

CONTEMPORARY ISSUES IN **SOCIAL RESEARCH**



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Ibadan University Press,
Publishing House,
University of Ibadan,
Ibadan, Nigeria

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First Published 2020

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ISBN: 978 – 978 – 8529 – 33 – 0

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Scope and Limitation of the Study in Social Research

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Introduction

Social research is an endeavour that, most times, gives researchers the needed freedom and independence to inquire into issues they observe to be problematic or need understanding. Interestingly, such issues can be timeless and limitless. This is because society is the laboratory of social scientists and human societies and problems are massive and sometimes infinite. It is within this often limitlessness of societies and social problems that researchers' have freedoms and academic and scholarly *licence* to operate. While human problems in countless societies may be limitless, research cannot be infinite due to human and material exigencies and the nature of humans themselves. Social researchers can conduct research on dyadic groups or a whole country. They can investigate a social phenomenon at a point in time or examine social trends over a period of time. They can conduct case studies of social entities or do a comparative study of more than one social entity (University of Calicut, 2011; Halloran, 2010). These are methodological issues and decisions every researcher in social sciences must settle even within the epistemological limitlessness of human societies and problems. This is why scholarly boundaries come with academic and research freedom.

While social problems and issues are unlimited and researchers are free and have the *licence* to research any issue, at least in free societies, resources available for research are comparatively little as scientists compete with alternative, but equally important, issues. Hence, as much as social researchers would, ordinarily, like to study all social issues and problems and extend their studies to every known human society in every part of the world for validity, reliability, justifiability and replicability to solve all problems, there are critical decisions all researchers must make. These decisions are in terms of: (1) what to study (2) why it must be studied (3) when it must be studied (4) why what is not (to be) studied (5) how much and (6). how it must be studied. These strategic pragmatic sextet questions are what we refer to, here, as the **4Ws2Hs** of social research determining scope and limitation of relevant and good social research. There are many genuine and valid reasons why ambitious research projects may not be

possible, at expected level and coverage and this could be due to time and other resources constraints (Lamont and Molnar, 2002).

The nature, enormity and processes of these constraints are what ultimately determine application trajectories of the 4Ws2Hs. Aside time and other resources, these constraints also sometimes border on research/social ethics, scientific relevance and significance, resource optimization, academic and scholarly capacities and experience, funders' focus and intentions, personnel's capacities and interests as well as theoretical/methodological implications among others. Some tangential external issues may also play key roles in these situations. The tangential external issues include security and political climates of the research setting and socio-cultural challenges of the topic in line with the research setting's realities. Against these backdrops, social research must strategize and propose within the 4Ws2Hs to determine what is important, the extent of importance and what is to be left out factoring in internal and external contextual issues.

These background issues are what social scientists categorically describe as scope and limitation of the study. That is, to what extent should social research go against limited resources in the face of unlimited research issues and interest (scope) and what issues would/could not be covered in the research for what reasons and what should future researchers do (limitation). Scope and limitation of study are very important elements of good social research and they must be well-conceived and attended to. Improper and amateurish scoping of research are scintillating recipes for failure. Any social research that is not professionally bound is a certain disaster going somewhere to happen. The same applies to the limitation of the study. While the two issues of scope and limitation of the study may not be flipsides, they are related and equally important. They are also not synonyms and neither are they antonyms.

While scope can sometimes be determined before research/fieldwork and at the level of conceptualization of social research, a limitation is usually found and determined during fieldwork and/or even after fieldwork. This is however not to suggest that experienced researchers cannot determine the limitation of research at preparation and conceptualization stage especially when limitations have to do with resources, time, manpower and so on. Unfortunately, as important as scope and limitation of studies are to social research, they are among the least researched and understood aspects of social research. While most trainee researchers are known to have a poor understanding of scope and limitation, many so-called

experienced researchers are also not very knowledgeable in these respects. Many researchers merely gloss over these very important aspects of research. Many also either ignore the issues or bully their ways through thereby propagating and perpetuation vacuous knowledge of research.

