Keynote Speech - How to Become a Successful Researcher?

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Deans, Heads of Departments, Professors, Librarian, senor and young academics, members of administrative and non-academic staff and of course dear students. It is a great honour and a previllaged to have been invited to the 11th Annual Research Session of the Sabaragamuwa University.

What is research in social sciences and how does research contribute to the production of high quality knowledge and its dissemination? These are very important questions at a time when, 'publication' has become a global profitable industry in which unfortunately supply and demand have become key determinants and the 'invisible' hand, originally proposed by economic philosophers Adam Smith in his "wealth of nations" appear to have greater control on knowledge production. In the academic world today, academics strive to publish as many publications as possible irrespective of the quality. Often, we try to publish as many publications as possible exploiting a single research study. Thus, academic publications can lose the aspect of originality and may not have any impact on society, which makes our employment possible through the payment of taxes. So, the question that I am addressing in this keynote address is how to become a successful researcher by being able to undertake meaningful studies which end up in meaningful publications generating new knowledge and fresh intellectual as well as pragmatic contributions to human life in our society. How do we cease to become unwitting agents of a rabid publication culture?

Often, postgraduate students and young researchers struggle to find a meaningful research topic or an area of study in their dissertations, which is nowadays mandatory to obtain a degree in social sciences and therefore, the search for topics has becomes a boring and routine exercise instead of a genuine quest for knowledge. Is there a more meaningful way to develop new research ideas? First of all, students and young researchers need to understand how and why we become interested in research. The critical element in the development of knowledge is the inherent human tendency for observation. As a social science student and a young researcher, throughout your university education, you have been exposed to a wide spectrum of concepts and theories, which help you understand the social reality you experience in everyday life. All of us have internalized these concepts and theories and have made them a part of our life even though you may not realize it. The theories and concepts you have studied influence the way you look at things, understand them and interpret them and react to them in practical ways. The application of knowledge takes place even in most mundane interactions within the family or community. This natural tendency for utilizing knowledge can be combined with natural human tendency for observation. When you interact with family and friends, when you travel, when you watch television, when you read a book, etc you observe, perhaps without knowing that you observe. In fact, your close and attentive observation may help you generate highly meaningful research ideas. For example, let me take two recent examples; the covid pandemic affected the entire globe, and we heard from many sources that domestic violence has increased in Sri Lanka during the past one-year or so. A curious social science student will grab this piece of information with great enthusiasm and use it to develop an interesting research quest on the linkage between the social dynamics of covid and domestic violence. To take a second example, one could not have failed to watch on television how farmers in Sri Lanka have taken to the streets, perhaps, for the first time in our political history after independence. Again a young researcher with good observation skills would not fail to ask as to why do farmers come out on to the street to protest? She would be interested in finding out the deeper sociological reasons, which motivate farmers to question a government policy on organic agriculture. A good observer will naturally develop these questions and she will then move on to develop more specific research ideas. There are of course other ways in which you develop new research ideas; reading existing literature, conversations with experienced academics in your faculty, new developments or radical changes in the society and important social issues etc are veritable sources of new research topics.

But does every social problem become a research problem? My answer is certainly in the negative. What is a research problem after all? You may have an interesting research topic in your hand but several months later in your academic semester you supervisor or senior colleague may tell you that there is no research problem and then you find yourself stranded in no-man's land. Many students rewrite their research topic in different words as the research problem or rewrite the objectives of the study as the research problem. None of these actually represent the research problem, which becomes illusive for many young academics. To put it simply, the research problem is a lacunae in knowledge; it is

the gap which you try to address (Bernard, 2006: Bryman, 2012). Hence, not every social problem becomes a research problem. For example, at the beginning of the covid pandemic, the relative increase of domestic violence became an important topic as this was a new experience and hence a knowledge gap; this was a new experience and most of us did not realize that domestic violence had actually increased and we could not understand why it had increased. So, it was not the prevalence of covid-related household violence that formed the research problem; it was precisely the gap in knowledge which created a research problem. Perhaps, by now, we may find important academic and policy studies which have undertaken in-depth studies into domestic violence under a pandemic situation and then, we may no longer have a research problem there when the gap in knowledge has already been filled. To take another example, poverty continues to persist in Sri Lanka to some extent in some parts of the country. Therefore, poverty is definitely a social problem but does it also become a research problem? It becomes a research problem only if you find an aspect related to poverty about which a knowledge gap can be demonstrated. How do you demonstrates that a knowledge gap exist? That can only be shown through an effective study of existing literature (Bryman, 2012).

