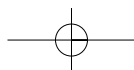
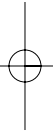
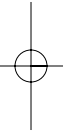
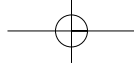


Part One



Part One of this book is concerned with two ideas that will recur again and again during the course of this book—the idea of research strategy and the idea of research design. Chapter 1 outlines a variety of considerations that impinge on the practice of business and management research and relates these to the issue of research strategy. Two research strategies are identified: quantitative and qualitative research. Chapter 2 identifies the different kinds of research design that are employed in business research. Chapters 3 and 4 are concerned with providing advice to students on some of the issues that they need to consider if they have to prepare a dissertation based upon a relatively small-scale research project. Chapter 3 deals with planning and formulating research questions, while Chapter 4 is about how to get started in reviewing the literature. Chapter 5 deals with ethics in business research, including the principles and considerations that need to be taken into account in designing a small-scale research project.

These chapters provide some basic conceptual building blocks that you will return to at many points in the book. Some of the issues in Chapters 1 and 2 may seem remote from the issues of research practice dealt with in Chapters 3, 4 and 5, but they are in fact important and fundamental aspects of how we think about business research.





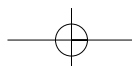
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Business research strategies

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4 Business research strategies



Chapter guide

The chief aim of this chapter is to show that a variety of considerations enter into the process of doing business research. The distinction that is commonly drawn among writers on and practitioners of business research between *quantitative research* and *qualitative research* is explored in relation to these considerations. This chapter explores:

- the nature of the relationship between theory and research, in particular whether theory guides research (known as a *deductive* approach) or whether theory is an outcome of research (known as an *inductive* approach);
- *epistemological issues*—that is, ones to do with what is regarded as appropriate knowledge about the social world; one of the most crucial aspects is the question of whether or not a natural science model of the research process is suitable for the study of the social world;
- *ontological issues*—that is, ones to do with whether the social world is regarded as something external to social actors or as something that people are in the process of fashioning;
- the ways in which these issues relate to the widely used distinction in the social sciences between two types of *research strategy*: quantitative and qualitative research; there is also a preliminary discussion, which will be followed up in Chapter 21, that suggests that, while quantitative and qualitative research represent different approaches to business research, we should be wary of driving a wedge between them;
- the ways in which *values* and *practical issues* also impinge on the business research process.



Introduction

This book is about business research. However, business research does not exist in a vacuum. Not only is it shaped by what is going on in the real world of business and management, it is also shaped by many of the intellectual traditions that shape the social sciences at large. In this chapter we explore some of these intellectual traditions in the form of some of the philosophical ideas that exert an influence on how business research can and should be conducted and how the nature of organizations is perceived. It is these issues that provide the central focus of this chapter. However, these are sometimes quite difficult issues but they are crucial to appreciating the bases of business research.

This book attempts to equip people who have some knowledge about management and business with an

appreciation of how research in this area is conducted and what the research process involves. This latter project involves situating business research in the context of the social science disciplines, such as sociology, psychology, anthropology, and economics, which inform the study of business and its specific fields, which include marketing, HRM strategy, organizational behaviour, accounting and finance, industrial relations, and operational research.

Two points are of particular relevance here. First, the methods of management and business research are closely tied to different visions of how organizational reality should be studied. Methods are not simply neutral tools: they are linked to the ways in which social scientists envision the connection between different viewpoints about the nature of social reality and how it should be

examined. However, it is possible to overstate this point. While methods are not neutral, they are not entirely suffused with intellectual inclinations either. Secondly, there is the question of how research methods and practice connect with the wider social scientific enterprise. Research data are invariably collected in relation to something. The 'something' is often a pressing organizational problem, such as the effect of mergers and acquisitions on corporate culture or the impact of the introduction of new technology on employee motivation. Another scenario occurs when research is done on a topic when a specific opportunity arises. For example, the NASA space shuttle *Challenger* disaster in 1986 stimulated business and management research into the decision-making processes and group dynamics that had led to the decision to launch the shuttle despite indications that there were significant safety problems (Shrivasta et al. 1988; Vaughan 1990). Yet another stimulus for research can arise out of personal experiences. Lofland and Lofland (1995) note that many research publications emerge out of the researcher's personal biography. Certainly, Bryman traces his interest in Disney theme parks back to a visit to Disney World in Florida in 1991 (Bryman 1995, 1999), while his interest in the representation of social science research in the mass media (Fenton, Bryman, and Deacon 1998) can almost certainly be attributed to a difficult experience with the press reported in Haslam and Bryman (1994). Similarly, the experience of having been involved in the implementation of a quality management initiative in an NHS hospital trust prompted Bell to explore the meaning

of badging in an organizational context (Bell et al. 2002). Finally, research data are also collected in relation to social scientific theory and this raises the issue of the nature of the relationship between theory and research.

The nature of business research

It would be easy to 'cut to the chase' and explore the nature of methods in business research and provide the reader with advice on how best to choose between and implement them. After all, many people might expect a book with the title of the present one to be concerned mainly with the ways in which the different methods in the business researcher's arsenal can be employed. But the practice of business research does not exist in a bubble, hermetically sealed off from the social sciences and the various intellectual allegiances that their practitioners hold. In particular, the diverse nature of management and business scholarship has led to considerable disagreement about how its research claims ought to be evaluated. Hence, some writers have suggested that management research can be understood only as an applied field because it is concerned not only with understanding the nature of organizations but also with solving problems that are related to managerial practice (see Key concept 1.1). Tranfield and Starkey (1998) argue that much management research has lost touch with the concerns and interests of practitioners and that management and business researchers must relearn how to be responsive to them in order for their research to retain a value and a purpose.



Key concept 1.1 What is the difference between research and practice?

An interesting point about the relationship between theory and practice in business and management research is made by Gummesson (2000), who sees academic researchers and management consultants as groups of knowledge workers who each place a different emphasis on theory and practice. 'Backed by bits and pieces of theory, the consultant contributes to practice, whereas the scholar contributes to theory supported by fragments of practice' (2000: 9), but fundamentally their roles are closely related. Gummesson sees researchers and consultants as involved in addressing problems that concern management, thereby reinforcing the view that the value of both groups is determined by their ability to convince the business community that their findings are relevant and useful.

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However, other writers would suggest that management and business research is too concerned with lengthy 'fact-finding' exercises and is insufficiently guided by theoretical concerns. They would argue that application is not a primary purpose to which management research should be directed (Burrell 1997). For these scholars, making research relevant to managerial practice ought not to be the main aim of academic study (Clegg 2002; Hinings and Greenwood 2002). They believe that research should not be dictated by non-academic interests, such as professional associations and government agencies, who may seek to influence its focus and guide its development in a way that is 'useful' to current practice but susceptible to the whim of current management fads and fashions. Bell and Bryman (2003) suggest that the applied nature of management and business research has influenced the development of the field in a manner that has made it overly pragmatic and susceptible to users' agendas.

A further debate that has influenced our understanding of the role of management and business research stems from the thesis developed by Gibbons et al. (1994) concerning the way that scientific knowledge is produced. Gibbons et al. suggest that the process of knowledge production in contemporary society falls into two contrasting categories or types, which they describe as 'mode 1' and 'mode 2' knowledge production. These are summarized as follows:

- *Mode 1*. Within this traditional, university-based model, knowledge production is driven primarily by an academic agenda. Discoveries tend to build upon existing knowledge in a linear fashion. The model makes a distinction between theoretically pure and applied knowledge, the latter being where theoretical insights are translated into practice. However, only limited emphasis is placed on the practical dissemination of knowledge because the academic community is defined as the most important audience or consumer of 'mode 1' knowledge.
- *Mode 2*. This model draws attention to the role of *trans-disciplinarity* in research, which it assumes is driven by a process that causes the boundaries of single contributing disciplines to be exceeded. Findings are closely related to context and may not easily be replicated, so knowledge production is less of a linear process. Moreover, the production of knowledge is not

confined to academic institutions. Instead, it involves academics, policy makers, and practitioners who apply a broad set of skills and experiences in order to tackle a shared problem. This means that knowledge is disseminated more rapidly and findings are more readily exploited in order to achieve practical advantage.

Although mode 2 research is intended to exist alongside mode 1, rather than to replace it, some researchers have suggested that management and business research is more suited to a 'mode 2' model of knowledge production (Tranfield and Starkey 1998).

These debates frame a series of questions about the nature and purpose of management and business research, which any new researcher in this field must deal with. For example:

- What is the aim or function of business research?
- Is it conducted primarily in order to find ways of improving organizational performance through increased effectiveness and efficiency?
- Or is it mainly about increasing our understanding of how organizations work their impact on individuals and on society?
- Who are the audiences of business research?
- Is business research conducted primarily for managers and, if not, for who else in organizations is it conducted?
- Or is it done in order to further the academic development of business and management as a field or even as a discipline?

These questions are the subject of considerable ongoing academic debate about the nature and status of business research. Being aware of them is important in understanding what influences your choice of research topic and how you address it. Another way of understanding this issue is by thinking about the practices of scholars who do business and management research. There are four points that can be made in relation to this.

1. In order to evaluate the quality of management and business research it is necessary to know as much as possible about researchers' *own* role in this process—including how they collected and analysed the data and the theoretical perspective that informed their interpretation of it. This understanding relies on examination of methods used by business researchers, which is why,

throughout this book, we have used real examples of published research to illustrate how researchers deal with and justify these methodological choices.

2. This leads to a second point in relation to the use of examples. Business research methods tend on the whole to be more eclectically used and explained in less detail than in some other social sciences such as sociology. Perhaps this is due to the emergent nature of the field or because it draws from such a diverse range of disciplines, but in practice it means that novice researchers can sometimes find it difficult to identify examples of existing research that can be used to inform their own practice. One of the purposes of our use of examples in this book is therefore to draw attention to the range of methodological approaches that business researchers have taken in a way that can be understood by those who are new to this field of study.
3. The third point relates to the kinds of methods used in business research. In some instances, it is hard to identify examples of the use of particular research methods, while in others, such as the case study method, there are numerous studies to choose from. We believe, however, that this can provide an opportunity for new researchers to make use of less popular or less commonly used methods in order to gain insight into a research problem. In other words, we hope that, through reading this book, business students will possibly be encouraged to use research methods that are less commonly used, as well as those that have a more established reputation.
4. Finally, despite some of the limitations of business research, in terms of the availability of examples that illustrate the use of various research methods, we have tried to confine our choice of examples to the field of business and management. This is partly because by getting to know how other researchers have approached the study of business it is possible to build up an understanding of how the use of research methods in this field might be improved and developed in the future.



Theory and research

Characterizing the nature of the link between theory and research is by no means a straightforward matter. There are several issues at stake here, but two stand out in particular. First, there is the question of what form of theory one is talking about. Secondly, there is the matter of whether data are collected to test or to build theories.

What type of theory?

The term 'theory' is used in a variety of ways, but its most common meaning is as an explanation of observed regularities, to explain, for example, why women and ethnic minorities are under-represented in higher-paid managerial positions, or why the degree of alienation caused by the introduction of new technology varies according to the methods of production that are involved. However, such theories do not in themselves constitute a theoretical *perspective*, which is characterized by a higher level of abstraction in relation to research findings. Examples of

this kind of theory include structural-functionalism, symbolic interactionism, critical theory, poststructuralism, structuration theory, and so on. What we see here is a distinction between theories of the former type, which are often called *theories of the middle range* (Merton 1967), and *grand theories*, which operate at a more abstract and general level.

