

Starting management research

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Learning outcomes At the end of this chapter the reader should be able to:

- **understand the processes and complexities of selecting and justifying a research topic;**
- **take initial steps with regard to planning the research;**
- **understand the importance of knowing and summarizing the literature in a field of interest;**
- **understand how to begin a literature search;**
- **understand how to undertake a literature review.**

This chapter considers some preliminary matters essential to making a start. These are the selection and justification of the topic, planning the project and reviewing the literature. The rest of the book is then devoted to methodological issues. Nevertheless, it is of course recommended that the whole book should be read at least once before starting a research project.

As we explained in Chapter 1, this book is primarily concerned with offering guidance on the appropriate approach to take to a particular research topic. From experience we have discovered that this matter is generally the most problematic for the researcher. However, we also suggested earlier that research invariably proceeds in roughly the sequence outlined in Figure 1.2, and such a systematic procedure is clearly a useful way of clarifying matters at the outset. However, as also mentioned, it should be recognized that these stages are usually not so clear cut in practice and frequently may be recycled; for example, both the topic and the approach taken to address it may be modified iteratively as the work is planned and action taken.

Primarily, then, in this book we will be concerned with selecting the research approach, and collecting and analysing data and evaluation research findings; that is stages 3 to 7 in the sequence in Figure 1.2, and these matters will be the main concern of later chapters.

Topic selection

Until a topic for the research is identified the work cannot of course start. This obvious point is made to emphasize that so much research, particularly for research degrees, founders because students do not take a systematic approach to topic selection. At the risk of complicating this matter at so early a stage, there are fundamentally two ways of formulating research topics. One is by analysing the literature, formally stating the problem and the major questions, and only then collecting relevant data; the other suggests that this way of formulating problems tends to stifle questions that a more open-ended approach to the topic might stimulate. Both ways have merit and choice depends upon the research approach(es) selected. Broadly speaking, action research and most qualitative approaches exert open-ended constraints on formulating problems while programmed constraints are placed on those using surveys and experiments. Brewer and Hunter (1989) suggest that multi-method strategies may help overcome these constraints upon problem formulation, and we will consider this matter in more detail in Chapter 8.

Students may of course be allocated a research topic. This is less likely in projects that are part of taught programmes in business and management, where students are generally encouraged to find their own topics with some supervisory help since negotiating various stakeholders about the focus of research and about gaining access to organizations is often considered to be a key part of the learning process. Nevertheless, much depends on the disciplinary traditions and the immediate research setting. For example, if the student is working as a member of a research team this may entail fitting into an existing programme of research. Further, in such areas as the natural sciences and engineering the student apparently has less influence in topic selection than is commonly the case in the social sciences (Young et al., 1987: 21).

On the other hand, topic selection may be a somewhat risky process if left entirely to the student, and it would seem that an arrangement whereby student and supervisor work together to define the topic is ideal. There is otherwise a danger that, through lack of experience, topics chosen solely by students may prove impracticable, or alternatively, that the student who is allocated a project will feel no sense of ownership and commitment.

Sources of research topics

Topics may arise in a number of ways. For example, many part-time students in business and management derive topics from their work experience often in consultation with hierarchical superiors. In effect they offer to work as internal consultants on some problem in their own organization and then, when studying at, say, master's level, stand back from the work so that it becomes generalizable to other cases.

Topics may also arise from articles in academic and professional journals, and ideas for research may be stimulated by reports in the media, where an unsupported assertion may provide a fruitful line of inquiry. Such assertions are not confined to the media; authorities in the field may also make assertions which are not well founded. For example, an established researcher may assert that capital budgeting techniques are used not for decision-making but only as a control mechanism – an assertion that may be readily tested by accumulating research evidence from practitioners.

Experts or authorities will frequently write articles or make speeches commenting on the absence of research in a particularly fruitful area and in the same way committee reports may also refer specifically to the need for research in an area under investigation.

Groups of managers at local meetings of professional bodies, such as the Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development, may also be useful sources of research ideas and access to research them. Such suggestions do need to be regarded with a degree of caution, for practitioners are often unaware of research that has already been done, but nevertheless they may often be a useful starting point for a research inquiry.

Research projects in management have also often originated from consultancy, where research questions have arisen in the course of the work. An example was consultancy in a large, nationally known chemical complex to help management commission a technically very sophisticated plant, where the research issues were concerned with the staff's resistance to implementing the new technology. Consultancy helped clarify the topic area as well as lend credibility to the research group in their search for funding in a competitive field in which they previously had little experience.

Finally, many theses and dissertations contain suggestions for further research. Journal articles sometimes refer to the need for further work and since these appear only a year or so after the study they are generally more up to date than books.

Some characteristics of a good research topic

In looking for a research topic certain important characteristics need to be kept in mind. It is unlikely that all these can be satisfied and each student will place them in a different order of priority, but all the following factors should be checked against each topic proposed.