Hence, a study of literature, often called technically the literature review, becomes a key component in the development of research proposals. I have observed that many postgraduate and undergraduate researchers try to develop a separate chapter in their dissertations on the existing literature. However, many of these dissertations lack a section outlining the research problem or it has not been effectively articulated. Often, students do not realize that it is through the study of existing literature that one can show there is inadequacy of knowledge about some research area. It is this aspect which then is chosen for a particular study. Usually the following structure may be used to present a research problem. After the usual introduction, you can launch your literature review and then you can start a new subtopic on the research problem where you offer a short summary of your literature review. This helps the reader to have a snapshot of your long literature review. In the summary you direct the attention of the reader to previous scholars who have generated insights into the topic of your study but point out that these existing studies have failed to give sufficient attention on the particular sub-aspect which you propose to study. This way you can demonstrate the knowledge gap. Then, you may also highlight the importance of filling this knowledge gap. Remember to comment on the academic value of filling this knowledge gap.

It does not need to be reiterated that the research problem is the heart of a research proposal and hence why examiners usually pay special attention to the research problem in evaluating a research proposal or an application for a research grant. The research problem is your guiding light to everything you do in your research study. It guides your advanced literature review, research objectives, research design, methodology and data collection instruments, analysis and finally the publication of a dissertation, any other publication. When you have developed a clear research problem, then, you develop some objectives for your study. There is a strong logical relationship between the problem and objectives in the following order; when you fulfill the objectives, automatically, the gap in knowledge

should be filled. This means, in order to fulfill your objectives, you gather data, which you must analyse and generate new knowledge.

Epistemology and ontology in research

A particular difficult area where young academics and students struggle involves the application of epistemology and ontology in research proposals. While experienced researchers, at times, do not make an explicit statement about epistemology and ontology, they take care to give sufficient attention to these aspects in their research designs. Examiners of dissertations lay significant emphasis on highlighting these aspects in undergraduate and postgraduate research in order to make sure that students get the best training in social research. Simply, epistemology refers to study of knowledge or science of knowledge. It address the question of how we know things or how we gather knowledge (Uyangoda, 2015). Bryman (2012) in this famous textbook on research methods shows that epistemology is basically about four interrelated questions

Rationalism versus empiricism

Positivism versus interpretivism

Rationalism is the idea that we gather knowledge through the application of reason or our power of thinking. Ancient Greek philosophers primarily used their power of thinking to generate knowledge. One can argue that oriental philosophical traditions such as Buddhism, Hinduism, Jainism, Confucianism etc also used rationalism to a greater extent. Rationalists believed in 'a priory truths' and absolute truth, which supposedly exist in the universe. Human beings only have discover them using their power of thinking. Once discovered, the truth is absolute and can never be proven wrong. Empiricism is the idea that we generate knowledge through experience rather than reason. Human beings have five senses and we use them to gather external signals containing coded information, which is then processed in our brain and decoded. This process of using experience to generate knowledge is the empirical approach. The philosopher John Locke stated that human beings are born with a clean table and it is the experience which leads to knowledge. David Human further mentioned that sensory information leads to generalization, which then can be advanced to knowledge. For example, when human beings observed that when dark clouds gather in the sky, the rain follows. They then, generalize this experience and develops a theory that dark clouds causes rain. In contrast to rationalists Hume said that truth is incremental and there is no absolute truth but then truth is incremental. Our journey is one of incremental increase of knowledge and it is never a one way journey (Bryman, 2020; Comte, 1975; Silva, 2001; Uyangoda, 2015). Truth can of course be overturned; for example, human beings once believed in geocentrism; that the earth is the center of the universe. Later on, Nicolaus Copernicus presented a mathematical model to confirm Heliocentrism, which established the sun as the center of the universe. If we take a contemporary y example, at the beginning of the covid pandemic world health organization advised that face masks were not essential for ordinary people but then later it was

made mandatory. Thus, the idea that truth can be overturned is the foundation of modern science. Early social scientists believed that social sciences should espouse this method of generating knowledge. This relates to our earlier discussion on whether social science should rely on positivism or humanism/interpretivism.

