

## 2 Before you begin to begin

### Where do you stand?

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Before you can begin to research, you need to know certain things, the first of which is the kind of researcher you are. This will affect everything from recognising the research problem to the way you undertake the research to the way that you write it up.

If you have been provided with a research methods course during your Masters programme, you will have been introduced to an alien vocabulary – ontology, epistemology, axiology, paradigm, positivist, phenomenological – describing concepts that in themselves are complex but not complicated, and about which you may already have thought, but not in those words.

But for those specialised words to make sense to you, you need to recognise their relevance to you as a researcher.

When you have given some thought to the information provided in this chapter, you will be in a better position to assess what kind of dissertation will work for you. I talk you through the various kinds, leading to a description of what to expect of a research proposal and the other things you need to think about at the outset. Remember that you are aiming for a well-written dissertation, and writing well emerges from clear

## 8 DOING YOUR DISSERTATION IN BUSINESS AND MANAGEMENT

thinking – and that, in turn, depends on clear understanding of what you are doing, and why you are doing it.

### What kind of a researcher are you?

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In the main, there are five broad types of researcher, which I call the detective, the doctor, the explorer, the insider and the outsider. These are what the textbooks call ‘ideal types’ – the perfect example that doesn’t actually exist in our imperfect world.

#### *The researcher as detective*



A detective is a person who solves crimes from the uncovering of clues. The researcher as detective solves problems from the discovery of indicators relevant to the problem.

The researcher detective knows what the research problem is – why is absenteeism so high in firm X?, what happened to make that change programme go so horribly wrong?, when did firm Y begin to show signs of being in trouble?, where can firm Z find more suppliers of raw materials?, which is the best computer system to buy? who was responsible for that decision?, how do effective teams produce their output? – and needs to uncover and discover the clues that will solve the problem. (The next chapter deals in more detail with the issue of the research problem.) The clues then need to be put together in the form of evidence, so that others are convinced that the correct solution to the research puzzle has been found.

#### *The researcher as doctor*



The doctor is presented with a variety of symptoms, and has to diagnose the disease before the appropriate medication can be prescribed. The researcher as doctor is aware of

symptoms – the high absenteeism in a firm, the resistance to a change process, the atmosphere of stress and tension in a department – and needs to diagnose what is ailing the firm, so as to prescribe appropriate medicine that will work and cure the problem. The research doctor is concerned to find the reasons behind the research question.

### *The researcher as explorer*



The explorer enters unknown territory, maps what is found, and returns with information previously unknown. The explorer will tend to provide rich and full descriptions of the new things discovered. The use that is made of what the explorer finds is generally not the explorer's concern, which is about novelty, and first-time knowledge. Often, it is the journey itself, into and through the unknown, that is of higher value than any of the discoveries made while exploring. The story of the exploration is what holds the reader's interest, with the description of the discoveries taking a less significant place in the narrative – whoever the readers – your supervisor(s), your examiner(s), or other Masters students.

### *The hybrid researcher*

Whichever ideal type you are closest to, it is more likely that you will approach research with aspects of all of them. It may be that your research problem requires 'detective' skills at the beginning, but then moves on to need 'doctor' skills in order to provide as complete a solution as possible.

But it is nevertheless helpful to bring to the front of your mind the researcher type which is your dominant approach. It will make it easier to choose your topic and to conduct your research if you know about your own researcher inclinations.

**10** DOING YOUR DISSERTATION IN BUSINESS AND MANAGEMENT*The researcher as insider*

Separate from the ideal types, though it can be combined with them, is the issue of where you place yourself in the insider/outsider split. If you are involved in researching your own area of work in your place of employment, you are doing one of the two types of insider research. You are the truest insider in that you are examining yourself, your motives, your methods, your inputs and outputs, and the consequences (intended or not) of what you do. Not much research is undertaken in this mode in management and business as there are problems of lack of objectivity and bias that need more skill to resolve than a novice researcher like you can comfortably cope with.