Access The possibility of access is generally a fairly easy matter to assess. Nevertheless, students often start with ideas for projects where accessibility will clearly prove difficult if not completely impractical. For example, a Ph.D. project to investigate the role of personnel departments in acquisitions and to make comparisons between the UK and North America clearly posed insurmountable problems of accessibility, not least because of the unwillingness of organizations to provide access to such sensitive and traumatic events. Further, and probably for the same reasons, secondary data seemed sparse – but this took a little longer to assess before the topic was drastically revised. In addition, of course, such a topic was also probably too broad, a common fault and one we will address below.

Similarly, topics concerned with, for example, redundancy, competitive markets or managerial stress, while potentially interesting and useful research areas, may be difficult to access. One internationally known research worker once told one of the authors that one of the fundamental problems in carrying out investigations into managerial stress was to gain access to individuals to interview. After many rejections the conclusion was reached that many managers were too stressed to talk to him about it! It has sometimes been cynically remarked that the potentially most rewarding research topics are often those which are also most inaccessible and often considerable ingenuity and persistence may be required to research further in such areas.

However, it should also be borne in mind at this stage that, as Drummond (1989) has pointed out, the use of lateral thinking to concentrate on objectives rather than on obstacles to gaining access to data is a useful technique. In this regard she provides an example from her own Ph.D. research, which seemed to demand access to coercive organizations such as prisons. Much time and wasted effort were taken up trying to gain access to such organizations through official channels, when a focus on what was actually needed to meet the research aims led to fresh thoughts on how to obtain the necessary data. It was found instead to be comparatively easy to obtain

access to released inmates through the National Council for the Care and Resettlement of Offenders, to enable the completion of questionnaires. Similarly, Spencer (1980) gained access to non-executive directors by interviewing some who performed the role part-time in the course of their work as business school academics and were as a consequence probably more sympathetic to a researcher working for a Ph.D.

Achievable in the time available With limited time available there is a temptation to select a topic before doing the preliminary groundwork suggested here; this temptation should be resisted and time will be saved in the long run.

In general the time taken to accomplish a piece of research is frequently underestimated. The time actually spent on the project is lengthened by delays due to such matters as illness, domestic pressures and part-time work; and, for part-time students, by job changes and pressures. There is a further potential difficulty for students undertaking research part-time in their own organization. While it may be advantageous for the research to be undertaken as part of their normal duties, there may be difficulties if the research depends on the researcher's superior and the organization remaining unchanged throughout the period of the work. Such a case occurred in research being conducted in a region of the National Health Service, where an original plan, based on strategies largely determined by a powerful superior, had to be changed radically following organizational changes. Fortunately, the research design was flexible and the researcher sufficiently resilient to regard such changes as an opportunity rather than a hindrance. This of course has frequently to be the approach in research concerned with complex problems in the relatively uncontrolled conditions found in organizations.

These potential delays are made more manageable by drawing up a research plan, which will indicate the phases of the research and the dates for its completion; an example is given later in this chapter.

Symmetry of potential outcomes A way of reducing the risk entailed in any project is to try to ensure that, whatever the findings from the work, the results will be equally valuable; this is known as symmetry of potential outcomes.

For example, a research project to explore the effects on managers' careers of holding a postgraduate qualification in a management subject would have symmetrical potential outcomes. If no correlation were found this would be at least as interesting and important as if there were found to be a high correlation. On the other hand, an example of a non-symmetrical outcome might be research which aimed to investigate a possible link between psychoanalytical factors, such as the mid-life crisis, and the personality of the entrepreneurial individual. Establishing such a relationship would clearly be an interesting and potentially useful contribution, but if no relationship were found the result would not be nearly as interesting. The matter of symmetry is particularly important in doctoral studies, where the contribution to knowledge is a principal criterion for the award and the risk entailed in a relative lack of symmetry needs to be minimized.

Student capabilities and interest This seems an obvious point: clearly, a student with strong capabilities in the behavioural sciences and low numeracy should hesitate before choosing a topic, needing, for example, complex statistical analysis even though it might otherwise be a good one. Similarly, a student with poor descriptive writing skills might be unwise to embark on an ethnographic study.

Finally, it is obviously important for the student to be able to sustain interest in work which may continue for long periods; in the case of higher degrees for a number of years. In these circumstances it is essential that the topic be of particular interest to the student. Thus the student should carefully assess his or her interests and abilities to ensure they match the proposed research project.

Financial support In most student projects it is usual for the matter of financial support to have been resolved before the project begins but, even then, there are frequently problems for full-time students in ensuring continuity of support; for example, the curious rules of the research councils (e.g. Economic and Social Research Council) sometimes cause problems of continuity for the researcher.

