

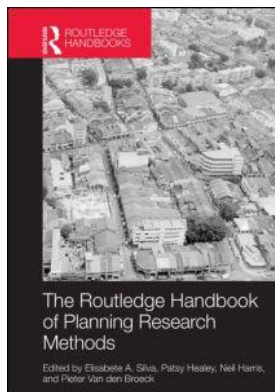
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## **The Routledge Handbook of Planning Research Methods**

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### **Shifting between Academia and Practice**

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## 1.3

# SHIFTING BETWEEN ACADEMIA AND PRACTICE

## Reflections on doing planning research in a university environment

*Neil Harris*

### **Introduction**

I hesitated when my fellow editors suggested the idea of providing autobiographical sketches of our research experience as part of the opening of this book. My experience to date in doing planning research has been mixed. My account is not one that provides a manual for a successful research career. I have certainly engaged in a range of research projects of different types and recall some of that experience in this account. Yet I have also struggled at times with sustaining an active research profile. Research has been one of those parts of my academic life to which at times it has been challenging to devote sufficient time and effort. I expect and hope that I am not unusual in that regard and that some of the reflections I provide here resonate with or are useful to others.

### **Studying in a research-led institution**

My first exposure to research in planning was as an undergraduate planning student in the early 1990s. I had made an early decision that I wanted to pursue a career in planning and the built environment, and enrolled on a professionally-accredited undergraduate planning degree at Cardiff University, UK. The university, like many others, defined itself as a research-led university with the expectation that all staff would be active in undertaking research. Being research-led also informed my department's teaching and the culture of learning. Academic staff would relay projects they were engaged in as part of the delivery of their teaching. Some of the lecturers would inform us that they had just been engaged in a research project and that we might be interested in some of the ideas and materials generated by the project. Academic staff highlighted their involvement in research projects for government departments, which would resonate well with students on our professionally accredited course. A key part of the curriculum was the delivery of research methods and skills, and all students at undergraduate level were expected to design and deliver a research dissertation. These dissertations were typically expected to involve the development of a research design, the carrying out of fieldwork,

and the collection and analysis of data. The conduct of research was expressed as a key part of a planner's skill set. The research skills we were taught were mainly academic ones and reflected the department's strengths in quantitative research and statistical analysis. The model of hypothetico-deductive research – a model based on establishing a hypothesis and falsifying or confirming this by reference to empirical data (see Webster in Chapter 2.6) – featured prominently in our teaching and learning. Nevertheless, we were also exposed to the types of real-world research conducted for government as part of its planning research programme. This appealed to me much more than some of the abstract principles covered elsewhere, given its focus on practical problems and the resulting recommendations for change to the planning system. The principle that research could lead directly to changes in the planning system was an important and exciting one.

This undergraduate experience of doing research was also the first occasion where I had to define the focus of my own dissertation – an opportunity to explore and investigate a topic of my own choice. Today, as a supervisor, I point out to students that the dissertation or individual research project should be the part of their course that they are most enthused by. They choose the topic and focus of the project, after all. I recall very clearly sitting in a darkened bedroom and devising a long list of interesting topics, producing a short list of three or four contenders, and finally opting for the one that I thought would be best. Key criteria in that final selection were currency – in the sense of being a topical or current issue – and practical relevance. The period when I had to choose my topic was one of local government reorganization in England and Wales, and I was concerned as to how this would impact on the shape and delivery of the planning system. On reflection, this was the early development of a long-standing interest in planning systems and how effectively they function. I was encouraged by a young member of the academic staff to publish from the study and this triggered an interest in an academic career (Harris and Tewdwr-Jones, 1995). Nevertheless, I had embarked on a planning course with the intention of becoming a professional planner and progressed to a placement year in practice as part of my sandwich course.

### **Working in a practice environment**

The placement year was an interesting experience, based in the activity of development control in a local planning authority in the UK. I became intrigued by how rules and procedures worked, how policies were interpreted and applied, why certain mechanisms for making decisions appeared to work, and why others did not. Most importantly, it was interesting to see how planners worked in practice, to see how they interpreted situations, how some issues were important to them and others were not, how they managed politically charged situations, and how they exercised decision-making power within prescribed limits. I do not think I made a very effective development control officer.<sup>1</sup> I was more interested in how decisions were made than in making them myself. On conclusion of the placement, a colleague remarked that 'maybe you would be better off working in policy', which on reflection I take to be an indication that I was not so practical. I have always interpreted this as recognition by others that I was interested in more abstract concepts, and so it's a small step from working in policy to working in academia.