Positivism is the idea that social science must use the scientific method used in natural sciences. Social scientists should undertake empirical data collection, develop hypotheses and proceed to tests those hypotheses like in natural sciences. Positivism was adopted by the modern father of sociology August Come and founders of sociology such as Emily Durkheim too. However, some social scientists believed that the social sciences were fundamentally different from natural sciences and that social sciences cannot use the same methods as in natural sciences. Social science involves the study of human beings, their perceptions, feelings, emotions, behavior which is highly unpredictable and hence, we have to use a different approach. This is the basis of humanism where it was belied that we need to have an interpretative understanding of the social reality. Max Weber's concept of verstehen is important in this concept (Tucker, 1965).

Moving on the question of ontology in social science research, we need to address two questions; Objectivism versus Constructivism. Objectivism is connected to positivism in many ways and maintains that the social reality is something that is objective, which we can see, feel, and almost touch. The social reality is tangible and like in Durkheimian sociology, the reality stands over and above the individual. The reality has an existence separate from the researcher (Bernard, 2006). However, constructivism believes that in human world, the reality is not so concrete and most social phenomena we study are social constructs. The reality is not out there for us to see, feel or touch. The reality is something that we create in our mind, in particular historical periods in relation to social and political conditions which exist at the time and even the same phenomenon will have different meanings in different historical contexts. Therefore, we should see the social reality as something that is constantly under construction by individuals and society. For example, if you take the concept of nation, one can ask where it exists. Can one find the nation? Where is it located? What does it look like? The nation is in our mind and what is meant exactly by concepts such as nation, nationalism, ethnicity, religion, priest etc change over time and hence these are social constructs. Tambiah

It is important for young academics and students to properly outline in their dissertations where they stand in relation to these important questions raised under epistemology and ontology. When you have a proper understanding on these questions you are in a position to carry out a study which will result in meaningful publications and generate fresh intellectual contributions, which others will want to read.

Pragmatic planning in social science research.

As in everything else we do, research requires extensive and careful planning which helps you minimize loss of time and save resources. In almost all cases, a research study starts

with some observations and a study of existing literature and of course your senior colleagues at the university will be a great source of 'leads' in research. This may not always happen in a formal setting but it could just be when you have a coffee with your colleagues or in other informal settings. For students, your supervisor will be your greatest source of new ideas. When you have some interesting ideas, which you may want to test, the next step is to read extensively and continuously communicate with your colleagues and/or supervisor. When you reach an advanced stage of having developed a full research proposal, then, you may also want to undertake some pragmatic planning. Research is expensive and needs funding. Most undergraduate and Master of Philosophy students self-fund their studies and this is doable as they usually limit data collection to a smaller sample but when it comes to a doctoral degree, you may want to explore sources of funds. The University Research Council at your university or the Faculty Research Committee may have information about funds from the institution. There are also various national foundations such as the national science foundation, national research council, and international sources. Often international sources requires joint application with experienced researchers and in most cases you will have to apply through an established research institution, which can be your university or research institutions such as the International Center for Ethic Studies, Center for Poverty Analysis, and similar organizations. If you succeed in securing funds from a national or international organization, you may rest assured that you have a good proposal in your hand. The ability to secure a grant outside of your university is an indication that you already are a good researcher or at least have the potential to become a good researcher. Securing funds from an international organization will require you to compete internationally among other researchers and hence your proposal must be original, systematically developed, comprehensive in literature review, has identified the gap in knowledge, has proposed a sound methodology, is feasible within a time frame and most importantly, has the potential to contribute to fresh intellectual insights to the field of study. Often, your caliber which means your existing record of publication, caliber of other members in your team, and alignment of your proposal with the goals of the funding organization will have a critical influence. Therefore, if you apply for international funding, make sure to read instructions and match your goals with the goals of the funder. Some universities have developed what is referred to as a 'publication seminar', which are held once in a month and where researchers can present their draft papers and proposals. These are genuine sources of help in order to improve your research proposal or grant application.

