms of their compatability with the theoretical orientation of the researcher. An appreciation of the importance of theory to research and an understanding by the researcher of his/her own theoretical position can facilitate the ordering of the literature into a hierarchy of significance.

DEFINING THE RESEARCH PROBLEM

An awareness of his/her theoretical position can also greatly assist the researcher negotiate what is one of the most difficult phases of the research process: definition of the research problem. Research problems do not, in my view, exist independently of theory, merely awaiting the perceptive and objective observation of the social scientist to identify them. Rather, research problems are constructed in and by

discourse; they are products of theory, and are embedded in theoretical conceptions of the nature of social reality. Discourses (or theoretical frameworks, paradigms) construct research problems in their own way. What may be a research problem for one discourse may not be for another, and if it is, it is likely to be constructed in quite a different way. For example, neo-classical economic theory focuses on the market, whereas Marxist political economy emphasises class relations and the forces of production, and regards the market as a secondary phenomenon.

If the researcher can attain a good grasp of the theoretical area he/she occupies, the definition of the research problem can become a more straightforward matter than it otherwise might be. A research problem might be suggested by a discourse in a number of ways:

1. A debate between scholars about a particular issue.
2. A gap or contradiction in the empirical work pursued by the discourse.
3. A need for further elaboration of the theoretical dimensions of the discourse.

Whatever theoretical discourse the researcher occupies, he/she will need to identify and define the research problem as clearly and as quickly as possible. However, defining the research problem involves a process of clarification in the mind of the researcher, and it is very likely that this process will persist throughout much of the research project. Defining the research problem is usually not something which can be achieved fully at the outset of the research process, although it is desirable that considerable thought and effort be put into this phase of research early in the research project. Otherwise, time and effort will be wasted as the research effort will lack focus and direction.

What techniques can be used to facilitate definition and justification of the research problem? As I have argued above, a familiarity with the assumptions and concepts of the theoretical framework the researcher occupies will facilitate the definition of the research problem. Beyond this, the researcher should attempt to answer the three following fundamental questions:

1. What is my research problem?
2. Why is it a research problem?
3. What is my argument?

Let us elaborate the significance of each of these questions. First, it is essential that the researcher think in terms of a research problem, rather than an area or title. Many researchers, and particularly beginning researchers, confuse these. A research

project requires a title, it is true; but a title is not research problem. Similarly, an area of research is not in itself a research problem; a problem is situated in a research area. As we have seen, a research problem is indicated by a debate between scholars, a gap or contradiction in the empirical work pursued by a discourse, or the need for theoretical elaboration. The statement of the research problem should be posed in terms of these, or a mixture of them.

Second, it is important that, as the researcher is attempting to define the research problem, he/she develop a justification of its status as a research problem. In other words, the significance of the research problem has to be explained and this is done by demonstrating, usually through a survey of the literature on the research problem, the existence of a debate, gap or contradiction in the empirical work, or the need for the development of theory. The ability to provide a convincing justification of the research problem thus requires both a sound understanding of the theoretical terrain on which the research is to be situated and a familiarity with the available literature on the research problem. This understanding of the relevant theory and familiarity with the literature are not something which can be achieved immediately at the outset of research, but are dimensions of the research process which may endure throughout the research project. Consequently, a researcher who has been working on a research project for some time can be expected to provide a more sophisticated and mature justification of the significance of a research problem than a researcher who is in the early stages of research. By the same token, the researcher commencing a new project should immediately begin thinking, not only about *what* the research problem is, but *why* it is a problem.