The relevance of this brief incursion into planning practice is that it opened up to me a whole new line of inquiry and a field of interest. On returning to university for my final year of professional studies I was exposed by one of the lecturers to the works of North American academics who were researching 'what planners do' (Hoch, 1994; Forester, 1989). This literature resonated with my placement experience in that these authors' works demonstrated that

planners were engaged in messy, practical, everyday activities through which we could learn a great deal about professional judgment, the constraints on planning work, and ethical issues too. It was dawning on me that if I might not be cut out to be a planner, then I was certainly interested in observing and trying to understand the activities that planners were engaged in. Healey (1992) helpfully captured some of the methodological aspects of trying to document a planner's day, while a supervisor's recommendations for reading helped to fuel this interest in what planners do, why they do it, and the relationship of their work to the notion of a profession (Healey and Underwood, 1978; Underwood, 1980; Reade, 1987; Evans, 1993). I had yet another dissertation to complete as part of my professional diploma, and used it to explore some of these issues in relation to who makes decisions and how in relation to planning proposals (Harris, 1998).

### **The doctoral research experience**

I look back on the conclusion of my professional diploma as a moment when I had two pathways available to me – a career in practice as I had always intended or a pathway to an academic career through completing a PhD. I secretly hoped that I would secure the funding for the PhD that I had applied for. I had framed my proposal around some of the literature that engaged me at the end of my professional diploma, but linked some of that material to the emerging paradigm of communicative planning theory (see the introduction to this book). I secured the funds and this meant that I was now a PhD student with a three-year funded period of research ahead of me. My generation of PhD students was one when the notion of doctoral research training was developing and in its infancy. I was required to enrol on a diploma in social science research methods during the first year of my PhD. Such programmes of doctoral research training have developed significantly in the period since, but my programme introduced me to a wide range of ideas across the social sciences. We were taught in multidisciplinary groups in which other PhD students were engaged in researching diverse subjects, including criminology and suicide, the recognition of medical conditions, education, sexuality and gender, and so on. The lecturers delivering the programme were drawn from similarly diverse backgrounds and used their disciplinary material in sessions. They would relay experience of ethnographic fieldwork, situated experience in the field, and explored what from my own disciplinary background appeared to be creative and even dangerous subjects for research. This experience contrasted significantly with the hypothetico-deductive models and quantitative approaches that had featured as part of my planning education. So, an engagement with social science helped me to understand a different way of seeing the world, and one that provided a full range of qualitative and quantitative methods. The key contribution from this engagement with social science during my PhD training was the array of methods for doing qualitative research and analysis in a structured, systematic way that made these methods legitimate and defensible as a way of doing planning research. I learnt that planning research could be so much more creative if it embraced this range of qualitative methods that had not featured strongly in my own planning education. I also learned that each discipline has its own traditions of doing research. This is as true of planning as it is of any other discipline, and that is a key issue that this edited book tries to elaborate upon.

I look back on my own personal doctoral experience – as do many others – as a curious period of highs and lows. For the highs, then it was an almost unique opportunity to engage systematically and in detail with the research project and research interests that I had fashioned for myself. It is very unlikely that an opportunity to study so intensively for three years with no

other commitments or distractions will ever occur again during an academic career. It appears to be an almost luxurious opportunity with hindsight, even if it felt quite different at the time. The PhD was similarly an opportunity to engage with research methods that can be applied only by a full-time researcher working on a single project without any other commitments. I used it as the opportunity for sustained fieldwork, hanging out in planning offices and following planners around for months on end. There was also the opportunity to read widely, including beyond one's own disciplinary boundaries, as well as to reflect on that experience (Harris, 1999). I also had the good fortune to have a supervisor in Mark Tewdwr-Jones, who helped to give me confidence and encouragement throughout, which I needed at key stages of the thesis. It was also helpful to have others in the school who I could periodically engage with to test out ideas. I often failed to convince these people with my arguments and had to go back and reconsider my thesis. Many of these people later became colleagues, including Huw Thomas and Jon Murdoch, and some of them still help to kindly point out to me where my arguments are less than convincing.

Despite the freedoms and support of the PhD experience, I found the whole experience quite an isolating one, with many uncertainties and questions about the value of what I was doing. These days I reflect on whether the PhD experience becomes a self-fulfilling one of isolation, uncertainty, dead ends, etc., or whether this is simply part of the process of doing PhD research, a process one must go through in order to come out the other end as an academic researcher. I left the thesis where it was on securing the PhD and decided to write it off as a chapter in my career that I did not wish to revisit. It occasionally resurfaces to my horror when my PhD supervisees take up someone's advice in PhD guidance books to read their supervisor's own thesis! Nevertheless, I recall some discussion at my viva voce on whether I felt as though I had developed a subject expertise, having focused on evaluating a body of theory. I remember the helpful advice of my examiners – that the key issue is having developed a set of skills and qualities that one could apply throughout a research career to whatever subject was of interest to me at the time. I could happily leave the thesis behind and move on to whatever now interested me.