It is therefore particularly important for the matter of cost to be examined before a topic is finally selected; the lack of funds for travelling, expensive equipment or subsistence may prejudice a successful outcome.

Value and scope of the research In projects which form part of taught courses the value of the work may usually be judged primarily by its suitability in demonstrating sufficient research competence or problem-solving ability to fulfil the criteria judged necessary to pass the course. For a higher degree by research both problem-solving ability and research competence are needed and, additionally, the findings should add to the general body of knowledge without necessarily being of value to the community at large.

There are, however, several reasons why the value of the research should be considered when topics are selected. Both students and supervisors are likely to be more highly motivated if the work has obvious value and examiners, too, are likely to be more interested and award higher marks if the work is clearly making a contribution to the solution of a significant problem. Furthermore, there is growing concern by government and public funding bodies that publicly funded research should be devoted to problems judged to be important and of practical application.

Closely related to the issue of value is the extent to which the topic has the scope to challenge current beliefs, to be surprising and to affect public policy. For example, personal research for a higher degree into risk-taking by decision-makers had considerable scope, particularly when it was fortuitously discovered that decisions taken by groups were apparently more risky than the same decisions taken by individuals. The implications of such findings, if confirmed, were clearly enormous and led to considerable research activity (Brown, 1965: Ch. 13).

Findings with this degree of scope will rarely present themselves to the student researcher but topics low in both surprise and value should if possible be avoided and the search continued for topics which better meet these criteria.

Techniques for generating research topics

When defining a research area most researchers move from a wide field to a manageable topic using some of the criteria mentioned above. We suggested earlier that such criteria are best applied systematically, and the same is true when narrowing down what may be a rather vague list of early ideas into something capable of being researched. On the other hand, some researchers may have already defined their topics and, while this may at first sight seem ideal, the work may be impractical or

have already been done; either way, the inexperienced researcher may not be aware of the position.

Techniques which may be used to clarify topics owe much to work on creativity by, for example, De Bono (1971), Parnes et al. (1977) and Miller (1983).

Simplistically, one might start by using brainstorming methods to provide a list of first thoughts in a particular topic area and then reviewing items on the list by deciding what is meant by each idea. For example, if it were proposed to investigate managerial stress in a particular organization, questions which might arise in a non-evaluated, brainstormed list might be:

- 1 What is managerial stress?
- 2 How is it to be identified?
- 3 Do 'managers' include 'supervisors'?
- 4 Might some managers be more stressed than others?
- 5 Will this be a function of the individual?
- 6 Or of the job?
- 7 Or of the supervisory style?
- 8 Might the investigation be focused on particular departments?
- 9 If so, which?
- 10 Does stress increase at particular times?
- 11 Is it possible to predict stressful events?
- 12 What remedial measures may be appropriate?
- 13 Is managerial stress openly discussed in organizations?

The next step with such a list is to analyse it carefully and ensure that it is clear what is meant by the terms used and what is to be discovered and why. In this way the aims and objectives of the study will become clearer, as will the tasks which require to be performed; irrelevant topics will also stand a better chance of being eliminated at this stage.

As well as checklists some authors (e.g. Howard and Sharp, 1983) suggest a more systematic approach to topic generation, by the use of particular techniques employed in the management of research and development (Jantsch, 1967). Such techniques have as their foundation the use of analogy, which may usefully indicate a line of inquiry by its resemblance to the one under consideration, or it may suggest a methodology that, having been employed in one field, may be applied to another. An example of the former was useful in suggesting approaches to consultants who were studying the implementation of computer-aided design into small businesses. Such a specialized topic had apparently had little research attention but when looking into related fields, such as the implementation of high technology in large manufacturing companies, it became clear that advances made there could, by analogy, provide useful insights in the field under study. Similarly, the methodology used to study marketing managers (Grafton-Small, 1985) was helped by analogy with the methods used by Watson (1977) in his study of personnel managers.

Other analogy-based techniques that may be employed to generate topics are forced relationships, attribute-listing, relevance trees and morphological analysis. Most of these techniques are best performed in a group, where the synergy introduced by an effective group process usually stimulates creativity. While research is often thought of as an individual effort, particularly in relation to student research projects, the usefulness of working in groups at particular stages of the work should not be underestimated.

Table 2.1 Morphological analysis

Objective	Method	Target
Exploratory	Experiments	Individuals
Exploratory	Quasi-experiments	Professional group
Clarification	Action research	Department
Theory	Surveys	Interdepartment organization
Problem-solving	Case studies	
Conceptual	Longitudinal	Interorganization
Predictive	Ethnographic	National

Forced relationships involve attempting to relate anything in one's awareness to the problem at hand. It may be a particularly useful technique when an individual is temporarily bogged down and needs to be helped to bring back a flow of ideas.