According to Merton, grand theories offer few indications to researchers as to how they might guide or influence the collection of empirical evidence. So, if someone wanted to test a theory or to draw an inference from it that could be tested, the level of abstractness is likely to be so great that the researcher would find it difficult to make the necessary links with the real world. For research purposes, then, Merton argued that grand theories are of limited use in connection with social research, although, as the example in Research in focus 1.2 suggests, an abstract theory like structuration theory (Giddens 1984) can have some pay-off in research terms.

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Research in focus 1.2 Grand theory and researching project-based organizations

Giddens's (1984) structuration theory represents an attempt to bridge the gulf between notions of structure and agency in social life and is suggested to have the potential to overcome the dichotomy within organizational studies between the 'structural' perspectives of traditional theories of bureaucracy and the 'interactional' perspectives that emphasize informal processes of talk and action (Ranson, Hinings, and Greenwood 1980). The theory has substantially informed a number of empirical studies of managerial control, agency, and strategy, including Pettigrew's (1985) study of strategic change at ICI, which portrays environmental structures as both enabling and constraining human action. By combining a focus on the role of executive leadership and managerial action with a concern for the contexts in which managers work, Pettigrew suggests that the actions of managers are framed by the business and economic environment encountered by the organization.

Bresnen, Goussevskaia, and Swan (2004) use structuration theory in their analysis of project-based organization by applying it to a longitudinal case study of a construction firm involved in implementing a new managerial initiative to understand how the relationship between structural form and individual agency influences the diffusion and enactment of managerial knowledge. They argue that 'project management practices can be seen as the outcome of a complex, recursive relationship between structural attributes and individual agency, in which actors (in this case project managers and project team members) draw upon, enact and hence reproduce (and, under certain circumstances modify) the structural properties of the system in which they are embedded' (2004: 1540). Their analysis highlights the influence of the structural conditions of decentralization that created circumstances in which individual actors could act upon the new managerial initiative by drawing on shared local perspectives. They conclude that 'the rules of signification and legitimation . . . gave project managers considerable latitude in being able to choose how to respond to the introduction of the new practices . . . project managers were able to transform the initiative and the implementation process with responses like "playing the scoring game"' (2004: 1549). Their analysis suggests that the diffusion of new managerial knowledge in project-based organizations is shaped by a complex interplay between structural conditions and actors' social practices.

Instead, middle-range theories are 'intermediate to general theories of social systems which are too remote from particular classes of social behavior, organization and change to account for what is observed and to those detailed orderly descriptions of particulars that are not generalized at all' (Merton 1967: 39).

By and large, then, it is not grand theory that typically guides management and business research. Middle-range theories are much more likely to be the focus of empirical enquiry. In fact, Merton formulated the idea as a means of bridging what he saw as a growing gulf between theory (in the sense of grand theory) and empirical findings. This is not to say that there were no middle-range theories before he wrote: there definitely were, but what Merton did was to seek to clarify what is meant by

'theory' when social scientists write about the relationship between theory and research.

Middle-range theories, unlike grand ones, operate in a limited domain. Whether it is a perspective on strategic choice or labour process theory (see Research in focus 1.3), they vary somewhat in the purpose of their application. In other words, they fall somewhere between grand theories and empirical findings. They represent attempts to understand and explain a limited aspect of social life. For example, contingency theory has been used widely in management and business research to explain the interrelationships among subsystems, as well as the relationship between the organization and its environment. The theory relies on a number of assumptions that guide research: first, there is no one best way to organize;

secondly, any particular way of organizing is not equally effective under all conditions; and, thirdly, in order to be most effective, organizational structures should be appropriate to the type of work and the environmental conditions faced by the organization (Schoonhoven 1981). However, contingency theory has been applied in different ways and for different purposes, by different writers. Some, like Lawrence and Lorsch (1967), have used it descriptively to show that factors within the environment must be

taken into account. Others, for example in the field of leadership, have applied the theory in a normative sense, adopting a solution-seeking focus and providing a guide to managerial action based on 'best fit' in a particular situation (e.g. Fiedler 1967). A normative stance suggests that, although factors within the environment should be taken into account, it is up to managers to make decisions about how they respond to these in order to achieve the impact on organizational performance that they want.



Research in focus 1.3

Labour process theory: an example of a contested middle-range theory

In the sociology of work, labour process theory can be regarded as a middle-range theory. The publication of *Labor and Monopoly Capital* (Braverman 1974) inaugurated a stream of thinking and research around the idea of the labour process and in particular on the degree to which there has been an inexorable trend towards greater and greater control over the manual worker and deskilling of manual labour. A conference volume of much of this work was published as *Labour Process Theory* (Knights and Willmott 1990). P. Thompson (1989) described the theory as having four elements: the principle that the labour process entails the extraction of surplus value; the need for capitalist enterprises constantly to transform production processes; the quest for control over labour; and the essential conflict between capital and labour. Labour process theory has been the focus of considerable empirical research (e.g. Knights and Collinson 1985) and the focus of considerable ongoing debate within business and management studies, most recently about whether or not labour process theory can account for the conditions of greater autonomy and discretion associated with 'knowledge work' (Sewell 2005).

Sewell believes that the central problem of labour process theory relates to the 'indeterminacy of labour', which he describes as the gap between an employee's capacity to labour and what they actually end up doing—the job of management control being to reduce this gap. He argues that under conditions of knowledge work the focus has changed from a struggle over the indeterminacy of labour to a struggle over the indeterminacy of knowledge. 'The vision of workers being trusted to devise their own work tasks is . . . at odds with the traditional conception of the dynamics of control' (2005: 691). Thus the fear that drives management under conditions of knowledge work is that employees are holding back their knowledge, rather than their labour, from the organization. By going beyond the traditional preoccupation of labour process theorists with the control of physical effort, Sewell argues that we are able to subject the managerial notion of empowerment to critique. However, in a response to Sewell, Thompson and Ackroyd (2005) argue that Sewell's representation of labour process theory is a 'shallow misrepresentation of this "classical" canon' (2005: 705). They argue instead that nowhere in this literature has there been a view that physical labour is the focus of managerial control. They go on to suggest that the distinction between mind and body, or hand and head, made by Sewell reproduces a crude dualism that labour process theorists have long since abandoned. This debate illustrates the extent of contestation that has arisen in recent years between the different academic groups involved in the sociology of work regarding labour process theory.

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However, even the grand/middle-range distinction does not entirely clarify the issues involved in asking the deceptively simple question of ‘what is theory?’. This is because the term ‘theory’ is frequently used in a manner that means little more than the background literature in an area of social enquiry. To a certain extent, this point can be taken to apply to contingency theory mentioned above. For example, Schoonhoven (1981) suggests that it is not a theory at all, in the sense of being a well-developed set of interrelated propositions. Willmott (1990) suggests that contingency theory is based on empirical evidence without any acknowledgement of the social theories that affect the political realities of organizations, and so it is unable to deal with complex organizational problems.

In many cases, the relevant background literature relating to a topic fuels the focus of an article or book and thereby acts as the equivalent of a theory. In Ghobadian and Gallea’s (1997) article on Total Quality Management (TQM) and the competitive position of small or medium-sized enterprises (SMEs), there are no, or virtually no, allusions to theories. Instead, the literature informs the generation of research questions in relation to what the authors perceive to be a neglected topic, as the majority of TQM literature tends to focus on large com-

panies. The researchers are then able to seek to resolve inconsistencies between different findings in relation to small and large companies in terms of the impact of TQM on competitive position. Other ways in which background literature influences the focus of research include: the researcher may spot a neglected aspect of a topic; certain ideas may not previously have been tested; the researcher may feel that existing approaches being used for research on a topic are deficient; and so on.

Social scientists are sometimes prone to being somewhat dismissive of research that has no obvious connections with theory—in either the grand or middle-range senses of the term. Such research is often dismissed as naive *empiricism* (see Key concept 1.4). It would be harsh, not to say inaccurate, to brand as naive empiricism the numerous studies in which the publications-as-theory strategy is employed, simply because their authors have not been preoccupied with theory. Such research is conditioned by and directed towards research questions that arise out of an interrogation of the literature. The data collection and analysis are subsequently geared to the illumination or resolution of the research issue or problem that has been identified at the outset. The literature acts as a proxy for theory. In many instances, theory is latent or implicit in the literature.



Key concept 1.4 What is empiricism?

The term ‘empiricism’ is used in a number of ways, but two stand out. First, it is used to denote a general approach to the study of reality that suggests that only knowledge gained through experience and the senses is acceptable. In other words, this position means that ideas must be subjected to the rigours of testing before they can be considered knowledge. The second meaning of the term is related to this and refers to a belief that the accumulation of ‘facts’ is a legitimate goal in its own right. It is this second meaning that is sometimes referred to as ‘naive empiricism’.

Indeed, research that appears to have the characteristics of the ‘fact-finding exercise’ should not be prematurely dismissed as naive empiricism either. For example, research in the field of industrial relations that focuses on the detail of current employment practices in a variety of sectors or cultural contexts has sometimes been criticized for its attention to facts, which is suggested to be accom-

panied by a lack of theoretical development (Marsden 1982; Godard 1994). The problem with this, according to Marsden (1982), is that ‘empiricists tend to assume that theory will somehow arise from the facts “like steam from a kettle”. But facts are never given, they are selected or produced by theory’ (Marsden 1982: 234) and consequently industrial relations has not managed to develop

sufficient theory to establish its status as a discipline distinct from economics and sociology. To explore the accuracy of such claims in contemporary context, Frege (2005) looked at patterns of publication within the field of industrial relations in leading American, German, and British journals between 1970 and 1973 and 1994 and 2000. She found that empirical publications were much more common in the US (72% in the 1970s and 91% in the 1990s) than in Germany (41% over both time periods), with Britain in between (72% over both periods). However, looking more closely at the nature of these empirical papers reveals differences in the type of empirical work that was carried out in different countries. Specifically Frege detects a shift away from empirical-descriptive articles towards empirical-deductive and empirical-inductive papers in the US journals. She concludes 'the notion of what is empirical research shifted over time away from purely descriptive towards more sophisticated analytical work' (Frege 2005: 194). However, while the scale of empirical work also increased in Britain over the time period although at a slower rate, the empirical articles in these journals were less analytical and the number of descriptive pieces published actually increased rather than decreased.

Raising the question of what is empiricism invites consideration of another question: in so far as any piece of research is linked to theory, what was the role of that theory? Up to this point, we have tended to write as though theory is something that guides and influences the collection and analysis of data. In other words, research is done in order to answer questions posed by theoretical considerations. But an alternative position is to view theory as something that occurs after the collection and analysis of some or all the data associated with a project. We begin to see here the significance of a second factor in considering the relationship between theory and research—whether we are referring to deductive or inductive theory.

Deductive and inductive theory

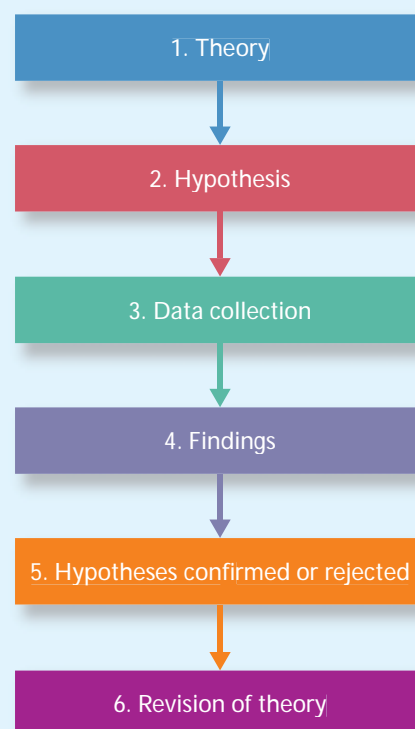
Deductive theory represents the commonest view of the nature of the relationship between theory and research. The researcher, on the basis of what is known about in a particular domain and of theoretical considerations in relation to that domain, deduces a hypothesis (or hypotheses) that must then be subjected to empirical scrutiny.