### **Working in academia**

The next stage of my academic career was to be thrown straight into a lecturing position. Research was now undertaken in bits and pieces of time that I could find or create around the commitments of delivering lectures, marking work, and seeing students. I struggled with that and I still do. Similarly, there was very little scope to go out and do sustained fieldwork of the type I completed during the PhD. Another important change in making the transition to doing research in an academic post was that research became a collaborative enterprise rather than an individual pursuit. I became a member of teams that tendered, sometimes successfully, for research projects. These teams would sometimes be made up of colleagues, but might also involve third parties too, such as planning consultants. Research was now often driven by the expectations of staff to secure funding for research activity, different in some ways to the PhD research funding I had relied upon for the previous three years. Research was driven more by a client's needs than my own specific research interests, although the challenge is always to align these as best as one can. Projects were now also of a different character as the research needed to be completed in periods of three or six months, rather than the three or four years I had to complete my PhD thesis. These issues probably reflect the type of research activity I have engaged in since taking up an academic post.

Some of the research I have completed since might not readily be distinguished from consultancy-type research that private companies engage in. Indeed, we partnered with those organizations on occasion, and this provided insights into how research methods are applied differently in a practice environment than in academia. For example, the pragmatic use of an interview in ‘government-as-client’-type research is very different to the fully transcribed, coded, and carefully analysed interview that characterises careful academic inquiry. For an academic this can lead to concerns about the rigour of the research and whether the findings are robust, or whether there might be alternative analyses and interpretations of the data that time does not allow for. The fast pace and immediacy of this type of research can be enjoyable, but it clearly distinguishes the different requirements and traditions of academia and practice. There are alternatives to this model of client-driven research, including longer-term work funded by research councils and other, similar organisations, and such research probably reflects a more academic model resembling more closely the types of research underpinning a PhD thesis. The need to demonstrate the impact of research<sup>2</sup> also became more important in a way that never influenced my PhD research, although work for government clearly provided input to the development of planning policy and ideas in practice.

One of the challenges of becoming involved in client-driven research in academia has been how to utilise the insights from that work for academic purposes, including for academic publication. There are examples of where we have revisited work generated for a client with a more critical, academic, and conceptual perspective (see Harris and Hooper, 2004, and Harris and Thomas, 2011). This can lead to the curious position of exploring conceptual frameworks after fieldwork has been carried out, but I have found that this is a useful way of understanding the data in greater depth, as well as helping to fashion and explore concepts. One of the other challenges of being engaged in client-driven research is that it demands more than just understanding something about the world – it demands that practical recommendations are made or that good practice is distilled. This inhabiting of two worlds – academia and practice – and the shuttling back and forth between them is interesting for many reasons. Even in cases where I have engaged in what I would describe as more indulgent, academic work of a more theoretical nature (see Harris, 2011), there has been the challenge of explaining those ideas to potential interviewees in practice in a way that makes practical sense. A key task is translating one’s own academic, conceptual, and theoretical interests into practically meaningful terms. How exactly does one take the Foucauldian concept of panoptic surveillance, as well as other concepts of lateral surveillance, and explore with planning enforcement officers how they go about detecting and investigating breaches of planning control (Harris, 2013)? This is one of the delights of bridging academia and practice.

## Conclusions

Many readers of this edited book may be engaging with research in planning for the first time as part of their undergraduate or postgraduate studies and already be based in research-led educational institutions. They may be struggling with defining a topic for their own research project, be uncertain about what legitimate and appropriate methods are for researching their topic, or what purpose doing that research serves. They may instead be embarking on the challenging task of doing doctoral research and embracing the opportunity to explore the limits of the spatial planning discipline and what lies beyond it. In all cases, the material in this book should provide help and support on doing research within our specific discipline of spatial planning. Yet the purpose of these biographical sketches is to highlight both common themes and

important differences in our own engagement with doing research in the spatial planning field. If there is one contribution that I wish to emphasise in my own account, it is the value of bridging academia and practice through the conduct of research activity. I sometimes feel as though I could never be comfortable in either practice or academia alone – and maybe I do not fit either well – for it is the inhabiting of these two worlds where I find most interest and enjoyment in exploring ideas, concepts, and practices through research.

### Notes

- 1 The term ‘development control officer’ is used in the UK to describe a planner who deals with applications for planning permission. Such an officer would manage a caseload of applications for planning permission and make recommendations to senior officers or elected politicians on whether planning permission should be granted.
- 2 Universities in the UK are required to submit periodically – approximately every five years or so – for assessment of their performance in research. An increasingly important part of these assessments is to demonstrate the ‘impact’ of their research. This impact is explored through assessing case studies of the impacts or benefits of research beyond academia. See also Davoudi’s contribution in Chapter 5.2.

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