Attribute-listing, another technique to aid the flow of ideas, involves identifying particular aspects, or attributes, of the research area and then focusing on one of them.

Relevance trees are used to suggest ways of developing related ideas from a broad starting concept. As groups of related ideas are produced it becomes possible to identify manageable research areas. Relevance trees are therefore particularly useful for producing alternative areas for research or for helping to bring into focus otherwise vague ideas for a research topic.

Morphological analysis applies the notions of attribute-listing and forced relationships in a matrix, with the purpose of generating a large number of alternative ideas. For example, a morphological analysis of types of management research projects might produce three lists of attributes under factor headings as shown in Table 2.1. Different research projects can then be generated by taking one attribute from each of the three columns. For example, an exploratory survey might be made of a professional group to define some research issues.

Such an analysis can be useful in offering insights and may be of particular help in focusing a topic, although it is advisable to keep the number of factors low as morphological analysis is capable of producing a large number of alternatives.

All these techniques create many alternatives, which are of course useful only when carefully evaluated. (The ideal creative individual may be the manic-depressive who generates ideas in his or her manic phase and evaluates them later!)

Planning the project

In their book, *How to Get a PhD*, Phillips and Pugh (1987) refer to the need for planning as a means of overcoming some of the main difficulties inherent in such a large individual undertaking. What they have to say is also true of many difficulties.

These difficulties stem from initial enthusiasm, perhaps leading to over-ambitious projects, followed by periods of alienation as the earlier excitement diminishes, deadlines become increasingly irksome and the boredom of concentrating on a particular project for a long period becomes predominant. There are periods of feeling stuck, often towards the middle of the research, and other times when the work proceeds speedily and purposefully, especially when the end of the work is in sight. While all

this may seem part of the very nature of such endeavour, the remedy for many of these problems is to manage time carefully by systematic timetabling and planning.

People often run into trouble because they are unable to identify a manageable focus for their research topic. Translating the bright idea into a set of research aims and objectives will make research not only easier in that it is more manageable, but also better in that from the outset you will have a clearer idea about how you will undertake your research, who it might involve, where it might be undertaken, and when you need to do things. This might sound obvious but regardless of the level at which students are working, it is often a lack of focus which causes people difficulties. Thinking through the what, how, who, where and when will also avoid the problem that often student research is much too over ambitious given the resources available. This is why virtually all research projects are best set out in the form of a proposal, which will generally be a summary of the researcher's more detailed plan. Some experienced researchers advocate the use of network analysis, a technique often applied to the planning of construction projects and which seems easily applicable to research work, particularly if students are already familiar with this approach (Howard and Sharp, 1983: 48).

The essentials of a research plan are contained in the questions asked, for example, in most universities' application forms to register a higher degree, and are implicit in the demand to submit a research proposal on well organized postgraduate and undergraduate courses that have a dissertation component. Candidates are asked to define their field of interest, then their aims and finally a plan, clarifying the proposed phases of the work, with dates; outlining the state of current knowledge and how the proposal intends to add to that knowledge; and, finally, the methods that will be used to research the topic. For example, a Ph.D. proposal (Noble, 1989) was structured as follows:

Management research example: Organizational design and the implementation of office systems (Noble, 1989)

Title: Organizational Design and the Implementation of Office Information Systems

Aim: To identify the effects of different organization design strategies on the implementation and successful exploitation of office systems.

What is Known: The exploitation of office information systems is much less than anticipated in the early 1980s, in part because senior management are unsure of the strategic benefits of

office automation where to start or how to manage the change process (Prince Waterhouse 1988/89). Researcher on the organizational effects of office automation has focused on the introduction of word processing and the work and attitudes of typists and secretaries (Wainwright and Francis, 1984). Less is known about the effects of computerized office systems on interdepartmental relations and organizational structure and performance, (Olson and Lucas, 1982). The researcher will focus on the managerial issues involved in the successful introduction of new technology which seem to depend on the interaction of technical and organizational factors and the quality of the implementation process (Marcus and Robey, 1983).

Plan of work

Phase One

1–4 Months

Literature searching on the nature and types of office systems: the strategic use of information technology, implementation approaches and methodologies and qualitative research methods. Literature searching to continue throughout the project but particularly intense throughout this period.

1–6 Months

Comparison of implementation methodologies used by consultants, vendor and user organizations, with particular attention to organizational design implications.

Locating and entering six organizations which have recently implemented office systems.

6–12 Months

Three of the six organizations accessed in depth.

Phase Two

9 Months

Literature survey to be extended to analogous topics such as the management of innovation and methodological approaches intended to include. For example, Pava (1983); Mumford et al. (1985); Checkland (1981); and Eason (1989). Survey results analysed.

Fieldwork in the three organizations to continue and to be three additional sites to represent differing implementation approaches and organization types.