Embedded within the hypothesis will be concepts that will need to be translated into researchable entities. The social scientist must both skilfully deduce a hypothesis and then translate it into operational terms. This means that the social scientist needs to specify how data can be collected in relation to the concepts that make up the hypothesis.

This view of the role of theory in relation to research is very much the kind of role that Merton had in mind in connection with middle-range theory, which, he argued, 'is principally used in sociology to guide empirical inquiry' (Merton 1967: 39). Theory and the hypothesis deduced from it come first and drive the process of gathering data (see Research in focus 1.5 for an example of a deductive approach to the relationship between theory and data). The sequence can be depicted as one in which the steps outlined in Figure 1.1 take place.

Figure 1.1

The process of deduction



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Research in focus 1.5 An example of a deductive study

In a study that attempted to ascertain the economic value of Total Quality Management (TQM) to the firm, T. C. Powell (1995) critiques existing empirical studies that conclude that TQM produces value, on the grounds that most were conducted by 'consulting firms or quality associations with vested interests in their outcomes, and most did not conform with generally-accepted standards of methodological rigor' (1995: 18). On the basis of a review of the diffusion of innovation literature, Powell posits fifteen hypotheses to test whether TQM produces economic value. These include:

- Hypothesis 1: TQM firms outperform non TQM firms;
- Hypothesis 2: long-term TQM firms outperform short-term TQM firms.

In addition, because TQM originated from manufacturing environments, and it remains more widely disseminated among manufacturing than service companies, he predicts that:

- Hypothesis 3: manufacturing TQM firms outperform service TQM firms.

Powell developed a TQM measurement scale, based on his review of the literature that covered twelve variables that were identified as significant in the development of a TQM programme. The measures also allowed for firm-level factors, such as organizational climate and structure, which have been shown to have an effect on performance. The empirical research involved a survey questionnaire sent to a random sample of CEOs of all firms with more than fifty employees in the north-eastern USA generated on the basis of zip/postal codes, whether or not they had adopted TQM. This was followed up by on-site structured interviews with CEOs and quality executives in thirty firms not included in the postal questionnaire survey. Of these, twenty-three had TQM programmes in place.

Findings were shown to support hypothesis 1, and therefore to confirm the underlying assumption that TQM provides economic value to the firm. In relation to hypothesis 2 it was found that 'long-time TQM adopters were more satisfied with their TQM programs than short-time adopters, even though no apparent time-performance correlation existed' (1995: 26). In response to hypothesis 3, Powell finds that manufacturers were significantly more satisfied with their TQM programmes than service firms.

However, at this point Powell departs from a purely deductive approach and starts to draw conclusions from these findings, by relating them back to the literature that stimulated the research in the first place. In particular, he suggests that it may be that long-term TQM firms report greater satisfaction because they have successfully mastered the core TQM techniques. He goes on to conclude that TQM can produce economic value to the firm but it has not done so for all adopters. This is because success relies on intangible factors, rather than just on the application of TQM tools and techniques.

The last step involves a movement that is in the opposite direction from deduction—it involves *induction*, as the researcher infers the implications of his or her findings for the theory that prompted the whole exercise. The findings are fed back into the stock of theory and the research findings associated with a certain domain of enquiry. This can be seen in the case of Whittington's (1989) case study research into strategic choice within

the domestic appliance and office furniture industries. Whittington's approach is primarily deductive, since it is based on the contention that a critical realist approach to strategic choice enables recognition of the importance of plural and contradictory social structures for human agency and thus avoids determinism. However, as he points out towards the end of his book, 'after the empirical interlude of the last four chapters, it is time now to

return to the theoretical fray' (1989: 244) to assess how well deterministic and realist approaches to strategic choice account for the behaviour within the eight case study firms. At this stage he claims that, although dominant actors within the firms 'began from their structural positions within the capitalist enterprise, this starting point was neither unambiguous or exhaustive' (1989: 282). This finding thus confirms his central proposition that these organizational structures were able to be converted into 'the effective instruments of private agency'.

A further point to bear in mind is that the deductive process appears very linear—one step follows the other in a clear, logical sequence. However, there are many instances where this is not the case. There are several reasons why a researcher's view of the theory or literature may change as a result of the analysis of the collected data:

- new theoretical ideas or findings may be published by others before the researcher has generated his or her findings;
- the relevance of a set of data for a theory may become apparent only *after* the data have been collected;
- the data may not fit with the original hypotheses.

The Hawthorne studies (see Research in focus 2.9), undertaken at the Western Electric Company's Hawthorne plant between 1927 and 1932, aptly illustrate how deductive research can sometimes produce unexpected findings. In the early stages of this research, which explored the human effects of work and working conditions (Roethlisberger and Dickson 1939), the aim was to explore the relationship between conditions of work and the incidence of fatigue and monotony among employees. In order to test this relationship, a series of experiments were undertaken to establish the effects of variables such as lighting, temperature, humidity, and hours of sleep that could be isolated and measured separately. These early experiments involved adjusting the level of artificial illumination in departments at stated intervals in order to see if this had any effect on efficiency of production. However, researchers were not able to make sense of the changes in productivity of workers, which increased and remained high despite manipulation of a range of variables such as temperature and lighting. This led researchers to move away from the 'test room method' and to adopt a more qualitative strategy based on inter-

view and observation. By modifying their approach towards this more inductive position, researchers were able to make sense of the data through generation of an alternative hypothesis that focused on the importance of informal social relationships. Eventually, this led to the development of an alternative method for the study of the informal work group. In the Bank Wiring Observation Room investigators spent a total of six months observing informal social relationships within a group of male operators. The Hawthorne research thus made an important methodological contribution to the study of work organizations by allowing research questions and methods to evolve and change during the course of the investigation (Schwartzman 1993).

Similarly, in a study of the impact of Total Quality Management (TQM) on the competitive position of small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs), Ghobadian and Gallear (1997) examine the differences between SMEs and large organizations and explore the relationship between organizational size and the implementation of TQM. A series of research questions about this relationship were developed through analysis of the TQM literature. Although Ghobadian and Gallear describe their research as deductive, they also point out that classic hypotheses were not easily formulated, because the variables and issues identified were mainly contextual and therefore did not translate into simple constructs. They therefore shift towards a more inductive approach in the later stage of the study, using four case studies to explore the relevance of the research questions and to develop a ten-step framework for the implementation of TQM in SMEs.

This may all seem rather surprising and confusing. There is a certain logic to the idea of developing theories and then testing them. In everyday contexts, we commonly think of theories as things that are quite illuminating but that need to be tested before they can be considered valid or useful. In point of fact, however, while the process of deduction outlined in Figure 1.1 does undoubtedly occur, it is better considered as a general orientation to the link between theory and research. As a general orientation, its broad contours may frequently be discernible in business research, but it is also the case that we often find departures from it.

However, in some research *no* attempt is made to follow the sequence outlined in Figure 1.1. Some researchers prefer an approach to the relationship between theory

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and research that is primarily *inductive*. With an inductive stance, theory is the *outcome* of research. In other words, the process of induction involves drawing generalizable inferences out of observations. To put it crudely, whereas deduction entails a process in which:

theory → observations/findings,

with induction the connection is reversed:

observations/findings → theory.

However, just as deduction entails an element of induction, the inductive process is likely to entail a modicum of deduction. Once the phase of theoretical reflection on a set of data has been carried out, the researcher may want to collect further data in order to establish the conditions in which a theory will and will not hold. Such a general strategy is often called *iterative*: it involves a weaving back and forth between data and theory. It is particularly evident in *grounded theory*, which will be examined in Chapter 19, but in the meantime the basic point is to note that induction represents an alternative strategy for linking theory and research, although it contains a deductive element too.

However, as with ‘theory’ in connection with the deductive approach to the relationship between theory and research, we have to be cautious about the use of the term in the context of the inductive strategy too. While some researchers undoubtedly develop theories, it is equally necessary to be aware that very often what one ends up with can be little more than empirical generalizations of the kind Merton (1967) wrote about. Inductive researchers often use a grounded theory approach to the

analysis of data and to the generation of theory. This approach, which was first outlined by Glaser and Strauss (1967), is frequently regarded as especially strong in terms of generating theories out of data. This contrasts with the nature of many supposedly inductive studies, which generate interesting and illuminating findings but whose theoretical significance is not entirely clear. They provide insightful empirical generalizations, but little theory. Secondly, in much the same way that the deductive strategy is associated with a quantitative research approach, an inductive strategy of linking data and theory is typically associated with a qualitative research approach. Research in focus 1.6 is an example of research that can be classified as inductive in the sense that it develops a hypothesis out of interview data about innovation and change and the formation of organizational subcultures. However, the analytic strategy adopted by Sackmann (1992) in Research in focus 1.6 was more complex and multifaceted, combining ethnographic, phenomenological, and clinical methods and relying on qualitative (thematic) content analysis (see Chapter 18). It thus illustrates how research methods can be combined within a broadly inductive approach. In addition, it is not a coincidence that Sackmann’s research is based on in-depth, semi-structured interviews that produced qualitative data in the form of respondents’ detailed answers to her questions. However, as will be shown below, this characterization of the inductive strategy as associated with qualitative research is not entirely straightforward: not only does much qualitative research *not* generate theory, but also theory is often used at the very least as a background to qualitative investigations.



Research in focus 1.6 An example of an inductive study

To investigate the existence and formation of organizational subcultures, Sackmann (1992) argued that an inductive approach was needed. ‘Rather than hypothesizing about subcultures and their locations a priori, an inductive research methodology was chosen so that unknown groupings could emerge’ (1992: 143). This, she suggests, enabled the generation of empirically based knowledge, which provides greater insight into the complexity of culture through identification of the different kinds of cultural knowledge that members of an organization share.

Her 'mid-range methodology' relied on the data collection technique of 'open interviewing' (which is essentially the same as semi-structured interviewing—see Key concept 8.2) with an 'issue focus' in order '(1) to serve as a stimulus for eliciting culture-specific cognitions, (2) to channel and narrow the potentially broad exploration, and (3) to introduce a reference point for respondents so that the information could be compared' (1992: 143). Three different research sites of a medium-sized US conglomerate were chosen for the study. Focusing on the issue of innovation and change, each interviewee was asked to name the three major innovations/changes that had occurred in the company during the last five years.

As the four-month interview study progressed, Sackmann explains that 'a hypothesis emerged from the data that cultural groupings may form according to functional differentiation' (1992: 147). This hypothesis was subsequently tested by interviewing members of the marketing/sales division of the company, who had not been involved in the earlier part of the study, and it was found that functional subcultures revolved around the specific 'dictionary knowledge' or commonly held descriptions of things and events. Finally, Sackmann suggests that the findings from her inductive research 'may serve as hypotheses for studies of culture using deductive research methodologies' (1992: 154).

It is useful to think of the relationship between theory and research in terms of deductive and inductive strategies. However, as the previous discussion has implied, the issues are not as clear-cut as they are sometimes presented. To

a large extent, deductive and inductive strategies are possibly better thought of as tendencies rather than as a hard-and-fast distinction. But these are not the only issues that impinge on the conduct of business research.



Student experience

Using an inductive approach in designing a small-scale research project

Nirwanthi's approach was highly inductive in that she was guided by themes emerging from her data that influenced her eventual selection of informal organization as a research subject. In her research people kept 'stressing . . . the importance of their personal contacts . . . within the firm and also externally with other organizations like . . . airlines that they use to export the fish, people there [who] pack the fish into special containers, things like that . . . [so] they had to rely very, very strongly on these contacts . . . I found out that they didn't need . . . formal structures or solutions and that they were doing fine with the informal methods that they were using already'. Nirwanthi's case is somewhat unusual in that her research questions (see Chapter 4) were quite loosely formed during the early stages of her research project and it was not until she had collected the data that, with the help of her supervisor, she was able to theorise her findings. As we shall discuss in Chapter 4, there are risks associated with taking such an approach in your research design but Nirwanthi's experience does illustrate the potential for adopting an inductive approach in designing a small-scale research project.