Most existing texts and literature on Social Research also either outrightly does not cover these topics or merely mention them in passing. In fact, the gaps in literature and practice were very apparent at the level of preparing this chapter. It was very difficult and nearly impossible to find scholarly literature about the scope and limitation of the study. Very few scholarly works exist in the area. This is why poor knowledge of the subjects has tarried and subsisted over time. This chapter is therefore largely pragmatically interventionist, practically capacity building and academically contributory. The following sections are intrinsically embellished with issues of conceptualization, philosophical and theoretical issues around the scope and limitation, similarities between scope and limitation and how social researchers can write excellent scope and limitation of study for their research endeavours.

Conceptual Issues of Scope and Limitation of Study

This section examines the various meanings and definitions of the two concepts—scope and limitation of the study—and their relevance to social research. As already known in social sciences, there is hardly any concept that has a unified definition or meaning among scholars not even the concept of ‘definition’ itself. This section, therefore, seeks to aggregate different arguments and viewpoints on the concepts to provide detailed and broad understanding.

Scope of a Social Research

Scope of social research is to make research manageable, handy, researchable, optimal and SMART.¹ Researchers need to determine the scope very early enough in the research cycle. Aside from the fact that it makes research processes seamless and focused, it also makes research financing and accounting transparent, easy and accountable. Good research scope establishes a researcher’s competence, expertise and integrity. Unfortunately, according to Trinity Washington University (2014), most research topics, projects and engagements cover areas that are far too multitudinous, multifaceted, complex, or inexhaustible to be addressed in a research study of any scope. This is to say nothing of an undergraduate or a graduate-level research paper. Many

¹ Simple, Measurable, Achievable, Researchable and Time Bound

projects, dissertation and theses are too ambitious and unwieldy to the extent that they either become any of the following three and/or a combination. They (1) fail before they start (FBTS), are (2) brought in dead (BID) or/and are (3) dead on arrival (DOA). These are the situations with many pieces of research in academics and practice due to poor scope. This is why it is common to hear in seminar rooms, conferences, board rooms and classes that *your research/study lacks focus and your study/research lacks direction*. Since research is a fractal engagement and seedy process, once the scope of research is not clearly defined and sufficiently settled, the research is bound to lack focus and direction. There are research directions and research questions suggested by research topics but are not addressed in these research studies (Trinity Washington University, 2014) due to poor scope of research.

The scope of the study is a section in a research proposal/thesis/report where the researcher engages in the discussion of the research areas, research questions, objectives, population and study area covered (which also implies those not covered) in the study to show that you know where your research fits in its scholarly community and that you know what you can accomplish (Trinity Washington University, 2014). Scope of study can therefore be in terms of geography, scholarship, study population/demographics and time. According to Simon and Goes (2013), the scope of the study refers to the parameters under which the study will be operating. This means specifying the domain of the research and clearly stating what the researcher is studying including the factors that are within the accepted range of the research (Simon and Goes, 2013). This may mean clarifying the subjects, extent of coverage of the concepts employed in the study objectives and the time frame to set the reach of the study in the context. In this regard, the scope of the study is a detailed exposition of the study to ensure that the breadth, depth and detail of the study are compatible and sufficient to address the stated study objectives (University of Cyprus, 2006) within available time in manners that will optimize available resources. Identifying the scope of the study not only helps to show the coverage of a study, but it also enhances the credibility, validity and reliability of the study and makes other scholars to know within which subject, context, time and remit they can assess and replicate a/your research.

In some literature, the scope of the study is also known as the delimitation of the study. In this sense, they are the boundaries, a researcher, set on the study and can be said to be within the researcher's control (Baron, 2009). Therefore, the delimitation of the study entails the choice of

research questions researchers' ask, the details of research objectives, the theoretical position(s) researchers choose to adopt and the population relevant for the research (Baron, 2009). According to Pajares (2007), writing out the delimitation of the study is an attempt to explain the activities the researcher will not be undertaking (in terms of, for example, literature, population and methodology) and then the *justification* of why this is so. Justification is very important here because all aspects of a research must be justified (please see the chapter on Justification in this book). Even when Justification is a section on its own in research reports and proposals, Justification is also embedded in all sections. In this case, in the delimitation/scope of the study, the researcher must justify why he/she is setting/determining the scope of the study and what factors determine the scope.