An original contribution to knowledge is expected to lie in the relationship between technology and organization structure: the role of different management strategies in determining the outcome of technical change; and the identification of those environments and organizational constraints which inhibit the use of 'best practice'.

Phase Three

7 Months

Completion of Ph.D. thesis. Word processing and editing.

Methods

Research methods will be employed to build up case material from which generalizations will be made.

Semi-structured inter interviews will be conducted with senior management. IT staff, users, and heads of user departments.

Documents such as, for example, training manuals will be analysed.

A postal survey of 250 managing directors of leading UK companies will be conducted to discover the state of the art. i.e. the relevance of office systems to business strategy and the problems encountered in introducing it.

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Clearly, then, planning is an important factor in determining the effectiveness and efficiency with which research is carried out. It is especially useful and motivating for students when stages in the work can be identified and dates agreed with supervisors. As with all plans, it will need to be revised from time to time but with an adequate plan progress can be assessed at any time, problems are more likely to be foreseen and contingencies can be taken care of.

Reviewing the literature

Whatever its scale, any research project will necessitate reading what has been written on the subject and gathering it together in a critical review which demonstrates some awareness of the current state of knowledge on the subject, its limitations and how the proposed research aims to add, or contribute, to what is known. Indeed, one of the criteria for any research degree is to demonstrate a critical awareness of background studies and matters relating to the thesis.

What is a literature review?

The aim of the literature review is to demonstrate the researcher's familiarity with existing knowledge of the subject area and to provide insights in the field. As such, it has been argued that reviewing the literature is in itself a 'research activity' that can make a contribution to knowledge (Easterby-Smith et al., 2008). More generally it is seen as a way of developing a rationale for the significance of the research and importantly where it will lead. An effective review will present the case and the context for the proposed research and it is, therefore, 'important to demonstrate the relationship of the work to previous research in the area' (Lee and Lings, 2008: 78).

The review, however, has purposes other than to simply demonstrate knowledge of previous work in the field and the research methods literature offers many opinions as to the multiple purposes of the review. For example, apart from providing the background to the research and identifying contemporary debates, issues and questions in the field, Ridley (2008) suggests it may be used to provide definitions to clarify how terms are being used in the context of the research and it may be used to show how your work extends, challenges or addresses a gap in work in the field of interest.

Whatever the case, at a general level we can identify a number of important outcomes of a well conducted literature review.

- It helps describe a topic of interest and refine either research questions or directions in which to look;
- It presents a clear description and evaluation of the theories and concepts that have informed research into the topic of interest;
- It clarifies the relationship to previous research and highlights where new research may contribute by identifying research possibilities which have been overlooked so far in the literature;
- It reviews opinions and provides insights into the topic of interest that are both methodological and substantive;
- It helps discover strategies and methodologies appropriate to the research question and objectives;
- It presents the theoretical and methodological contexts for the proposed study which demonstrates why it is important and timely;

- It demonstrates powers of critical analysis by, for instance, exposing taken for granted assumptions underpinning previous research and identifying the possibilities of replacing them with alternative assumptions;
- It justifies any new research through a coherent critique of what has gone before and demonstrates why new research is both timely and important;
- The extent and form of this depends upon whether a deductive or inductive research strategy (discussed in Chapter 3) has been adopted.

Clearly it is important to start reviewing the relevant literature from the outset of research – even when the topic of interest is still unclear. Indeed the review of the literature will help to refine a focus, help to identify gaps in prior studies which new research might fill, and most importantly enable the researcher to set conceptual boundaries on what is relevant. Moreover, Easterby-Smith et al. (2008) identify three discernable features of a literature review:

- 1 There needs to be critical engagement with previous research such that gaps in the theory and knowledge are identified;
- 2 It should not recount knowledge and ideas already written about, but should build progressively towards the research questions to be addressed in the study;
- 3 The review is not a one off thing – it is ongoing throughout study.

So whilst literature searches and reviews usually take place early in the research sequence, keeping up to date with the literature on the topic of course continues throughout the period of the research. As mentioned earlier, most projects will have a section that gives an overview of the existing theory that underpins the research, however, this is not the only area where literature needs to be reviewed. Table 2.2 (based on Hart, 1998) summarizes the different uses of the literature throughout the research project.

Table 2.2 Research report: use of literature

1. Introduction	Show aims, objectives, scope, rationale and design features of the research. Rationale is usually supported by references to other works which have already identified the broad nature of the problem.
2. Literature Review	Demonstrate skills in library searching: show command of the subject area and understanding of the problem; justify research topic, design and methodology through a coherent critique of what has gone before.
3. Methodology	Show appropriateness of techniques used to gather data and methodological approaches employed. Relevant references from literature are often used to show understanding of data collection techniques and methodological implications, and to justify their use over alternative techniques.
4. Findings and discussion	Show command of the subject area and understanding of the problem; justify and validate the credibility of findings. Develop convincing arguments for relevance of finding. Discussions usually supported by references to other works that have already identified similar results or other interesting issues.