Third, as soon as a researcher begins thinking about a research problem, he/she should begin developing an argument about that problem. Many researchers put this off, and justify doing so by saying that they have not read enough, don't know nough about the topic, haven't done the field work, and so on. This prevarication is a mistake, one which can be very counterproductive to the prosecution of purposeful and focussed research. While the researcher's argument may develop, become more sophisticated, or even change dramatically as the research proceeds, the formulation and articulation of an argument from very early in the research project can have beneficial effects, not only for the progress of the research project, but also in extending and shaping the analytical skills of the researcher. Without an argument, the statement of the research findings will be merely descriptive, and lack analytical rigour; it will also be a lot less interesting for the reader of the research if the argument is weak or not clear, and the research relies on description rather than interpretation and analysis. Researchers should strive for a strong argument, one which challenges conventional views or stives to say something innovative on the basis of new empirical findings.

The researcher needs to think, from the outset, in terms of a *thesis statement*,

one which will define the research, its purpose and viewpoint. A thesis statement can usually be expressed in one or two sentences, although it may take many hundreds of pages to elaborate and support the statement. To help my own Ph.D students develop their arguments, I ask them to complete the following sentence: "I will argue that . . ."; and they must do it in a sentence or two. Some find completing this sentence very difficult, but all agree that the exercise of attempting to complete it is very beneficial to the progress of their research.

WRITING UP RESEARCH FINDINGS: SOME HINTS

Defining the research problem is one of the two most difficult aspects of research for researchers in the social sciences and humanities. The other is writing the first draft of the research. It is at this stage that many researchers experience "writer's block," the inability to write down their findings and ideas.

Again, postponing the evil moment when writing must commence is often justified in terms of not having done enough reading about the research problem. With some researchers, "writer's block" becomes so serious that they are unable to complete a research project, and this obviously has very seroius implications for the researcher, and particularly so for the beginning researcher attempting to complete a Ph.D.

Writing is hard work, but there are a number of techniques which can be used to make it easier. I will discuss these briefly below. However, it is important to keep in mind that all researchers have their own individual styles, and this includes the way in which they confront the process of writing. It is important to develop an individual, personal style, and to recognise what works best for you as a researcher. The hints discussed below can only be taken as suggestions for consideration and experimentation.

1. The first thing to do when setting out to write up research results is to divide the task into manageable units. In the process of defining the research problem, it will have become clear that the problem is made up of smaller components, and these can function as the basis of a writing unit. For example, a very long piece of writing (such as a thesis or a book) can be divided into a number of chapters, and these in turn can be divided into sections of chapters. It is a lot easier to confront the task of writing five thousand words on a specific issue within a broader research project than to write at one go a thesis or book of one hundred thousand words. Similarly, it may be possible to break the five thousand word chapter (or section) into smaller sub-sections. It is easier psychologically to confront a small task than a big one.

Division of the writing task can help the researcher get started. However, it is very important that when the entire writing task is completed, and all the chapters and sections written, the researcher work through the entire manuscript integrating the various chapters and sections into a coherent and integrated whole. One section must be linked to the next, and each chapter must be connected logically with the chapters before and after. The reader should be left with the impression of a flowing, continuous narrative which draws together the various dimensions of the research findings into a seamless web. This is an ambitious goal for the writer, but a possible and realisable one.

2. Having divided the writing task into manageable units, it is important to remember that, when writing up a long and complex piece of research, you don't have to start at the beginning and write sequentially through to the end. It is better, in my experience, to take the line of least resistance, and commence writing about a part of the research project with which you are most familiar and most comfortable. It is a great morale boost to get something down on paper (or on the computer screen these days), and it doesn't matter if it is Chapter 6 of the thesis or book rather than Chapter 1. Writing down what the researcher knows most about can also help structure the entire project in the researcher's mind, for it becomes clearer what needs to come before and after the completed draft chapter. Writing is a very important learning exercise, and we often learn what we want to say and need to know more about through writing. It is important to get something written, and it is easier to think about writing something the researcher is confident about.