To see a live interview with Nirwanthi and hear more about her research experiences, go to the Online Resource Centre that accompanies this book at: www.oxfordtextbooks.co.uk/orc/brymanbrm2e/.



Epistemological considerations

An epistemological issue concerns the question of what is (or should be) regarded as acceptable knowledge in a discipline. A particularly central issue in this context is the question of whether or not the social world can and should be studied according to the same principles,

procedures, and ethos as the natural sciences. The position that affirms the importance of imitating the natural sciences is invariably associated with an epistemological position known as *positivism* (see Key concept 1.7).



Key concept 1.7 What is positivism?

Positivism is an epistemological position that advocates the application of the methods of the natural sciences to the study of social reality and beyond. But the term stretches beyond this principle, though the constituent elements vary between authors. However, positivism is also taken to entail the following principles.

1. Only phenomena and hence knowledge confirmed by the senses can genuinely be warranted as knowledge (the principle of phenomenalism).
2. The purpose of theory is to generate hypotheses that can be tested and that will thereby allow explanations of laws to be assessed (the principle of deductivism).
3. Knowledge is arrived at through the gathering of facts that provide the basis for laws (the principle of inductivism).
4. Science must (and presumably can) be conducted in a way that is value free (that is, objective).
5. There is a clear distinction between scientific statements and normative statements and a belief that the former are the true domain of the scientist.

This last principle is implied by the first because the truth or otherwise of normative statements cannot be confirmed by the senses.

A natural science epistemology: positivism

The doctrine of positivism is extremely difficult to pin down and therefore to outline in a precise manner, because it is used in a number of ways by authors. For some writers, it is a descriptive category—one that describes a philosophical position that can be discerned in research—though there are still disagreements about what it comprises; for others, it is a pejorative term used to describe crude and often superficial data collection.

It is possible to see in the five principles in Key concept 1.7 a link with some of the points that have already been raised about the relationship between theory and research. For example, positivism entails elements of both a deductive approach (2) and an inductive strategy (3). Also, a fairly sharp distinction is drawn between theory and research. The role of research is to test theories and to provide material for the development of laws. Pugh (1983), for example, describes the research task as entailing the collection of data upon which to base generalizable propositions that can be tested (see Research in focus 1.8). But both of these



Research in focus 1.8 Positivism in action

In his reflections upon the Aston Programme, Pugh (1983: 45) describes himself as an 'unreconstructed positivist' guided by the belief that organizations exist as concrete entities about which data can be collected. This 'appeal to data' is underpinned by a distinction between facts and values, the former being the goal towards which data collection is directed, leading to the development of a 'conceptual framework' made up of 'analytical constructs' that can be used to analyse the regularities of the data. As a result, conclusions can be drawn about the 'structure and functioning of organizations' and the 'behaviour of groups and individuals within them' (1983: 48), thereby contributing to what Pugh describes as the 'subdiscipline' of organizational behaviour. This results in the generation of scientific knowledge, based on generalizable propositions that can be tested against the facts from which it is possible to discover 'how to organize better'. The main purpose of the Aston studies was therefore to make systematic comparisons across organizations that would enable generalizations about the relationship between organizational size, technology, and structure to be made. The early research was thus an early demonstration of structural contingency theory.

connections between theory and research carry with them the implication that it is possible to collect observations in a manner that is not influenced by pre-existing theories. Moreover, theoretical terms that are not directly amenable to observation are not considered genuinely scientific; they must be susceptible to the rigours of observation. All this carries with it the implication of greater epistemological status being given to observation than to theory.

It should be noted that it is a mistake to treat positivism as synonymous with science and the scientific. In fact, philosophers of science and of the social sciences differ quite sharply over how best to characterize scientific practice, and since the early 1960s there has been a drift away from viewing it in positivist terms. Thus, when writers complain about the limitations of positivism, it is not entirely clear whether they mean the philosophical term or a scientific approach more generally. *Realism* (in particular, *critical realism*), for example, is another philosophical position that purports to provide an account of the nature of scientific practice (see Key concept 1.9).

The crux of the epistemological considerations that form the central thrust of this section is the rejection by some writers and traditions of the application of the canons of the natural sciences to the study of social reality. A difficulty here is that it is not easy to disentangle the natural science model from positivism as the butt of their criticisms. In other words, it is not always clear whether

they are inveighing against the application of a general natural scientific approach or of positivism in particular. There is a long-standing debate about the appropriateness of the natural science model for the study of society, but, since the account that is offered of that model tends to have largely positivist overtones, it would seem that it is positivism that is the focus of attention rather than other accounts of scientific practice (such as critical realism—see Key concept 1.9).

Interpretivism

Interpretivism is a term given to a contrasting epistemology to positivism (see Key concept 1.10). The term subsumes the views of writers who have been critical of the application of the scientific model to the study of the social world and who have been influenced by different intellectual traditions, which are outlined below. They share a view that the subject matter of the social sciences—people and their institutions—is fundamentally different from that of the natural sciences. The study of the social world therefore requires a different logic of research procedure, one that reflects the distinctiveness of humans as against the natural order. Von Wright (1971) has depicted the epistemological clash as being between positivism and *hermeneutics* (a term that is drawn from theology and that, when imported into the social sciences, is

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concerned with the theory and method of the interpretation of human action). This clash reflects a division between an emphasis on the *explanation* of human behaviour that is the chief ingredient of the positivist approach to the social sciences and the *understanding* of human behaviour. The latter is concerned with the empathic understanding of human action rather than with the forces that are deemed to act on it. This contrast reflects long-standing debates that precede the emergence of the modern social sciences but find their expression in such notions as the advocacy by Max Weber (1864–1920) of a *Verstehen* approach. Weber described sociology as a ‘science which attempts the interpretive understanding of social action in order to arrive at a causal explanation of its course and effects’ (1947: 88). Weber’s definition seems to embrace both explanation *and* understanding here, but the crucial point is that the task of ‘causal explanation’ is undertaken

with reference to the ‘interpretive understanding of social action’ rather than to external forces that have no meaning for those involved in that social action. An example of an interpretative understanding of leadership is given in Research in focus 1.11. Grint (2000) claims that the concept of leadership can be understood only through understanding the meaning of the concept for those involved in this form of social action. His approach to this subject is thus broadly interpretative.

One of the main intellectual traditions that has been responsible for the anti-positivist position has been *phenomenology*, a philosophy that is concerned with the question of how individuals make sense of the world around them and how, in particular, the philosopher should bracket out preconceptions in his or her grasp of that world. The initial application of phenomenological ideas to the social sciences is attributed to the work of



Key concept 1.9 What is realism?

Realism shares two features with positivism: a belief that the natural and the social sciences can and should apply the same kinds of approach to the collection of data and to explanation, and a commitment to the view that there is an external reality to which scientists direct their attention (in other words, there is a reality that is separate from our descriptions of it). There are two major forms of realism:

- *Empirical realism* simply asserts that, through the use of appropriate methods, reality can be understood. As such, it ‘fails to recognise that there are enduring structures and generative mechanisms underlying and producing observable phenomena and events’ and is therefore ‘superficial’ (Bhaskar 1989: 2). This is perhaps the most common meaning of the term. When writers employ the term ‘realism’ in a general way, it is invariably this meaning to which they are referring.
- *Critical realism* is a specific form of realism whose manifesto is to recognize the reality of the natural order and the events and discourses of the social world and holds that ‘we will only be able to understand—and so change—the social world if we identify the structures at work that generate those events and discourses. . . . These structures are not spontaneously apparent in the observable pattern of events; they can only be identified through the practical and theoretical work of the social sciences’ (Bhaskar 1989: 2).

Critical realism implies two things. First, it implies that, whereas positivists take the view that the scientist’s conceptualization of reality actually directly reflects that reality, realists argue that the scientist’s conceptualization is simply a way of knowing that reality. As Bhaskar (1975: 250) has put it: ‘Science, then, is the systematic attempt to express in thought the structures and ways of acting of things that exist and act independently of thought.’ Secondly, by implication, critical realists unlike positivists are perfectly content to admit into their explanations theoretical terms that are not directly amenable to observation. As a result, hypothetical entities to account for regularities in the natural or social orders (the ‘generative mechanisms’ to which Bhaskar refers) are perfectly admissible for realists, but not for positivists. What makes critical realism *critical* is that the identification of generative mechanisms offers the prospect of introducing changes that can transform the status quo.



Key concept 1.10 What is interpretivism?

Interpretivism is taken to denote an alternative to the positivist orthodoxy that has held sway for decades. It is predicated upon the view that a strategy is required that respects the differences between people and the objects of the natural sciences and therefore requires the social scientist to grasp the subjective meaning of social action. Its intellectual heritage includes: Weber's notion of *Verstehen*; the hermeneutic–phenomenological tradition; and symbolic interactionism.



Research in focus 1.11 Interpretivism in action

Grint (2000) challenges much of the positivist thinking that has tended to characterize other studies of leadership by arguing that effective leadership relies on the management of subjective meaning. Grint claims that the skills of leadership involve shaping the way that organizational problems are defined and persuading others that this definition is correct.

Using the example of Richard Branson, Grint analyses media coverage and biographical accounts of events that are associated with Branson's business ventures. Grint shows how Branson has instilled ideological commitment to a goal, through building a vision of a company where fun rather than rewards is seen as a reason to be associated with the Virgin brand. Branson has also created an image of himself as a plucky daredevil, attacking the establishment in order to protect the interests of the consumer. Much of Branson's success as a leader, Grint claims, relies on persuasive communication, involving high-profile publicity stunts that help to cement a vision of his leadership in the eyes of employees and consumers. Grint concludes that there is no such thing as 'good' leadership, which can be defined, identified, and measured in terms of the characteristics of the leader. Instead leadership is primarily a social phenomenon that relies on the subjective interpretations of followers, more than the specific actions of individual leaders. The task of leaders is, therefore, to construct an imaginary community that followers can feel a part of. This relies on the construction of an identity and a narrative that can be used to make sense of organizational events—past, present, and future. Grint's argument is thus founded on an essentially interpretivist epistemological position. This enables him to investigate leadership as a construct that is used to make sense of social action.

Alfred Schutz (1899–1959), whose work did not come to the notice of most English-speaking social scientists until the translation from German of his major writings in the 1960s, some twenty or more years after they had been written. His work was profoundly influenced by Weber's concept of *Verstehen*, as well as by phenomenological philosophers, like Husserl. Schutz's position is well captured in the following passage, which has been quoted on numerous occasions: The world of nature as explored by the natural scientist does not 'mean' anything to mole-

cules, atoms, and electrons. But the observational field of the social scientist—social reality—has a specific meaning and relevance structure for the beings living, acting, and thinking within it. By a series of common-sense constructs they have pre-selected and pre-interpreted this world which they experience as the reality of their daily lives. It is these thought objects of theirs which determine their behaviour by motivating it. The thought objects constructed by the social scientist, in order to grasp this social reality, have to be founded upon the

thought objects constructed by the common-sense thinking of men [and women!], living their daily life within the social world. (Schutz 1962: 59)

Two points are particularly noteworthy in this quotation. First, it asserts that there is a fundamental difference between the subject matter of the natural sciences and the social sciences and that an epistemology is required that will reflect and capitalize upon that difference. The fundamental difference resides in the fact that social reality has a meaning for human beings and therefore human action is meaningful—that is, it has a meaning for them and they act on the basis of the meanings that they attribute to their acts and to the acts of others. This leads to the second point—namely, that it is the job of the social scientist to gain access to people’s ‘common-sense thinking’ and hence to interpret their actions and their social world from their point of view. It is this particular feature that social scientists claiming allegiance to phenomenology have typically emphasized. In the words of the authors of a research methods text whose approach is described as phenomenological: ‘The phenomenologist views human behavior . . . as a product of how people interpret the world. . . . In order to grasp the meanings of a person’s behavior, *the phenomenologist attempts to see things from that person’s point of view*’ (Bogdan and Taylor 1975: 13–14, emphasis in original).