Adapted from Hart (1998)

Engaging with the literature is a good way to start to develop your research questions and aims. For example, you may have an interest in effective Human Resource Management or developing commitment, but how do you develop a researchable issue? In this case, Lee and Lings (2008) suggest that you need to adopt an emerging strategy. You start to read widely. Once you have, and thereby clarified your interest in the field you can then use a more directed strategy, the subject of the next section.

Undertaking the review

Clearly, in any research the relevant literature is used to perform different functions within a single piece of research. Nevertheless as Hart shows in Table 2.2 much of this is about demonstrating and justifying the nature, focus, methodology and contribution of the research in question. Here we shall focus upon the use on the literature in row 2 of Table 2.2 where a key question relates to how to approach the review of a particular area, that is, what type of review is appropriate? Writing the literature review can be a difficult exercise as Lees and Lings (2008: 97) suggest, ‘you need to provide some kind of added value to the literature’, that is the literature review should make ‘an intellectual contribution to your research project’.

The literature review needs to be structured around your research aims and there is a need to synthesize the literature through identifying and developing relevant themes or patterns in that literature. It should lead to a focusing of the research problem through a theoretical conceptualization of the topic, such that the review either articulates prior formulated theory and in doing so justifies the hypotheses which you are going to test (deductively) through the collection of data, or articulates the concepts/embedded problems, which you are going to (inductively) explore in the field and thus constitute what are called ‘sensitizing concepts’ that in effect are directions in which to initially look when conducting fieldwork that aims to generate theory out of observation and data collection (see Chapters 3 and 7). Regardless of these important issues you need to plan your literature review and, in particular, how you are going to conduct the search of the relevant literature.

Planning the literature search

- 1 *Identify the topic and focus.* This entails being very clear about what it is you are going to research because this sets some initial parameters for your literature search and thereby makes it more manageable. Start to focus your search as conceptual clarity develops and set parameters accordingly.
- 2 *Identify and define key terms.* Usually your research will link together several phenomena, sometimes in the form of a research question. Usually these phenomena are indicated by the use of an abstract concept (see Chapter 3). For instance you might be interested in researching the extent of employee organizational commitment in post-bureaucracies. This immediately raises several definitional issues which need to be sorted out. For instance, does the term employee include or exclude managers? Does it refer to part-time as well as full-time employees? Do you have a clear idea of what you mean by post-bureaucracy – are other terms used for this kind of organization – such as high performance organization? The same goes for organizational commitment. Basically you need to have a clear idea of what you might mean by these terms so that you can define the limits of the literature research.
- 3 *Define the parameters of the literature research and determine key words.* This is vitally important. In our example there is a huge literature upon ei-

ther organizational commitment or post-bureaucracy. There is a much smaller literature that combines the two. Obviously you would need to examine very closely any literature that specifically investigates both organizational commitment and post-bureaucracy together as this is the most relevant for you. But you would also need to look at the literature specifically about just organizational commitment as well as that which looks at just post-bureaucracy. Other parameters for the literature search that would need some thought are issues like: time frame (how far back do you go); sector (public or private sector or both); geographical location: is this relevant or important to your literature search. The aim is to create a list of possible terms, or key words, that you can use in your literature search.

- 4 *Identify possible literature sources.* Here you need to think about whether or not the materials you are going to search are limited to journal articles available electronically and therefore easier to search (and access) via key words, or does it include books, theses, bibliographies etc. Be very careful here, often some very important research has been published as chapters in edited books etc. and thus may not come up in an electronic search of journal articles.
- 5 Once you have begun the literature search be sure to *record and evaluate* the bibliographic details and content of the literature sources you access and try to assess its importance (see Stop and Think Exercise 2.1). Develop a flexible structure for your search at an early stage – then you know where things go. Use references given in the literature you have reviewed to guide you to new sources or sometimes to reconfigure your parameters of the search.

Stop and Think Exercise 2.1 Identify two or three key words that capture an area of interest, e.g. post-bureaucracy and organizational commitment. Enter these words into one of the search programmes available in your academic library such as Academic Google. Choose from the list of articles, books and papers that will appear an article which seems to be very important in your area and which has some empirical content. Have a go at summarizing the content of each these articles in terms of the following questions:

- What are the aims and objectives of the article?
- What does their literature review claim about the area they are investigating?
- What is the theoretical stance of the article, including any hypotheses that are presented for testing or any sensitizing concepts that are articulated?
- What is the methodology used by the authors and how have they justified the chosen approach?
- What did they find?
- How important are these findings for your area of interest?
- What are the strengths and weaknesses of the reported research?