With or without funding, you need to concentrate on the pragmatic aspects of data collection. You must always keep in mind your epistemological and ontological approach to your study. There is a dominant tendency among social science researchers to heavily rely on qualitative methods of data collection. However, many excellent publications result from mixed methods research studies which combine qualitative and quantitative methods. A few of the most frequently used data collection methods are the interviews, observations, focus group discussions, case studies, and library or archival methods. These can very well be combined with a survey method if that is relevant for your study.

A particularly important aspect in data collection is 'note taking'. Often, especially those

relying on qualitative methods must be adept in note taking. In some disciplines such as anthropology, extensive note taking encouraged. Some anthropologists take note of even facial expressions, sound of breathing or humming, other non-vernal expressions made by the informants. Typically these studies do not want to miss even one word. In contemporary research it is not so common to be that extensive but it is always good to be as extensive as possible. Often it is advisable not to postpone the development of a transcript. You tend to forget the interview and perhaps lose more than 50% in a matter of few hours unless you have extensive notes. Hence, it is always a good idea to develop the transcript perhaps on the same day. Usually, you should not conduct more than 4 interviews per day if they have been about one hour each as you tend to become physically tired and lose attention to subtle conversations. Some researchers voice record the interviews and later develop extensive notes. It is here that the ethics approval becomes important.

In the past, not many social science journals requested ethics approval from contributors. However, some journals have now begun to request ethics approval and it is likely that within the next five years or so, most social science journal might want you to submit your ethics approval before they accept your publication for review. No ethics review committee gives approval to past studies or studies which have already begun. Hence, make sure you obtain ethics approval from a recognized ethics review committee, most likely, from a university. Returning to the utility of voice-recording, there is no doubt that it is an excellent way of having extensive data but you must obtain informed consent from the participants before you can record an interview. However, there is a downside to this; it is likely that your informant will be affected by voice recording and will not be as free as when no such voice-recording takes place. The informant will be careful when she or he expresses emotions, criticism, and most likely will want to cater to your own values. Therefore, the use of voice recording requires careful thinking.

Data analysis is a central part of your research output. This also where there is a central issue with regard to young academics who usually tend to adopt a reporting style. Often, they make use of extensive quotations from the interviews, FGDs, Case studies and 'report' what the informants have stated. This is certainly not the intended goal of a qualitative study, which aims at generating in-depth insights. Often students and young academics report their findings even using percentages. We almost never use percentages in qualitative studies as our sample is usually small and our aim is to go in-depth rather than cover a large number of people. Therefore, in qualitative studies, usually your sample is more likely to be heterogeneous as you want to get information from diverse participants so that you capture a diverse range of ideas on a chosen topic. The fact that you have a heterogeneous sample means that it makes no sense to report your findings in percentages. In qualitative studies we delimit the relevance of findings to the sample. We do not extrapolate our findings like in a survey method, which by definition relies on a random sample. However, although you do not claim to represent a wider group beyond your sample, the readers of your publication may have the freedom to decide that, perhaps, the findings are relevant beyond the sample. Therefore, it is important that we pay significant attention on to the 'analysis' rather than reporting. The publication resulting from your study should

have a deeper analysis of your data, which is the interpretation of your findings. This is where you generate a micro theory out of your data. Often the conclusion in many dissertations and at times research papers consist of a summary of the findings. That would be a waste of resources. In fact the conclusion should be used to engage in a deep analysis of your findings and generate in-depth insights and to develop a micro theory.

There are a wealth of theories and methods available for data analysis in qualitative research. Most common method of data analysis used in qualitative research relates to thematic analysis which is in fact a component of the family of Grounded Theory (Glaser, 1992; Glaser and Strauss, 1967). The systematic application of grounded theory which also includes narrative analysis, thematic analysis, conversational analysis, can yield very rich outputs. Alan Bryman (2012) has an excellent coverage on grounded theory and there is a wealth of material on grounded theory available on social media such as youtube. Depending on the type of the research problem and the nature of study, you might explore the possibility of using other methods such discourse analysis, ethnographic method and also content analysis, which is connected with quantitative analysis. Discourse analysis has become popular in studies which examines popular narratives such as the role of religion, ethnicity, nation and nationalism, sexuality, democracy, power, etc. discourse analysis can be performed at various levels; some undertake extensive data analysis like in linguistics while some experienced researchers use their training in order to extract the discourses which are embedded in conversations.