Researchers must also be able to justifiably explain what advantages the scope will have on the research and the output in terms of validity and reliability. All these efforts are meant to frame the focus of research (Kwan and Wolf, 2002) both in the substantive area or limits of the topic of inquiry and the research areas or the study settings and sample (Richards, 2006). It should be noted that the theory to be adopted for a particular study, will also influence and determine the nature and boundaries of the scope of the study. In this light, if a theory is somehow limiting in its scope, it can be triangulated with other theories that will cover the other aspects of the objectives of the research and thereby broaden the scope. The scope is a very important part of a research endeavour and must not be in any way seen to be *just one of the less important sections of reports or proposals*. It is also a very interesting and technically useful section.

Limitation of a Study

Limitation of study is not in any way negative issues of the study contrary to popular misconceptions among students, researchers and development partners. Limitations are also not necessarily problems/issues that reduce the usefulness and validity of the research. The ultimate impacts of limitations on any research will depend on the researcher's expertise, proactiveness, experience and nature of the study. A limitation is therefore not necessarily *anything/everything inimical and negative about a project*. As opposed to delimitation/scope of the study, limitation/this section of research reporting or project writing deals with the issues that are sometimes beyond the control of researchers but affects the methodology/outcome of the

research (Simon, 2011) in some ways. They can also be unforeseen issues the research could/would have covered but could not. Basically, according to Price and Murnan (2004), research limitations are the characteristics inherent in the research methodology or design that changes the meaning and interpretation of the research results. That is, they are the constraints on generalizability, applications to practice, and/or utility of findings that are the result of how a researcher initially chose to design the study and/or the method used to establish internal and external validity (Price and Murnan, 2004).

Limitations of the study are issues and challenges that researchers face during the study that may influence or impact the results and interpretations of those results (Price and Murnan, 2004). According to Baron (2009), limitations are factors, usually beyond the researcher's control, that may affect the results of the study or how the results are interpreted. All studies, regardless of how well-planned or well-conducted they are, have one limit or another. This limit can be on the issues of the theoretical or methodological choice for the study, or in terms of problems faced during the process of data collection. For example, a researcher might adopt the convenience sampling method instead of a systematic technique due to some unavoidable and genuine reasons; s/he might be unable to get hold of some information s/he needs for the study from either government agencies or an organization, or there might be difficulties in arranging interview sessions with some respondents that are central to the study. These difficulties or limitations are not the researcher's fault and they may only remove from the credibility of the research if they are not duly reported or handle. It is important to note that researchers must be able to build and develop capacities to the extent that they can professionally manage their limitations of the study to the extent that they do not implicate and limit the validity and reliability of studies.

Since limitations may be unforeseen and inevitable in many instances, the researcher must manage and strategize to limit or eliminate the negative implications of limitations. This is what will ultimately determine the impact of limitations on the research. A researcher should not just resign to fate when they confront limitations. They must brace up and creatively manage the limitations. There are always ways around limitations. This is what we call *Limitation Management in Social Research*. Of necessity, a researcher must be, generally, significantly experienced, proactive, able to manage situations and resources, be a leader and be a reporter. All these characteristics must come to bear when research are involved, and particularly when

limitations are involved. There may be no perfect research but finesse in managing limitations can determine the level of perfection of research. Researchers must therefore aggravate their proactiveness and capacities when handling limitations. Limitations of the study not only helps the researcher to validate the findings got from the field in the light of the circumstances surrounding the issue at stake but also gives readers confidence in the research results as they would interpret the data within the context of the limitations faced in the study - thereby acknowledging the problems and making the right decision when it comes to relying on the findings.

Limitations, when writing research proposals, can only be assumed at best before going out into the field based on a review of similar literature or from the researcher's experience among others. The actual limit to a study often occurs during or after the proposed study is conducted. However, the limitations are not meant to serve as excuses for not following the research methodology or conforming to the set scientific standards (whether qualitative or quantitative) but to buttress the extent to which generalizations can be made with the study results and their true meanings (Baron, 2009). Baron (2009) identified some examples of common limitations researchers might encounter on the field which are: the inability to generalize the research results beyond the specific population from which the sample was drawn because of the uniqueness or small quantity of the sample employed in the study; the inability of the researcher to get sincere responses from respondents or when such responses are atypical to the population under study; and the unavailability of some key respondents for evaluation, survey or interviews, especially in a longitudinal study.