In this exposition of *Verstehen* and phenomenology, it has been necessary to skate over some complex issues. In particular, Weber’s examination of *Verstehen* is far more complex than the above commentary suggests, because the empathetic understanding that seems to be implied above was not the way in which he applied it (Bauman 1978), while the question of what is and is not a genuinely phenomenological approach to the social sciences is a matter of some dispute (Heap and Roth 1973). However, the similarity in the writings of the hermeneutic–phenomenological tradition and of the *Verstehen* approach, with their emphasis upon social action as being meaningful to actors and therefore needing to be interpreted from their point of view, coupled with the rejection of positivism, contributed to a stream of thought often referred to as interpretivism (e.g. Hughes 1990).

Verstehen and the hermeneutic–phenomenological tradition do not exhaust the intellectual influences on interpretivism. The theoretical tradition in sociology known as *symbolic interactionism* has also been regarded by many writers as a further influence. Again, the case is not clear-

cut. The implications for empirical research of the ideas of the founders of symbolic interactionism, in particular George Herbert Mead (1863–1931), whose discussion of the way in which our notion of self emerges through an appreciation of how others see us, have been hotly debated. There was a school of research, known as the Iowa school, that has drawn heavily on Mead’s concepts and ideas, but has proceeded in a direction that most people would prefer to depict as largely positivist in tone (Meltzer, Petras, and Reynolds 1975). Moreover, some writers have argued that Mead’s approach is far more consistent with a natural science approach than has typically been recognized (McPhail and Rexroat 1979). However, the general tendency has been to view symbolic interactionism as occupying similar intellectual space to the hermeneutic–phenomenological tradition and so broadly interpretative in approach. This tendency is largely the product of the writings of Herbert Blumer, a student of Mead’s who acted as his mentor’s spokesman and interpreter, and his followers (Hammersley 1989; Collins 1994). Not only did Blumer coin the term symbolic interaction; he also provided a gloss on Mead’s writings that has decidedly interpretative overtones. Symbolic interactionists argue that interaction takes place in such a way that the individual is continually interpreting the symbolic meaning of his or her environment (which includes the actions of others) and acts on the basis of this imputed meaning. In research terms, according to Blumer (1962: 188), ‘the position of symbolic interaction requires the student to catch the process of interpretation through which [actors] construct their actions’, a statement that brings out clearly his views of the research implications of symbolic interactionism and of Mead’s thought.

It should be appreciated that the parallelism between symbolic interactionism and the hermeneutic–phenomenological tradition should not be exaggerated. The two are united in their antipathy for positivism and have in common an interpretative stance. However, symbolic interactionism is, at least in the hands of Blumer and the many writers and researchers who have followed in his wake, a type of social theory that has distinctive epistemological implications; the hermeneutic–phenomenological tradition, by contrast, is best thought of as a general epistemological approach in its own right. Blumer may have been influenced by the hermeneutic–phenomenological tradition, but there is no concrete evidence of this. There are other intellectual currents that have affinities with the

interpretative stance, such as the working-through of the ramifications of the works of the philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein (Winch 1958), but the hermeneutic-phenomenological, *Verstehen*, and symbolic interactionist traditions can be considered major influences.

Taking an interpretative stance can mean that the researcher may come up with surprising findings, or at least findings that appear surprising if a largely external stance is taken—that is, a position from outside the particular social context being studied. The Hawthorne studies, referred to earlier in this chapter (see also Research in focus 2.10), provide an interesting example of this, particularly as it was the failure of the investigation to come up with answers that related to the original research questions that stimulated the researchers to change their approach and methods and to adopt a more interpretative epistemological position. Of course, when the social scientist adopts an interpretative stance, he or she is not simply laying bare how members of a social group interpret the world around them. The social scientist will almost certainly be aiming to place the interpretations that have been elicited into a social scientific frame. As the example in Research in focus 1.11 illustrates, there is a double interpretation going on, whereby the researcher is providing an interpretation of others' interpretations of effective leadership. Indeed, there is a third level of interpretation going on, because the researcher's interpretations have to be further interpreted in terms of the concepts, theories, and literature of a discipline.

The aim of this section has been to outline how epistemological considerations—especially those relating to the question of whether a natural science, and in particular a positivist, approach, can supply legitimate knowledge of the social world—are related to research practice. There is a link with the earlier discussion in this chapter about the relationship between theory and research, in that a deductive approach is typically associated with a positivist position. Key concept 1.7 does try to suggest that inductivism is also a feature of positivism (third principle), but, in the working-through of its implementation in the practice of research, it is the deductive element (second principle) that tends to be emphasized. Similarly, the third level of interpretation that a researcher engaged in interpretative research must bring into operation is very much part of the kind of inductive strategy described in the previous section. However, while such interconnections between epistemological issues and research practice exist, it is important not to overstate them, since they represent tendencies rather than definitive points of correspondence. Thus, particular epistemological principles and research practices do not necessarily go hand in hand in a neat unambiguous manner. For example, although inductive approaches tend to rely on qualitative methods, Hofstede's research study of cultural differences (see Research in focus 1.12) provides an example where this is not the case. This point will be made again on several occasions and will be a special focus of Chapter 21.



Research in focus 1.12

An example of an inductive study using quantitative data

Hofstede's (1984) large-scale study of cultural differences between members of a large multinational business organization, which he refers to as the HERMES Corporation but is generally known to be IBM, provides an interesting example of inductive investigation based primarily on the analysis of quantitative data. The survey data were collected between 1967 and 1973, from employees in over forty different countries where HERMES had subsidiaries, producing a total of 116,000 self-completion questionnaires. Statistical analysis based on factor analysis formed the basis for Hofstede's development of a theoretical framework consisting of four main dimensions on which country cultures differ. He labelled these as power distance, uncertainty avoidance, individualism, and masculinity. Each dimension was suggested to be statistically independent—that is, a high score on one did not necessarily imply either a high or a low score on the other dimensions. These dimensions were not developed as hypotheses prior to data collection but instead were suggested to have emerged through the process of analysis.



Ontological considerations

Questions of social ontology are concerned with the nature of social entities. The central point of orientation here is the question of whether social entities can and should be considered objective entities that have a reality external to social actors, or whether they can and should be considered social constructions built up from the perceptions and actions of social actors. These positions are frequently referred to respectively as *objectivism* and *constructionism*. Their differences can be illustrated by reference to two of the most common and central terms in social science—organization and culture.

Objectivism

Objectivism is an ontological position that implies that social phenomena confront us as external facts that are beyond our reach or influence (see Key concept 1.13). We can discuss organization or *an* organization as a tangible

object. It has rules and regulations. It adopts standardized procedures for getting things done. People are appointed to different jobs within a division of labour. There is a hierarchy. It has a mission statement. And so on. The degree to which these features exist from organization to organization is variable, but in thinking in these terms we are tending to the view that an organization has a reality that is external to the individuals who inhabit it. Moreover, the organization represents a social order in that it exerts pressure on individuals to conform to the requirements of the organization. People learn and apply the rules and regulations. They follow the standardized procedures. They do the jobs to which they are appointed. People tell them what to do and they tell others what to do. They learn and apply the values in the mission statement. If they do not do these things, they may be reprimanded or even fired. The organization is therefore a constraining force that acts on and inhibits its members.



Key concept 1.13 What is objectivism?

Objectivism is an ontological position that asserts that social phenomena and their meanings have an existence that is independent of social actors. It implies that social phenomena and the categories that we use in everyday discourse have an existence that is independent or separate from actors.

The same can be said of culture. Cultures and subcultures can be viewed as repositories of widely shared values and customs into which people are socialized so that they can function as good citizens or as full participants. Cultures and subcultures constrain us because we internalize their beliefs and values. In the case of both organization and culture, the social entity in question comes across as something external to the actor and as having an almost tangible reality of its own. It has the characteristics of an object and hence of having an objective reality. To

a very large extent, these are the ‘classic’ ways of conceptualizing organization and culture.

Constructionism

However, we can consider an alternative ontological position—*constructionism* (see Key concept 1.14). This position challenges the suggestion that categories such as organization and culture are pre-given and therefore confront social actors as external realities that they have no role in fashioning.



Key concept 1.14

What is constructionism?

Constructionism is an ontological position (often also referred to as constructivism) which asserts that social phenomena and their meanings are continually being accomplished by social actors. It implies that social phenomena and categories are not only produced through social interaction but that they are in a constant state of revision.

In recent years, the term has also come to include the notion that researchers' own accounts of the social world are constructions. In other words, the researcher always presents a specific version of social reality, rather than one that can be regarded as definitive. Knowledge is viewed as indeterminate. The discussion of postmodernism in Chapter 24 further examines this viewpoint. This sense of constructionism is usually allied to the ontological version of the term. In other words, these are linked meanings. Both meanings are antithetical to *objectivism* (see Key concept 1.13), but the second meaning is also antithetical to *realism* (see Key concept 1.9). The first meaning might be thought of usefully as constructionism in relation to the social world; the second as constructionism in relation to the nature of knowledge of the social world (and indeed the natural world).

Increasingly, the notion of constructionism in relation to the nature of knowledge of the social world is being incorporated into notions of constructionism, but in this book we will be using the term in relation to the first meaning, whereby constructionism is presented as an ontological position in relating to social objects and categories—that is, one that views them as socially constructed.

Let us take organization first. Strauss et al. (1973), drawing on insights from symbolic interactionism, carried out research in a psychiatric hospital and proposed that it was best conceptualized as a 'negotiated order'. Instead of taking the view that order in organizations is a pre-existing characteristic, they argue that it is worked at. Rules were far less extensive and less rigorously imposed than might be supposed from the classic account of organization. Indeed, Strauss et al. prefer to refer to them as 'much less like commands, and much more like general understandings' (1973: 308). Precisely because relatively little of the spheres of action of doctors, nurses, and other personnel was prescribed, the social order of the hospital was an outcome of agreed-upon patterns of action that were themselves the products of negotiations between the different parties involved. The social order is in a constant state of change because the hospital is 'a place where numerous agreements are continually being terminated or forgotten, but also as continually being established, renewed, reviewed, revoked, revised. . . . In any pragmatic sense, this is the hospital at the moment: this is its social order' (Strauss et al. 1973: 316–17). The authors argue that a preoccupation with the formal properties of organizations (rules, organizational charts,

regulations, roles) tends to neglect the degree to which order in organizations has to be accomplished in everyday interaction, though this is not to say that the formal properties have *no* element of constraint on individual action.

Much the same kind of point can be made about the idea of culture. Instead of culture being seen as an external reality that acts on and constrains people, it can be taken to be an emergent reality in a continuous state of construction and reconstruction. Becker (1982: 521), for example, has suggested that 'people create culture continuously. . . . No set of cultural understandings . . . provides a perfectly applicable solution to any problem people have to solve in the course of their day, and they therefore must remake those solutions, adapt their understandings to the new situation in the light of what is different about it.' Like Strauss et al., Becker recognizes that the constructionist position cannot be pushed to the extreme: it is necessary to appreciate that culture has a reality that 'persists and antedates the participation of particular people' and shapes their perspectives, but it is not an inert objective reality that possesses only a sense of constraint: it acts as a point of reference but is always in the process of being formed.