Skills needed for research

Research in social sciences can be extremely rewarding when you have gained some experience in the trade but it can be a daunting exercise at the beginning. Some young researchers give up their research career midway as they feel that research is not something that they want to do. However, if you persist, you become accustomed to undertaking research even under challenging circumstances. Research in social science require you to be a thinker and be reflective. It requires not only good communication skills but excellent listening skills. You must train your mind to read between the lines and see the hidden messages in conversations. Research can be physically strenuous at times as you may travel to different parts of the country and at times different parts of the world for some studies, especially, when you become an experienced researcher. However being a researcher enables you to experience the world and generate new knowledge and it can make you an international character. It does not need to be emphasized that your language skills are critical in research and publications. Good researchers find good data but good researchers with excellent language skills develop excellent publications.

Publishing can also be a rewarding experience but it is also a frustrating experience for all researchers. If you have published in international journals already, you may have experienced rejections of your submissions as many as 10 times. But this requires you to have courage. Each rejection also offers you comments for improvement and those can be used to fine-tune your publications. As young academics and students, your initial step

will be to publish in local journals and publishing houses. There has been a tendency by academics to 'self-publish' where you approach a printing-shop with your book, pay them to print your book. But this method is increasingly discouraged now as this does not involve any referee process and a publisher. In fact you become your own publisher. Therefore, a good starting point can be those journals published by Sri Lankan universities or national science foundation. Most university journals maintain a double-blind review process. This gives a very good training into the process followed by international journals, which belong to many different layers. Some of them belong to the most prestigious category and young academics will initially find it difficult to publish in such high ranked journals. But if you have already published in local university journals, then, you can aim at recognized international journals and reputed publishing houses. Whether local or international, if you publish a book or an edited volume, it is always better to approach a recognized publisher.

A final war of caution should be given regarding the 'predatory' publications' which have become so common among academics. There is no standard definition for predatory publications and no hard and fast rules to categorise a journal as predatory. However, some guidelines can be used. In a very simple sense predatory publications are those which have a profit orientation and which publish articles or even books without a proper review process and without verifying the quality or originality. The sole purpose of these publications is to make profit and they will publish anything you submit. The first criteria may be whether you have to make a publication fee. If yes, you need to be careful. Usually predatory journal may charge somewhere between 100 to 300 US dollars and will publish your paper in a matter of weeks or a month. However, publication fee is not an adequate indicator as some of the highly ranked journals in some social sciences such as economics also charge a fee and they are reputed journals. Hence, you will need additional checks; usually predatory journals do not have an institutional affiliation to a university or a research institutions or an established publishing house. Some of them do not have an editorial board and even if they have one, the editors themselves do not have a publication record. Often the editors also do not have an institutional affiliation although they may have self-imposed titles such a professor or doctor. In some situations even the name of the journal can be a good indicator. Every morning when you open your email, you may be getting requests for articles from some journals. These might be predators which look for prey; hence the name predatory journals. Some of them (not all) have strange names such as "Australian Scientific Research Journal of Engineering, Medicine, and Sciences and religion" "Multidisciplinary journal of cybernetics, mathematics, and social sciences, or "Journal of contemporary, politics, Engineering, computing, and the Arts". These are hypothetical names but if you get a call from journals having such strange names, you need to exercise caution. Often these may be predatory because no journal of quality can afford to have such a variety of disciplines accommodated in one journal. Often, good journals represent only a fraction of a discipline in some situations or are devoted to social sciences in general. The Beall's list of predatory journals can also be used to identify such journals. Publication in predatory journals can discredit you in the academic world and even disqualify you from employment in the universities and scholarship programmes. In

fact, the University grant commission in Sri Lanka is developing a new promotion scheme where predatory journals have been specifically excluded from accepted publications.

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