Structuring of a literature review

Whilst searching the literature is an important aspect of any literature review, a literature review is not merely a description or list of published sources. Rather it should articulate your own considered opinion which does not take anything that is written at face value: a critical stance upon the different themes and orientations evident in the literature which is defended and justified. Arriving at such a position involves

an attempt at demonstrating how the relevant literature fits together and/or varies, through outlining its substantive and methodological content and relating different writings to each other and exposing their differences and similarities whilst evaluating their evident strengths and weaknesses. From these discernible patterns there has to be an attempt to show how the literature informs and justifies the intended research whilst initially indicating how that research will simultaneously contribute to, and perhaps even move beyond, that existing literature either substantively, or methodologically or philosophically – or even all three! This should involve you developing a personal position upon what you have read, which you have justified through argument by exposing the taken-for-granted assumptions, values and theories that other writers inevitably project onto their subjects of interest and thereby influence what they argue or find. In doing so you too will be making assumptions but it is best to articulate and try to defend them in the review thereby justifying your position and demonstrating that you can articulate and do understand the choices you have made. In other words, a well done literature review entails an attempt at interpreting the information gathered and presented such that there is a clear structure of how the different elements fit together so that the intended research focus, aims, objectives, questions, etc. are clearly positioned in relation to that existing literature and arises out of a critique of that literature. In doing so you will set the context of your own research and demonstrate that you understand the relevant literature. Naturally this raises the issue of how can such a tall order be accomplished?

At the beginning of any literature review it is very important to state the aims listed in Table 2.3 This is a useful check list for anyone beginning to write a literature review and it sets key parameters for what should follow.

Having defined the aims and parameters of the literature review in its introduction, usually reviews start with a general description of the relevant literature which compares and contrasts the work of key researchers in the area. Often there will be a chronological structure here that illustrates the development of the field from its inception through to the latest research. This narrative structure is used to outline the different ways in which the topic has been studied highlighting methodological variation as well as to summarize key findings. The emphasis here is to identify patterns or themes within the literature and to present some form of critical evaluation that serves to justify the aims and objectives of your own research.

The review of previous related research should also help you to identify key concepts and variables relevant to the research which may have been defined by researchers in different ways and thus inconsistently reported – something you may need to try to resolve in the literature review. With the development of this picture of

Table 2.3 Main components of an introduction to literature review

Aim	Means
To announce the topic of your review	A clear and concise statement
To state the purpose of your review	A careful explanation of what you aim to achieve
To explain the relevance of your review	An indication of its importance to your research, theoretically and methodologically
To establish your credibility	Information on why you should be seen as competent to write about the topic

Adapted from Hart (1998)

the different ways in which the topic has been studied usually there is an attempt to narrow the focus of the review down to work that is most relevant to your research topic in order to position your research substantively and methodologically in relation to this existing literature. In doing so there should be opportunities to highlight those issues where your research will provide additional, or indeed alternative, insights thereby further justifying your research project by elaborating the nature of its predicted contribution to the field.

However it is important to emphasize that the outcome of your literature review should vary according to whether or not your intention is to conduct deductive or inductive empirical research. With a deductive approach the role of the literature review is to critically review existing knowledge and to enable an exploration of the relationships between different variables or constructs of interest. The primary aim is to develop hypotheses from the review that are testable by collecting data (see Chapter 3). Thus a literature review may end with articulation hypotheses or predictions which you wish to test out in the situation under study. Indeed at the end of the literature review you should be able to say: 'This is the exact study which needs doing in order to move this area forward'. However with inductive research the purposes of the literature review are rather different. Whilst the issues of contextualization and justification in relation to an existing body of knowledge outlined by the literature review are equally important, inductive approaches are concerned with developing a pre-understanding of the substantive area of interest that provides a starting point for research in terms of what are called sensitizing concepts (see Chapter 7). In a sense these are foreshadowed guidelines for research which may be of help to the researcher during fieldwork rather than the precise hypotheses for testing of the deductive approach.

Good literature reviews will vary significantly in style and content. However poor literature reviews tend to share one or more of the following problems:

- A lack of organization and structure;
- A lack of focus and coherence indicating that the aims of the research have not been thorough and thus the topic has not been clearly defined;
- Much too repetitive and verbose rather than being incisive in its description and critique of the literature;
- A failure to cite influential research in the field under investigation;
- A failure to outline recent developments in the field under investigation;
- A failure to critically evaluate cited research thereby become a mere description of the literature rather than a review;
- Citing irrelevant research because there is no focus to the intended research;
- An over-dependence on a restricted number of literature sources;
- An over-use of web-based references and hence the danger of using literature of a dubious provenance.