Neither the work of Strauss et al. nor that of Becker pushes the constructionist argument to the extreme. Each

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admits to the pre-existence of their objects of interest (organization and culture respectively). However, in each case we see an intellectual predilection for stressing the active role of individuals in the social construction of social reality. Not all writers adopting a constructionist position are similarly prepared to acknowledge the existence or at least importance of an objective reality. Walsh, for example, has written that 'we cannot take for granted, as the natural scientist does, the availability of a pre-constituted world of phenomena for investigation' and must instead 'examine the processes by which the social world is constructed' (1972: 19). It is precisely this apparent split between viewing the social world as an objective reality and as a subjective reality in a continuous state of flux that Giddens sought to straddle in formulating his idea of structuration (see Research in focus 1.2).

Constructionism also suggests that the categories that people employ in helping them to understand the natural and social world are in fact social products. The categories do not have built-in essences; instead, their meaning is constructed in and through interaction. Thus,

a category like 'masculinity' might be treated as a social construction. This notion implies that, rather than being treated as a distinct inert entity, masculinity is construed as something whose meaning is built up during interaction. That meaning is likely to be a highly ephemeral one, in that it will vary according to both time and place. This kind of stance frequently displays a concern with the language that is employed to present categories in particular ways. It suggests that the social world and its categories are not external to us, but are built up and constituted in and through interaction. This tendency can be seen particularly in discourse analysis, which is examined in Chapter 17. As Potter (1996: 98) observes: 'The world . . . is *constituted* in one way or another as people talk it, write it and argue it.' This sense of constructionism is highly antithetical to realism (see Key concept 1.9). Constructionism frequently results in an interest in the representation of social phenomena. Research in focus 1.15 provides an illustration of this idea in relation to the representation of the position of middle managers during the late 1990s.



Research in focus 1.15 Constructionism in action

Much research attention has been devoted in recent years to considering the impact of delayering and downsizing on middle management. Some studies have drawn attention to increased job insecurity experienced by middle managers in the late 1990s and the rising levels of stress experienced by those who remain in employment. Others have struck a more optimistic tone, suggesting that managerial work can be transformed through delayering into a more strategic, intrinsically motivating form. These pessimistic and optimistic predictions of the future of middle management have formed the basis for much empirical testing and debate.

However, adopting a social constructionist framework, Thomas and Linstead (2002) suggest an alternative way of thinking about the 'reality' of middle management based on the assumption that the term itself is a social construct. This leads them to a focus on the ways in which middle managers' identity is continually being created and contested through prevailing discourses. In other words, they are interested in understanding how managers make sense of the language and practice that is associated with their changing work roles.

Through the analysis of individual managers' subjective accounts of their work, Thomas and Linstead illustrate how they construct their identity and deal with feelings of insecurity, ambiguity, and confusion that cause them to 'feel that they are losing the plot in their organizations' (2002: 88). Constant changes in terms of their roles and status make it difficult for middle managers to retain a sense of identity. The authors conclude: 'What is apparent . . . is that these middle managers, for a range of reasons, are searching for stability and sense in their reflections on their lives' (2002: 88).

In sum, the social constructionist perspective enables the question of 'what has become of middle management?' to be recast. Instead it asks: 'how are middle managers becoming?'.

Constructionism is also frequently used as a term that reflects the indeterminacy of our knowledge of the social world (see Key concept 1.14 and the idea of constructionism in relation to the nature of knowledge of the social

world). However, in this book we will be using the term in connection with the notion that social phenomena and categories are social constructions.



Relationship of epistemology and ontology to business research

Questions of social ontology cannot be divorced from issues concerning the conduct of business research. Ontological assumptions and commitments will feed into the ways in which research questions are formulated and research is carried out. If a research question is formulated in such a way as to suggest that organizations and cultures are objective social entities that act on individuals, the researcher is likely to emphasize the formal properties of organizations or the beliefs and values of members of the culture. Alternatively, if the researcher formulates a research problem so that the tenuousness of organization and culture as objective categories is stressed, it is likely that an emphasis will be placed on the active involvement of people in reality construction. In either case, it might be supposed that different approaches to the design of research and the collection of data will be required.

Competing paradigms

A key influence on understanding the epistemological and ontological foundations of business research has been Burrell and Morgan's (1979) exposition of the four paradigms that they suggest reflect the assumptions that researchers make about the nature of organizations and how we find out about them. Their use of the notion of paradigm draws on the work of Kuhn (1970; see Key concept 1.16). Burrell and Morgan suggest that each paradigm contains assumptions that can be represented as either:

- *objectivist*—there is an external viewpoint from which it is possible to view the organization, which is comprised of consistently real processes and structures; or,
- *subjectivist*—an organization is a socially constructed product, a label used by individuals to make sense of



Key concept 1.16 What is a paradigm?

Kuhn's (1970) highly influential use of the term *paradigm* derives from his analysis of revolutions in science. A paradigm is 'a cluster of beliefs and dictates which for scientists in a particular discipline influence what should be studied, how research should be done, [and] how results should be interpreted' (Bryman 1988a: 4). Kuhn depicted the natural sciences as going through periods of revolution, whereby normal science (science carried out in terms of the prevailing paradigm) is increasingly challenged by anomalies that are inconsistent with the assumptions and established findings in the discipline at that time. The growth in anomalies eventually gives way to a crisis in the discipline, which in turn occasions a revolution. The period of revolution is resolved when a new paradigm emerges as the ascendant one and a new period of normal science sets in. An important feature of paradigms is that they are *incommensurable*—that is, they are inconsistent with each other because of their divergent assumptions and methods. Disciplines in which no paradigm has emerged as pre-eminent, such as the social sciences, are deemed pre-paradigmatic, in that they feature competing paradigms. One of the problems with the term is that it is not very specific: Masterman (1970) was able to discern twenty-one different uses of it by Kuhn. Nonetheless, its use is widespread in the social sciences (e.g. Ritzer 1975; Guba 1985).

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their social experience, so it can be understood only from the point of view of individuals who are directly involved in its activities.

Each paradigm also makes assumptions about the function and purpose of scientific research in investigating the world of business as either:

- *regulatory*—the purpose of business research is to describe what goes on in organizations, possibly to suggest minor changes that might improve it but not to make any judgement of it; or,
- *radical*—the point of management and business research is to make judgements about the way that organizations ought to be and to make suggestions about how this could be achieved.

Plotting the assumptions of researchers along these two axes provides a framework for the identification of four possible paradigmatic positions for the study of organizations:

- *functionalist*—the dominant framework for the study of organizations, based on problem-solving orientation which leads to rational explanation;
- *interpretative*—questions whether organizations exist in any real sense beyond the conceptions of social actors, so understanding must be based on the experience of those who work within them;
- *radical humanist*—sees organization as a social arrangement from which individuals need to be emancipated and research as guided by the need for change;
- *radical structuralist*—views organization as a product of structural power relationships, which result in conflict.

They suggest that each paradigm results in the generation of a quite different type of organizational analysis as each seeks to address specific organizational ‘problems’ in a different way. Research in focus 1.17 illustrates the different organizational insights that each paradigm can produce.

However, one of the most significant areas of controversy to have arisen in relation to this model relates to the issue of commensurability or otherwise of the four paradigms. Burrell and Morgan were quite specific in

arguing that ‘a synthesis between paradigms cannot be achieved’ (Jackson and Carter 1991: 110), as they are founded upon a commitment to fundamentally opposing beliefs, in other words they are incommensurate with each other. Each paradigm must therefore develop independently of the others. Jackson and Carter argue that paradigm incommensurability is important because it protects the diversity of scientific thought, resisting the hegemony of functionalist approaches, which have tended to dominate business research, particularly in North American-based journals. Reed (1985), on the other hand, suggests that the boundaries between paradigms are not as clear as Burrell and Morgan suggest and that overstatement of the differences between them leads to isolationism and reduces ‘the potential for creative theoretical development’ (1985: 205). However, Willmott (1993) takes a different tack. He suggests that, although the four-paradigm model challenges the intellectual hegemony of functionalism and opens up possibilities for alternative forms of analysis within management, its central thesis is therefore distinctly double edged. In particular, the division between subjectivist and objectivist forms of analysis leads to a polarization of methodological approaches. Instead he suggests that paradigms arise through critical reflection upon the limitations of competing approaches. For example, labour process theory has sought to incorporate an appreciation of the subjective dimension of work while at the same time retaining a commitment to structural analysis of the dynamics involved in capitalist production. Willmott argues that this example draws attention to the ‘practical indivisibility’ of subjective and objective dimensions of organization.

Whatever view is held in relation to the relative commensurability of the four paradigms, it is clear that this model has significantly influenced business researchers by encouraging them to explore the assumptions that they make about the nature of the social world and the way it can be studied. The paradigm debate thus draws attention to the relationship between epistemology and ontology in business and management research. It can also reasonably be supposed that the choice of which paradigm to adopt has implications for the design of the research and the data collection approach that will be taken; it is to this question that we will now turn in the following section.



Research in focus 1.17

An example of multiple paradigm research

Hassard (1991) uses the multiple paradigm model, developed by Burrell and Morgan (1979), in order to conduct an empirical analysis of work behaviour in the British Fire Service. He shows how different insights into the organization can be gained through using each paradigm as a distinct frame of reference. Because each paradigm community defines its research problems differently, the study was adapted in order to focus on issues of work organization that each paradigm community would consider legitimate. The four main subjects were:

- job motivation (functionalist paradigm);
- work routines (interpretative paradigm);
- management training (radical humanist paradigm);
- employment relations (radical structuralist paradigm).

Although there is no necessary connection between, for example, the study of job motivation and the functionalist paradigm, Hassard states that it was logically and practically difficult to focus on a single issue examined from each of the four perspectives because each paradigm considers particular research problems to be important and not others.

For the functionalist investigation, the aim was to assess how full-time firemen evaluate the motivating potential of their jobs using the Job Diagnostic Survey developed by Hackman and Oldham (1980; see Research in focus 6.4). 110 questionnaires were distributed to a stratified sample of firemen, differentiated by age and length of service, and an 85% response rate was achieved. Analysis of the results using statistical tests showed that, although the fireman's job possesses modest levels of motivation potential, 'this is not in fact a problem for employees whose needs for psychological growth at work are also modest' (Hassard 1991: 285).

For the interpretative part of the study, firemen were asked to describe and explain their daily tasks in order to enable an ethnomethodological study of Fire Service work routines and activities (see Key concept 16.1 on ethnomethodology). Analysis of conversational data collected over a three-month period highlighted how routine events in the Fire Service are accomplished in a context of uncertainty, which stems from the constant threat of emergency calls. The research suggests that the Fire Service organization 'is a cultural phenomenon which is subject to a continuous process of enactment' (Hassard 1991: 288).

The radical humanist investigation was conducted in the style of critical theory; it describes how management training in the Fire Service contributes towards the reproduction of an ideology that supports and reinforces capitalist values. Data were collected on the training practices used to prepare firemen for promotion to first-line supervision. Analysis of tape recordings of formal classroom sessions and discussions between participants showed how the in-house training programmes allow the organization to retain tight control over the messages delivered, selectively using theories that reinforced the existing authority structure.

Finally, the radical structuralist paradigm was represented through the application of labour process theory, focusing on the development of employment relations and conflicts over working time. Historical analysis of contractual negotiations and strike action showed how, as firemen's working hours were reduced to a level comparable with other manual occupations, 'measures have been taken which at once enhance management's control over the work process whilst yielding greater productivity from the working period' (Hassard 1991: 294).