The other type of insider research has you as the researcher trying to find out what is 'inside' the people you are researching. You are attempting to understand the thinking or behavioural patterns of people in organizations, in order to consider what they really mean when they say or do something. When undertaking this kind of research you might either be watching others, or be working beside them and watching them at the same time. You then have the ethical problem of whether or not to tell the people you are working alongside that you are watching what they do and say, with an ulterior motive of researching in mind.

Most insider research tends to be reported in narrative form. There are likely to be 'number' – percentages or ranges of counts – but these are minor aspects, supporting the narrative account.

*The researcher as outsider*

As an acknowledged outsider, someone who has come in from elsewhere to undertake research, you have freedoms and constraints that the insider does not share. You can also be an outsider even if you are involved in researching your own place of work, because, although you are inside the firm, you may be researching a part of the firm in which you do not work.

The outsider's viewpoint makes it easier to establish facts, rather than meanings, and to analyse them quantitatively, rather than explain them in a narrative format.

## **Research itself as inside or outside**

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The type of research that you do can also be inside (emic) or outside (etic). This distinction is one of the important issues in cross-cultural research. 'Inside' research approaches are concerned with how the 'inhabitants' conceptualise the world. The researcher studies behaviour from within the system, examines only one culture or system or procedure, using internal criteria to discover the structures being researched. 'Outside' (etic) research is more concerned with universals, so the behaviour is studied from a position outside the system, many cultures, systems or procedures are compared, and the criteria used to create the structures are considered to be absolute and universal.

## **What is your overall approach to research?**

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Which kind of researcher are you most comfortable being? You really need to know. While a great deal of research is conducted in a state of anxiety, if you aren't aware of yourself as a researcher, you may find yourself feeling even more on edge all the time you are planning and doing the research, because it doesn't fit properly with your natural way of investigating things.

You probably aren't the 'ideal type', but will like searching for clues, while also having an interest in travelling around unknown territory and, at the same time, watching out for the way the inhabitants of that region behave. But logic has it that you will have a preference, and you owe it

## 12 DOING YOUR DISSERTATION IN BUSINESS AND MANAGEMENT

to yourself to clarify what that preference for researching is before you begin to plan it.

### **Researcher type and dissertation type**

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While there is a common sense connection between the type of researcher you are and the type of dissertation you will be inclined to produce, this link can sometimes be somewhat unclear. For instance, the implication is that the Detective and the Doctor already know what the research problem is, while the Explorer may know, or may not. These descriptions are therefore only aids to suggest routes to researcher self-definition.

### **Research strategy/methodology**

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If the author of your research methods textbook has been careful, he/she will have called the overall perspective or philosophy of researching by its proper name of 'methodology'. Confusion arises when either the textbook's author or your supervisor incorrectly calls the techniques of researching – your research methods – by the term 'methodology'. This can result in misunderstanding and confusion on both your parts.

Methodology is the philosophical framework within which the research is conducted, or the foundation upon which the research is based. You might also hear the phrase 'research strategy' used in place of 'methodology' and it means the same thing – the basic philosophical orientation of the research. Put another way, methodology is the rationale for the particular methods you use in your researching, and in that type of research in general. If your dissertation regulations require you to provide a section called methodology, then check whether you are being asked to explain the general approach you have adopted for defining your research problem, and for collecting your information and analysing or interpreting it' or whether you are expected to outline and justify the techniques you have used to collect your data.

You may be instructed to detail your methodology in your research proposal, and you will then correctly provide information about your views of reality, knowledge and values. But you may get the proposal flung back at you because ‘You haven’t mentioned your methodology’, when it hasn’t been made clear to you that this particular supervisor’s interpretation of the word ‘methodology’ is inaccurate and you were supposed to list down the specific techniques (like interviews) you will be using to collect your information’ or the techniques (like tables of frequencies) you will be using to analyse the information once you have collected it.