It should be noted that limitations of the study (especially in qualitative research) can be in terms of research logistics such as based on time and human and/or financial resources. However, highlighting the limitations the study faced should not in any way infringe on the basic and important aspects of the study's research design. Therefore, it is usually recommended that social researchers dig into and list out the possible challenges their studies may face before, during, and after the research and then make necessary adjustments in their research designs that prevent or control, to a large extent, these limitations (Baron, 2009). The absence of this section in dissertations or research proposals may mean that the research considered most if not all variables, the results can be generalized to all populations and such study is replicable under any circumstance. Since this is almost an impossible task in social science research, including the

section on limitation of the study, therefore, enhances the validity and reliability of the study results (Baron, 2009) rather than reducing validity and reliability of the findings like it is often erroneously believed by many Social Scientists.

Writing Excellent Scope and Limitation of a Social Research

This section delves into the issues in writing the scope and limitation of the study. It should be noted that these two are different and take separate sections of their own in the project report. For instance, the scope of the study is necessary for project proposal and final thesis, but the limitation of the study may be omitted in the research proposal as it deals with problems faced while carrying out the study (although some limitations can be predicted). Furthermore, the scope of the study deals with those parameters set by the researcher her/himself which include the period, study objectives, theory(ies) adopted, methodology and the geographical area to be covered, for instance, while limitation of the study is concerned with the characteristics of the design that can influence the interpretation of the results of your study (Olayinka, 2013). Therefore, the scope of the study is meant to address the specific boundaries within which the research will be conducted (Olayinka, 2013).

In writing the scope of the study, some phrases that can be used include “*the coverage of this study....; the study consists of....; the study covers the...; this study is the focus[ed] on...*” (Thesis Notes, 2009). In further delimiting a study, the researcher would use phrases such as... *the study does not cover the...; the researcher limited this research to...; this study is limited to...* (Thesis Notes, 2009). Richards (2006) rightly observed that choosing a topic and defining the suitable concepts together with the adopted theories is an attempt to delimit the substantive area. In this sense, there is a need for careful and in-depth consideration, focused research objectives, constant flexibility, self-criticism and the use of literature for comparison (Richards, 2006). Therefore, in setting the scope of the study, the social researcher must ensure that the delimitations are not too rigid or narrow but one with clear focus through which the research questions will get answered by the data to be gathered from the field (Richard, 2006). Also, in this regard, Richard (2006) argued that a hurried predetermination of the definitions of research concepts and phenomenon will mostly lead to premature closure of the scope of the study and this would adversely affect the substantive areas the research is meant to focus on. In terms of settings and study sample, the scope of the study should mention the study’s target population,

geographical area and concepts or variables to delimit the boundaries of generalization of the study's findings (Kenyatta University School of Business, 2012).

On the other hand, in writing limitation of the study (which is most times during or after the research takes place), the researcher notes the constraints that are out of her/his control and which cannot be avoided in the study process (Olayinka, 2013). However, stating limitations due to time or financial resources constraints are to be avoided at all costs (except in exceptional situations in qualitative research) as researchers are meant to have planned and implemented their research considering the time and financial resources available to them (Kenyatta University School of Business, 2012). Beyond this, in the section of limitation of the study, there is also the need to include the methods or ways through which the researcher will deal or had dealt with the issues that came up as obstacles to achieving the goals and objectives of the study and their implications for the generalization of the research results (Kenyatta University School of Business, 2012). Limitations must therefore not be reported as threats and weaknesses of the research but as information to guide the readers and users of the report for projects, programmes, teaching and replicability.

Conclusion

This chapter has considered the concepts of scope and limitation of the study, their meaning, relevance to social research and issues to be considered in writing them. Scope and limitation of the study, though distinctively different, are intrinsically related as they both highlight the extent to which a study can or cannot go and the degree to which readers can generalize about the findings of the research. Therefore, social researchers must always be careful of distinguishing between which issues or characteristics of the study fall under scope or limitation respectively. Researchers must also be careful in drawing a wedge through these important activities and sections. They should find ways of optimizing them as beauties and necessities of social research. In this chapter, we have adopted tool-kit, pragmatic and systematic yet scholarly, academic, and practical approaches. This is to guide readers, students, candidates, development partners and scientific/research communities in Do-It-Yourself (DIY) manner. We sincerely hope that readers of this chapter will find it useful and of value as we have attempted to confront some misconceptions around scope and limitation of social research head-on and expand knowledge of these activities strategically.

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