Hassard thus challenges the notion of paradigm incommensurability, suggesting instead that multiple paradigm research can be used to develop greater variety in organizational research, to challenge the kind of absolutist analysis typical within such journals as *Administrative Science Quarterly*. Yet, according to Johnson and Duberley (2000), the diversity in subject focus between the four investigations merely confirms the fundamental differences between the paradigms and hence their incommensurability. In conclusion, rather than showing how paradigms can be combined, Hassard's study demonstrates how they can be displayed side by side, as competing versions of reality.



Research strategy: quantitative and qualitative

Many writers on methodological issues find it helpful to distinguish between quantitative and qualitative research. The status of the distinction is ambiguous, because it is almost simultaneously regarded by some writers as a fundamental contrast and by others as no longer useful or even simply as 'false' (Layder 1993: 110). However, there is little evidence to suggest that the use of the distinction is abating and even considerable evidence of its continued, even growing, currency. The quantitative/qualitative distinction will be employed a great deal in this book, because it represents a useful means of classifying different methods of business research and because it is a helpful umbrella for a range of issues concerned with the practice of business research.

On the face of it, there would seem to be little to the quantitative/qualitative distinction other than the fact that quantitative researchers employ measurement and qualitative researchers do not. It is certainly the case that there is a predisposition among researchers along these lines, but many writers have suggested that the differences are deeper than the superficial issue of the presence or absence of quantification. For many writers, quantitative and qualitative research differ with respect to their epistemological foundations and in other respects too. Indeed, if we take the areas that have been the focus of the last three sections—the connection between theory and research, epistemological considerations, and ontological considerations—quantitative and qualitative research can be taken to form two distinctive clusters of *research*

strategy. By a research strategy, we simply mean a general orientation to the conduct of business research. Table 1.1 outlines the differences between quantitative and qualitative research in terms of the three areas.

Thus, quantitative research can be construed as a research strategy that emphasizes quantification in the collection and analysis of data and that:

- entails a deductive approach to the relationship between theory and research, in which the accent is placed on the testing of theories;
- has incorporated the practices and norms of the natural scientific model and of positivism in particular; and
- embodies a view of social reality as an external, objective reality.

By contrast, qualitative research can be construed as a research strategy that usually emphasizes words rather than quantification in the collection and analysis of data and that:

- predominantly emphasizes an inductive approach to the relationship between theory and research, in which the emphasis is placed on the generation of theories;
- has rejected the practices and norms of the natural scientific model and of positivism in particular in preference for an emphasis on the ways in which individuals interpret their social world; and
- embodies a view of social reality as a constantly shifting emergent property of individuals' creation.

Table 1.1

Fundamental differences between quantitative and qualitative research strategies

	Quantitative	Qualitative
Principal orientation to the role of theory in relation to research	Deductive; testing of theory	Inductive; generation of theory
Epistemological orientation	Natural science model, in particular positivism	Interpretivism
Ontological orientation	Objectivism	Constructionism

There is, in fact, considerably more to the quantitative/qualitative distinction than this contrast. In Chapters 3 and 13 the nature of quantitative and then qualitative research respectively will be outlined in much greater detail, while in Chapters 21 and 22 the contrasting features will be further explored. In particular, a number of distinguishing features flow from the commitment of the quantitative research strategy to a positivist epistemology and from the rejection of that epistemology by practitioners of the qualitative research strategy. In other words, the three contrasts in Table 1.1 are basic, though fundamental, ones.

However, the interconnections between the different features of quantitative and qualitative research are not as straightforward as Table 1.1 and the last paragraph imply. While it is useful to contrast the two research strategies, it is necessary to be careful about hammering a wedge between them too deeply. It may seem perverse to introduce a basic set of distinctions and then suggest that they are problematic. A recurring theme of this book is that discussing the nature of business research is just as complex as conducting research in the real world. You may discover general tendencies, but they are precisely that—tendencies. In reality, the picture becomes more complicated the more you delve.

For example, it is common to describe qualitative research as concerned with the generation rather than the testing of theories. However, there are examples of studies in which qualitative research has been employed to test rather than to generate theories. For example, Hochschild's (1983) theory of emotion work (see Research in focus 16.2) emerged from a questionnaire study of university students. The theory was subsequently tested to establish its wider significance in employment using two occupational groups, where a wider range of qualitative methods,

including interviews and participant observation, were used. This enabled development of the theory to incorporate the idea of emotional labour, which is emotion work that forms part of one's paid employment. This study shows how, although qualitative research is typically associated with generating theories, it can also be employed for testing them. Moreover, it is striking that, although Hochschild's study is broadly interpretivist in epistemological orientation, with its emphasis on how flight attendants view their work role identity, the findings have objectivist, rather than constructionist, overtones. For example, when the author describes the marketing and advertising strategies used by Delta airlines, she explains how, by creating a discrepancy between promise and fact, flight attendants are forced to cope with the disappointed expectations of customers through their emotional labour. She relates the demand for emotional labour to the structural conditions of the airline industry market, thus positing a social world that is 'out there' and as having a formal, objective quality. It is an example of qualitative research in the sense that there is no quantification or very little of it, but it does not have *all* the other features outlined in Table 1.1. As such, it has interpretivist overtones in spite of its use of quantitative research methods.

The point that is being made in this section is that quantitative and qualitative research represent different research strategies and that each carries with it striking differences in terms of the role of theory, epistemological issues, and ontological concerns. However, the distinction is not a hard-and-fast one: studies that have the broad characteristics of one research strategy may have a characteristic of the other. Not only this, but many writers argue that the two can be combined within an overall research project, and Chapter 25 examines precisely this possibility.



Influences on the conduct of business research

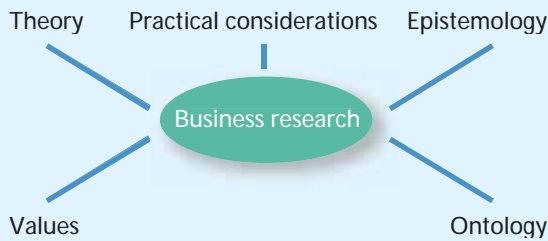
We are beginning to get a picture now that business research is influenced by a variety of factors. Figure 1.2 summarizes the influences that have been examined so far, but has added two more—the impact of *values* and of *practical considerations*.

Values

Values reflect either the personal beliefs or the feelings of a researcher. On the face of it, we would expect that social scientists should be value free and objective in

Figure 1.2

Influences on business research



their research. After all, one might want to argue that research that simply reflected the personal biases of its practitioners could not be considered valid and scientific because it was bound up with the subjectivities of its practitioners. Such a view is held with less and less frequency among social scientists nowadays. Émile Durkheim (1858–1917) wrote that one of the corollaries of his injunction to treat social facts as things was that all ‘preconceptions must be eradicated’ (1938: 31). Since values are a form of preconception, his exhortation was at least implicitly to do with suppressing them when conducting research. His position is unlikely to be regarded as credible nowadays, because there is a growing recognition that it is not feasible to keep the values that a researcher holds totally in check. These can intrude at any or all of a number of points in the process of business research:

- choice of research area;
- formulation of research question;
- choice of method;
- formulation of research design and data collection techniques;
- implementation of data collection;
- analysis of data;
- interpretation of data;
- conclusions.

There are, therefore, numerous points at which bias and the intrusion of values can occur. Values can materialize at any point during the course of research. The

researcher may develop an affection or sympathy, which was not necessarily present at the outset of an investigation, for the people being studied. It is quite common, for example, for researchers working within a qualitative research strategy, and in particular when they use participant observation or very intensive interviewing, to develop a close affinity with the people that they study to the extent that they find it difficult to disentangle their stance as social scientists from their subjects’ perspective. This possibility may be exacerbated by the tendency of some researchers to be very sympathetic to underdog groups. For example, following publication of his classic study of the Ford factory in Dagenham, Beynon (1975) was criticized by the press for having become too emotionally involved in the lives of workers. Equally, social scientists may feel unsympathetic towards the people they study. Although business and management researchers generally tend to emphasize their interest in understanding the problems and issues that affect practitioners, their value systems, particularly if they are working within a radical structuralist paradigm, are very likely to be antithetical to those of many managers working within a profit-making industry.

Another position in relation to the whole question of values and bias is to recognize and acknowledge that research cannot be value free, but to ensure that there is no untrammelled incursion of values into the research process, and to be self-reflective and so exhibit *reflexivity* about the part played by such factors. This view is borne of the assumption that the prior knowledge, experience, and attitudes of the researcher will influence not only how the researcher sees things but also *what* he or she sees. The example in Research in focus 1.18 considers some of these issues in relation to organization research. Researchers are increasingly prepared to forewarn readers of their biases and assumptions and how these may have influenced the subsequent findings. There has been a growth since the mid-1970s of collections of inside reports of what doing a piece of research was really like, as against the generalities presented in business research methods textbooks (like this one!). These collections frequently function as ‘confessions’, an element of which is often the writer’s preparedness to be open about his or her personal biases. This point will be taken up further in Chapter 24.

Still another approach is to argue for consciously value-laden research. This is a position taken by some feminist

writers who have argued that only research on women that is intended *for* women will be consistent with the wider political needs of women. Mies (1993: 68) has argued that in feminist research the 'postulate of *value free research*, of neutrality and indifference towards the research objects, has to be replaced by *conscious partiality*, which is achieved through partial identification with the research objects' (emphases in original).

The significance of feminism in relation to values goes further than this, however. In particular, several feminist researchers around the early 1980s proposed that the principles and practices associated with quantitative research were incompatible with feminist research on women. For writers like Oakley (1981), quantitative research was bound up with male values of control that can be seen in the general orientation of the research strategy—control of the research subject/respondent and control of the research context and situation. Moreover, the research process was seen as one-way traffic, in which researchers extract information from the people being studied and give little or more usually nothing in return. For many feminists, such a strategy

bordered on exploitation and was incompatible with feminism's values of sisterhood and non-hierarchical relationships between women. The antipathy towards quantitative research resulted in a preference for qualitative research among feminists. Not only was qualitative research seen as more consistent with the values of feminism; it was seen as more adaptable to those values. Thus, feminist qualitative research came to be associated with an approach in which the investigator eschewed a value-neutral approach and engaged with the people being studied as people and not simply as respondents to research instruments. The stance of feminism in relation to both quantitative and qualitative approaches demonstrates the ways in which values have implications for the process of social investigation. In more recent years, there has been a softening of the attitudes of feminists towards quantitative research. Several writers have acknowledged a viable and acceptable role for quantitative research, particularly when it is employed in conjunction with qualitative research (Jayaratne and Stewart 1991; Oakley 1998). This issue will be picked up in Chapters 15, 22, and 23.



Research in focus 1.18

Influence of an author's biography on research values

Brewis (2005) explains that, similar to other feminist researchers, the research that she does on topics such as sexual harassment and the sex industry impacts on her being-in-the-world more generally. Brewis considers the reasons why she chose to research sex and organization, even though she says that 'links between my life story and my research whilst they indubitably exist, are not causal or easily drawn' (2005: 540). However, she also argues that readers act as biographers in 'shaping and constructing authors as particular types of individual' (2005: 494) and in her own case this has involved them making 'certain assumptions' about her personal life based on her research interests. She explains: 'whether others meet me in settings such as conferences, listen to my presentations, read or hear about my work, their constructions of who I am and what I do derive in no small part from the ways in which they attribute a gender and a sexuality to me . . . Certain deeply embedded paradigms seem to have constructed me as the kind of author who has intimate relationships with her collaborators. Because I am gendered-as-female, and because I tend to collaborate with others who are gendered-as-male, these signs have apparently been read—through the heterosexual matrix—to imply that my relationships with these individuals go further than straightforward 'professional' contact' (2005: 498). This biographic construction of her professional identity serves to confirm the sexist belief that women can only progress in organizations if they trade on their sexuality. Brewis's analysis thus suggests a cyclical dynamic to the role of values on the choice of research subject, in that not only does her biography influence her choice of research subject but her chosen research subject affects how readers construct her biographically.