At this stage it is appropriate to make three important cautionary points. First, it is not uncommon for researchers to become bogged down in reading the literature so that it not only becomes a means of avoiding the tough process of writing but also often seems to become unhelpful in advancing original ideas, as the student becomes submerged in those of other people and thereby loses their own power and authority. Accordingly, the state of the literature search needs to be kept under close review, in consultation with supervisors and colleagues, to avoid becoming over concerned with other people's work at the expense of creativity.

Second, writing literature reviews can be a demanding exercise, for a critical review should provide the reader with a statement of the state of the art and major questions and issues in the field under consideration. Often they seem to be uncritical catalogues of all that has been found which vaguely relates to the topic regardless of the merits of the work. What is required is an insightful evaluation of what is known which leads naturally to a clarification of the gaps in the field and the way in which the proposed research is intended to fill them.

Third, some of the above problems can be avoided by developing a flexible structure for the review and beginning writing at the outset. Trying to read everything then trying to write it up is a daunting task because it is unlikely you will appreciate the significance or possible location in the review of what you read without some point of reference provided by a working structure. Therefore it is most important when embarking on a literature search to ensure that everything that is read is noted systematically at the time. After quite a short period the likelihood of remembering is remote and much time may be wasted at later stages of the research, for example in locating a precise reference that has not been recorded when read. Such records are best kept on a card index or, even better, on a computerized file so that they can be searched, added to and sorted in multiple ways as required. This is important because references from the literature, which has been read, guide the researcher to new sources – no new references appearing in literature sources imply that the search for literature is nearing an end. Once a system is decided upon it is advisable to stick to it.

Conclusions

In summary, in order to make a start on a research topic it is necessary to identify the broad area in which the work will be conducted and then to focus down into a manageable topic. Whilst many students struggle with this early stage of the research process it is vital to develop a coherent and justified focus for the research which is viable – without this, all subsequent stages of the research are in effect jeopardized. The next step is to make a plan by which stages in the research will be achieved. Alongside these early activities it will be necessary to search and review the literature relating to the field under study to look for gaps in the broad area and to secure an early appreciation of work already completed or under way. Whilst at this early stage the literature review needs to be geared to justifying the focus of your research and demonstrating that you appreciate what work has already been done in your chosen area, it is important to realize that the literature is relevant also to various other stages in the research processes (see Table 2.1) and often a literature review may need to be considerably redeveloped as research progresses and issues of concern might change.

We may now turn to the primary focus of this book: the approaches to management research, their choice and justification.

Further reading

At a fairly elementary level and designed primarily for education and social science students, Bell (2005) is a very useful text for helping the beginner researcher covers such issues from planning, reviewing and keeping records of the literature to choosing a topic and negotiating access to research sites. Further excellent advice and

guidelines are also given in Punch (2006) who considers issues such as: developing research proposals; planning a research strategy; and a discussion of research ethics. Also Locke et al. (2007) give some helpful insight into writing research proposals for different audiences whether the research is quantitative or qualitative. Similarly, Howard and Sharp (1983) is especially helpful in introducing systematic techniques to many aspects of getting research projects under way. It is particularly helpful as its examples are drawn mainly from management research. Meanwhile Phelps et al. (2007) provide much well thought through practical advice for postgraduates about dealing with the everyday issues that arise during research.

Focused specifically on Ph.D. research, and drawing its examples mainly from management and business, is Phillips and Pugh's classical text (1987). This is written largely as advice to the student and is particularly helpful on time management, managing the supervisor and the procedural tasks necessary for successful completion. Another particularly useful book on Ph.D. research is Rudestam and Newton (1992). This American text gives some excellent advice to doctoral students about coping with complexities that arise due to the interaction of both content and process issues. Likewise, Oliver's (2008) book gives useful suggestions for actually writing up research in the form of a thesis with excellent advice about preparing for the oral examination and publishing findings.

A very comprehensive book that takes literature reviewing to a fine art is Cooper (1989). Whilst the book is concerned with integrative literature reviews in the broad social sciences it should also prove helpful to the management researcher. It uses a phase model of the research process to discuss different aspects of literature reviewing. Students should read the introduction at least, and then further chapters according to needs. Excellent advice and comprehensive guidance about dealing with the literature is provided by Hart's companion books on doing a literature search (2001) and then writing a literature review (1998). Practical and detailed advice on all aspects of using the internet for undertaking literature searches is provided by O'Dochartaigh (2001). Finally, if you want to look at how literature reviews are done by professional researchers there are two excellent journals that are devoted to publishing such work, both of which are usually available electronically: *International Journal of Management Reviews* and *Academy of Management Review*.

The following recommended readings are available on the companion website:

- Buchanan, D.A. and Bryman, A. (2007) Contextualizing methods choice in organizational research, *Organization Research Methods*, 10(3): 483–501.
- Tranfield, D., Denyer, D. and Smart, P. (2003) Towards a methodology for developing evidence-informed management knowledge by means of systematic review, *British Journal of Management*, 14(3): 207–22.