Therefore, a word of warning here. Make sure that you and your supervisor are using the term ‘methodology’ in the same way – it will save endless hassle and wasted time and effort.

As I have suggested, your methodology is made up of three strands – considerations about what is real, what is knowledge or knowable, and what values underpin research. Because views about these three strands are not universally held, you need to know what your own views are so that you can explain where you are coming from, and, therefore, why your research has the ‘shape’ that it has.

Academics are accustomed to using the technical terms for their perspectives on reality (ontology), knowledge (epistemology) and values (axiology) and so you will be expected to use these terms instead of the more everyday words that are their equivalent.

Your methodology will tend to be either concerned with abstractions and concepts (theoretical) or concerned with facts and techniques (empirical). The two major divisions of empirical methodology are positivism and interpretivism. Your textbook should discuss these both as methodologies and also as research techniques. Positivism tends to lend itself towards undertaking research using quantitative techniques and interpretivism towards qualitative techniques. However, you will find that you will

**14** DOING YOUR DISSERTATION IN BUSINESS AND MANAGEMENT

probably need both quantitative and qualitative techniques in order to progress your research.

### *Reality/Ontology*

While we might have some difficulty in defining what we mean by 'real', we all know what is real when we come across it. But because your definition of reality may differ from other people you know, before you begin to research, you need to have the issue of 'the real' clear in your own mind. You are going to need to explain to your readers, either explicitly in so many words or implicitly in your dissertation's tone and perspective, where you are coming from. If you don't do so, readers of your dissertation may legitimately assume that their (possibly very different) view of reality is also yours. This misunderstanding can permeate the reading of your entire dissertation and result in an undervaluing of your research, and a subsequent lower evaluation of your contribution.

Put simply, reality is either 'out there' (objectively external to you), or 'in here' (subjectively within yourself), or it is 'in here' because it has been brought in from 'out there'. And it can get tricky because, while it is possible to justify a position about the material world and where it 'really' exists, it is more difficult to justify the reality of abstractions such as dreams or justice. It is clear that the view you take about what you consider to be real affects everything you do, including your research.

### *Knowledge/Epistemology*

Assumptions about the nature of knowledge underpin any approach to research. If you don't consider something to be knowledge or to be worth knowing, it is logically then not worth researching. It is only common sense to say that research is about knowledge – research is about what



you know, what you recognise as worth knowing, and what you do about the knowledge you have recognised as worth knowing.

While there are elements of the absurd or the ridiculous in the epistemology battles fought out between researchers and academics of different schools of thought, the matter is a serious one. The study of the grounds upon which knowledge is based influences recognition of its limits and validity.

A simple example: if you consider that reality is 'out there' and can be observed and counted, then knowledge is that which has been observed and counted, and anything else that cannot be observed or counted is logically not knowledge, or may even be impossible to know.

### *Values/Axiology*

There was a time when social science research (of which business and management research is a part) was considered to be objective and value-free, that is, the personal values of the researcher aren't biased or prejudiced, and he or she doesn't undertake research with preconceived notions or foregone conclusions. The classic style of scientific research is that it is objective research, based on clear-cut academic disciplines. It is accepted that consultancy (sometimes called applied research), which researchers tend to be paid to undertake, has values and knowledge systems concerned with practical relevance. This is because, unlike classical scientific research, applied research is rooted in political and social contexts, and in the needs of practitioners.

What you will be doing, albeit unpaid, is applied research, and it is a value-laden, sometimes very political process. Some of those values will be your own, and some will be those of your organisation or supervisors which you might find expedient to adopt for the time being.

**16** DOING YOUR DISSERTATION IN BUSINESS AND MANAGEMENT

In your dissertation, while you don't need to be explicit about your values, you do need to be clear for yourself, what these values are. You may come across dubious practices in your research, for example, and you need to have an idea of what you intend to do about it.