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There are, then, different positions that can be taken up in relation to values and value freedom. Far fewer writers overtly subscribe to the position that the principle of objectivity can be put into practice than in the past. Quantitative researchers sometimes seem to be writing in a way that suggests an aura of objectivity (Mies 1993), but we simply do not know how far they subscribe to such

a position. There is a greater awareness today of the limits to objectivity, so that some of the highly confident, not to say naive, pronouncements on the subject, like Durkheim's, have fallen into disfavour. A further way in which values are relevant to the conduct of business research is through the following of ethical principles or standards. This issue will be followed up in Chapter 5.



Student experience Influence of values on choice of research subject

Many students are influenced by their own personal beliefs and life experience in choosing a research subject and this intrusion of values may be no bad thing, not least because it has the potential to ensure that the student maintains an interest in the subject which can help to keep them going throughout the project.

Chris's interest in women in management stemmed in part from his mother's career experience. 'My mum used to do or does run residential courses for getting women into management for various large organizations, global organizations. So there'd always been books and we'd sit and talk about it around the house. It's always been something that's kind of been in my mind and been at the front of what's going on in my life . . . it was quite an interesting subject I thought . . . I had access to an organization that had a large number of women . . . doing reasonably well and I just felt it was something that would be really, really interesting to [explore]. Before I actually did the internship which allowed me the access . . . to the organization . . . I decided that I wanted to look at [this issue] . . . I don't really know exactly, looking back on it, why I chose that . . . [but] there were a number of topic areas and . . . I just thought it was something that not a lot of . . . well, certainly not a lot of men necessarily would research . . . I think a few people were a bit surprised when I chose to do that . . . and I suppose also . . . I wanted to research or put the argument forward that men aren't stopping—you know, the old boy network or whatever people talk about—it isn't just to say that blokes are doing all the bad stuff and it's maybe also a defence mechanism—I'd say, you know, positive defence. I don't know.' What is also interesting from Chris's account is that he is very aware of the importance of his own gender as potentially affecting how others perceive his interest in this subject.

The extent to which personal values influence the research project will obviously vary from one student to another. Angharad explained that her decision to study the under-representation of women in senior management was driven principally by an intellectual interest. She explained that this subject was 'something that I just kind of got interested in . . . it's something that I'd wanted to look at for my dissertation all along'. However, she did concede that underlying her interest was a concern about her own future career as a woman manager which gave rise to questions such as 'Am I going to get stuck? Am I in the wrong job?'. The experience of these students highlights the importance of researcher reflexivity, an issue we will cover in more depth in Chapter 25 (see also the entry in the Glossary).



To see a live interview with Chris and Angharad and hear more about their research experiences, go to the Online Resource Centre that accompanies this book at: www.oxfordtextbooks.co.uk/orc/brymanbrm2e/.

Practical considerations

Nor should we neglect the importance and significance of *practical issues* in decisions about how business research should be carried out. There are a number of dimensions to this issue. For one thing, choices of research strategy, design, or method have to be dovetailed with the specific research question being investigated. If we are interested in teasing out the relative importance of a number of causes of a social phenomenon, it is quite likely that a quantitative strategy will fit our needs, because, as will be shown in Chapter 3, the assessment of cause is one of its keynotes. Alternatively, if we are interested in the world views of members of a certain social group, a qualitative research strategy that is sensitive to how participants interpret their social world may be the direction to choose. If a researcher is interested in a topic on which no or virtually no research has been done in the past, the quantitative strategy may be difficult to employ because there is little prior literature from which to draw leads. A more exploratory stance may be preferable and, in this connection, qualitative research may serve the researcher's needs better, since it is typically associated with the generation rather than the testing of theory (see

Table 1.1) and with a relatively unstructured approach to the research process (see Chapter 13). Another dimension may have to do with the nature of the topic and of the people being investigated. For example, if the researcher needs to engage with individuals or groups involved in illicit activities, such as industrial sabotage (Sprouse 1992) or pilferage (Ditton 1977), it is unlikely that a social survey would gain the confidence of the subjects involved or achieve the necessary rapport. It is not surprising, therefore, that researchers in these areas have tended to use a qualitative strategy.

While practical considerations may seem rather mundane and uninteresting compared with the lofty realm inhabited by the philosophical debates surrounding such discussions about epistemology and ontology, they are important ones. All business research is a coming-together of the ideal and the feasible. Because of this, there will be many circumstances in which the nature of the topic or of the subjects of an investigation and the constraints on a researcher loom large in decisions about how best to proceed. Thinking deeper 1.19 considers the extent to which opportunism is, or indeed should be, a basis for doing research in a particular setting or focusing on a certain subject.



Student experience Gaining research access through workplace contacts

Chris, Karen, and Lisa all gained access to their research sites as the result of internship or workplacement opportunities organized by their universities as part of their degree course.

Chris used the contacts he had established during his internship to make contact with individuals within the bank who could facilitate his access and provide him with important information. As he explained, I 'ended up ringing . . . sort of the fourth or fifth most senior person in the bank saying "I'm doing this. Can I chat to you?" and she was absolutely great about it. I didn't actually speak to her. I spoke to somebody beneath her, but they also said she would [put me in contact with] women in the bank and she was absolutely great. I had a good chat with her. She gave me lots of information regarding percentage of women at different levels of management, progression over the years, information on competitors and things like that . . . [so] by the time I finished my internship . . . I'd organised three interviewees . . . I could then [go back to university] with the idea'.

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Karen also found that gaining the consent of her manager to carry out the research was relatively straightforward. 'Once I sort of said that this was a topic that I was interested in doing, I had a discussion with my manager and . . . it was something that . . . she was quite interested in as well and other people in the department, who did recruitment, were all quite interested in it . . . so access wasn't really [a problem]. Obviously it's difficult to sort of get time with people, but it wasn't from a management point of view saying, you know, "No, you can't."'

However, gaining access on the basis of placement opportunities can mean that students are constrained by the need to combine their full-time employment with a research role and they may also experience conflicts of interest as a result, as Karen explains, 'obviously when you're involved in the organization it's quite good because you can get access to people . . . that I knew, so if I asked them for a favour, they would help me because I'd helped them with something. So that was quite good, but then on the other hand it's like because I'm so involved in it as well, there's that sort of element of "Well, was I biased? Did I bring my own opinions into it because I was so involved in it?" Which I think to some extent I probably did, although I tried as much as possible to still keep my university head on and still keep myself distanced from it a little bit.'

Of course, opportunities for business research based on placement experience will not be available to all business students, so in setting up a small-scale research project it can also be important to make use of personal contacts that are available to you.



To see a live interview with Chris, Karen, and Lisa and hear more about their research experiences, go to the Online Resource Centre that accompanies this book at: www.oxfordtextbooks.co.uk/orc/brymanbrm2e/.



Student experience Practical reasons not to research your own organization

There may however be situations when it is more practical not to carry out your research in the place where you work. In Tom's case, he explained that this stemmed from the risks associated with the lack of continuity in his current work environment. 'When I started the course I was doing a job which was on a fixed-term basis and I knew I was going to be moving on, so I wasn't in a sort of settled work environment so I knew that it might be tricky kind of to get access and keep access . . . negotiated . . . where I was working. So it wasn't like I'd been working in one organization for a long time and had kind of things that I could sort of explore in that environment.' Researching your own workplace also introduces particular ethical and analytical considerations that stem from having to maintain the dual roles of being a colleague and a researcher. These issues will be discussed in more detail in Chapters 5 and 15.



To see a live interview with Tom and hear more about his research experiences, go to the Online Resource Centre that accompanies this book at: www.oxfordtextbooks.co.uk/orc/brymanbrm2e/.



Thinking deeper 1.19 Opportunism in business research

Alvesson (2003) makes the distinction within qualitative research between a '*planned-systematic*' approach to data collection and an '*emergent-spontaneous*' one. The researcher who takes a planned-systematic approach has a reasonably clear idea of their subject of study and plans the process of data collection with the aim of producing a pile of notes and interview transcripts at the end of it that they can then analyse. For example, they might be interested in the topic of organizational identity so the notes that they make during fieldwork and the questions they ask in interviews reflect this subject focus. The results of this data collection process then form the basis from which the researcher writes up their findings, whether or not the data that they collected is interesting or not. An emergent-spontaneous study, on the other hand, is carried out when something revealing happens. 'In such a study the researcher waits for something interesting/generative to pop up' (Alvesson 2003: 181). Although there are disadvantages associated with such an approach, namely it might appear somewhat arbitrary and unscientific, Alvesson suggests there are some advantages, 'the most significant one is that it increases the likelihood of coming up with interesting material. The researcher does not find the empirical material, it finds him or her' (2003: 181). By developing sensitivity for rich empirical data and a willingness to respond to situations where it arises, the researcher takes a more opportunistic approach to their task. The experience of Bell (2005) in researching the closure of the Jaguar car manufacturing plant in Coventry which is near to where she lives illustrates how such an emergent-spontaneous study might arise. In this case it was the result of existing local contacts she already had with members of the local community that enabled her to trace events relating to the closure as they unfolded. However, Alvesson recommends care in presenting studies that are based on emergent-spontaneous research as the conventions among some academics might cause them to respond unfavourably to this more unsystematic method of research topic selection, even if the research strategy and research design is well informed.



Key points

- Business research is subject to considerable debate concerning its relevance to practitioners and its fundamental purpose.
- Quantitative and qualitative research constitute different approaches to social investigation and carry with them important epistemological and ontological considerations.
- Theory can be depicted as something that precedes research (as in quantitative research) or as something that emerges out of it (as in qualitative research).
- Epistemological considerations loom large in considerations of research strategy. To a large extent, these revolve around the desirability of employing a natural science model (and in particular positivism) versus interpretivism.
- Ontological considerations, concerning objectivism versus constructionism, also constitute important dimensions of the quantitative/qualitative contrast.
- These considerations have informed the four-paradigm model that has been an important influence on business research.

- Values may impinge on the research process at different times.
- Practical considerations in decisions about research methods are also important.
- Feminist researchers have tended to prefer a qualitative approach, though there is some evidence of a change of viewpoint in this regard.



Questions for review

The nature of business research

- What, in your view, is the function or purpose of business and management research?
- What are the differences between mode 1 and mode 2 forms of knowledge production and why is this distinction important?

Theory and research

- If you had to conduct some business research now, what would the topic be and what factors would have influenced your choice? How important was addressing theory in your consideration?
- Outline, using examples of your own, the difference between grand and middle-range theory.
- What are the differences between inductive and deductive theory and why is the distinction important?

Epistemological considerations

- What is meant by each of the following terms: positivism; realism; and interpretivism? Why is it important to understand each of them?
- What are the implications of epistemological considerations for research practice?

Ontological considerations

- What are the main differences between epistemological and ontological considerations?
- What is meant by objectivism and constructionism?
- Which theoretical ideas have been particularly instrumental in the growth of interest in qualitative research?
- What are the main arguments for and against paradigm commensurability within management and business research?

Relationship of epistemology and ontology to business research

- What are the four main paradigms in business research and how do they influence the insights that are gained?

Research strategy: quantitative and qualitative research

- Outline the main differences between quantitative and qualitative research in terms of: the relationship between theory and data; epistemological considerations; and ontological considerations.

- To what extent is quantitative research solely concerned with testing theories and qualitative research with generating theories?

Influences on the conduct of business research

- What are some of the main influences on business research?



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Visit the interactive Research Guide that accompanies this book to complete an exercise in Business research strategies