3. When the researcher commences writing, it is very important to keep in mind that what is being written is the first draft. A first draft should be regarded as a means of very rapidly getting down on paper one's thoughts and arguments. It doesn't matter whether these are written in a logical and polished way, as editing and revision can occur during later drafts to improve continuity and sophistication of expression. Similarly, a first draft should not be concerned with quotes and footnotes, which are the normal trademark of academic writing. These can be added later. A first draft consequently is often much shorter than the final version. For example, a first draft of a ten thousand word chapter may only be two or three thousand words long. It will grow in subsequent drafts as additional ideas, information, argumentation and quotes are added. The first draft will also identify to the researcher if he/she needs to do more work on a particular issue, for the process of writing the first draft clarifies what the researcher knows and does not know. Writing a rapid first draft can also be a useful confidence booster, for it is often the case that the

researcher does know more than he/she had thought, and this is made clear in the act of writing.

It is however, very inportant to conceive of writing as a process of writing a series of drafts, each one becoming more coherent, polished, and fluent than the previous one, until the researcher is satisfied that no more can be done to improve the final draft. And it all starts with the first draft.

4. While researchers approach the task of writing in different ways, it is preferable to write often and not to postpone writing until all of the empirical or textual work has been completed. Postponing writing has a negative effect on the researcher's confidence, whereas writing often (on a daily basis, if possible) can do much to boost confidence. It is also the case that our ability to write improves the more we practice the skill of writing; it is consequently valuable to do it often.

A good example of a famous scholar who wrote in this way is E. H. Carr, the great historian of the Russian Revolution. Carr recounts in his well-known *What is History?* that as soon as he commenced looking at relevant documents, he would begin writing a rough commentary and interpretation of them. By the time he had finished working through the documents which were the basis of his research, he had already completed a rough first draft which he could then edit and revise.

Writing often, and if possible on a daily basis, requires that the researcher think about his/her daily routine and personal rhythms. Some researchers write best in the morning when they are fresh; others like to wait until the rest of the world is asleep and write during the midnight hours. Select the routine which suits you best, and discipline yourself to use effectively the hours when you feel most comfortable writing; and when you get into a rhythm and stick to it, you will find that writing becomes a lot easier.

5. When writing, set yourself realisable goals. Most writing tasks cannot be completed in one writing session, and in the case of a long and complex book, may take a year or more. No researcher, not even the most experienced, can write more than a few thousand words in one writing session. In practice, most write less. My own strategy is to set out at the beginning of each writing session to write five hundred words. Five hundred words does not sound like much, but it is psychologically easier to think about writing five hundred words than five thousand words, or an unspecified amount. In practice, I often exceed

five hundred words, but if I don't, I am still satisfied with my progress as long as I have written the five hundred words.

The arithmetic of five hundred words per writing session also confirms what a good strategy it is. Assume that you write five hundred words a day, five days a week, for forty weeks a year (let's be realistic - we have to have a break sometime!). This adds up to one hundred thousand words a year, which is the equivalent of a good sized book or ten substantial articles - every year.

An example of a writer who used this strategy, not from choice but necessity, was the famous American writer Ernest Hemingway. He found he could only write five to six hundred words a day; after that the "creative juices" ceased to flow. Yet, he managed to write many substantial books and scores of short stories. Hemingway's experience, and his success, confirms the benefits of writing "little and often".

CONCLUSION

Research is a complex activity, and like most complex things humans do, there is no one way of doing it. The ways of thinking about and doing research are diverse. Nevertheless, there are numerous books which talk in a prescriptive way about how research should be done, as though there is only one way of doing research. My view is that the advice offered by such textbooks on research should be considered critically and used selectively on the basis of the personal preferences and theoretical orientations of the researcher. It is important, however, to think about research as a process, and to develop a personal style which suits the individual researcher. It is true that, at the end of the day, the research has to be completed, and the book or article submitted to the publisher or journal, or the thesis submitted to the university for examination. But there are many paths to this final and crowning act of the research process. How to discover which path to follow in order to make research an enjoyable and ultimately rewarding experience is something which each researcher should think about. The advice offered in this article is intended to help this process of discovery.

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