For instance, one of my students discovered that his firm kept two sets of accounts, one for the Internal Revenue and tax-paying, and one for the owner of the firm and non-tax-paying. His response was to ignore this fact while doing his Masters (his boss was paying his fees and allowing him time to do his degree), and after he received his qualification he left the firm. I don't know whether or not he reported the firm for its false accounting.

If you are asked to provide a paragraph about values, it is likely to be a statement that you are aware that you can't be entirely objective and impartial in your judgements, but that you are doing all you can to be as unbiased as you possibly can.

### *Ethics*

And values naturally lead on to ethics. While you don't need to go overboard on the ethics issue – you are not going to be experimenting on someone who is sick or too young to understand what you are doing – you do need to think about the assorted ethical issues that your research will create. Approaching this from a negative point of view, the last thing you want is to be sued for alleged misconduct should the people who participate in your research feel that their rights and dignity have been infringed.

In a sense, ethical behaviour in research isn't complicated. You should avoid actions or questions that can be viewed as threats to your participants' health, values or dignity. One of the ways to achieve this is to get the informed consent of your participants. Explain who you are –

a student undertaking research for a dissertation – what it is you are researching, and why you wish them to provide their views or opinions. They also need to know what you intend to do with the information that they provide, so that they can consent to that. Never deliberately mislead participants about the purpose or nature of the research. And your participants should be informed at the outset that they can withdraw from participating at any moment if they wish to do so. Indeed, they have the right to withdraw their consent retrospectively and to require you to destroy the data that you have collected with their participation. Let them know how to contact you, should they wish to do so after their participation.

Offer confidentiality and anonymity, and mean it. Do not disclose who your participants are without their specific permission to do so. If they have provided you with information that is personal and/or private, they must be given the genuine assurance that the information will be protected and they will not be identified as the provider of that information.

Your business school may have a formal requirement that you fill in a form about your ethical approach to your research which will be sent to a Research Officer or Research Committee to be approved before you can begin your data collection. You may need to build the time that this will take into your preparations.

Have a look at Appendix 2 which says a little more about the ethics issue.

## Research

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Before you begin to begin, you have two more chores to undertake. The first is to find out what your business school considers ‘research’ to be, and the second – dealt with in the next section – is to be sure what the business school means by ‘dissertation’.

## 18 DOING YOUR DISSERTATION IN BUSINESS AND MANAGEMENT

'Research' is simply another word for 'enquiry', though admittedly, it is a special kind of enquiry. Research is the process of systematically gathering and analysing or interpreting information in order to gain knowledge and understanding. Researching involves two skills which are based on normal, everyday human activities – talking to people or watching them – and you have already had a lifetime's experience of doing this.

Research into business and management frequently (though not always) focuses on people and their behaviour or attitudes. It tends to involve a specific question, decision or problem facing a specific organisation, and obtains information about these. It sometimes tests ideas about the causes of a problem and is a systematic way of achieving the understanding and information necessary for some decision or action that will result from what is discovered during the research process.

### Student research

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You are no doubt well aware that you are not an academic and that, while research is generally the same thing whether undertaken by a student or an experienced academic, there are constraints on you-as-student imposed by the particular environment in which you are working.

You are well aware that:

- **while you are ostensibly free to choose any topic that interests you, you may have a topic imposed on you because of the availability of supervisors and their interests and workloads**
- **your research has to be completed within strict deadlines, and extensions may be difficult to get**
- **within the time allotted for the research, you have to learn how to do it while actually doing it**

- **you may find that, for whatever reason, you don't get on with your supervisor, and you have to cope with the problems that brings**
- **you are not only expected to add to knowledge but also to demonstrate that you have acquired competence in undertaking research**
- **the degree of originality required of you is never really made clear.**

The only comfort that I can give you is that these constraints are not only experienced by all Masters students, but they are also overcome, admittedly sometimes with great effort, but overcome and triumphed over, nevertheless.