1 Introduction

CHAPTER OBJECTIVES

After reading this chapter you will be able to:

● Describe why research in the real world is of increasing importance.

● Explain the nature of theories.

● Outline the stages in the research process.

● Use this book effectively by making use of its features such as Activities and Top Tips.

This book is designed to introduce you to some of the essential methodologies, approaches and tools of research. In doing so, we will explore some of the philosophies and theoretical perspectives behind the many different ways of conducting research, as well as providing practical examples and guidance as to how research should be planned and implemented. Later in this chapter we will look at the structure of the book, but first we need to examine the nature of the research process and why research is being seen as increasingly important in a growing number of organizations, communities and contexts.

The term 'globalization' is often used to describe a world that is becoming increasingly integrated and interdependent and where large, international organizations dominate. Within this globalized world, change in business and working environments has become rapid, pervasive and perpetual. Organizations have adapted to this uncertainty in a number of ways.

One approach has been to understand (often through research) and develop relationships with both markets and supply chains. Most forward-looking organizations have also recognized the need for a multi-skilled and occupationally agile workforce. It has also required that organizations understand what motivates their workforce and how people embrace change. All this has had an enormous impact on the way organizations operate and interact with the 'real world', and how they communicate and work. Small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) have also had to modernize their organizational practices and to understand their working environment, as have public sector organizations (including hospitals, schools, colleges and universities) and voluntary organizations.

Faced with a more competitive, dynamic and uncertain world, a knowledge of research **methods** is important because it helps people in organizations to understand, predict and control their internal and external environments (Sekaran, 2007). It also means that those involved in commissioning or sponsoring organizational research are better placed to understand and manage the work of researchers and to objectively evaluate and interpret the outcomes of research. Hence, it becomes possible to calculate the potential risks and benefits in implementing research projects. But what do we mean by the term 'research'?

ORGANIZATIONAL RESEARCH IN THE REAL WORLD

Research in this context is a 'systematic and organized effort to investigate a specific problem that needs a solution (Sekaran, 2007: 4). Hence, organizational research is often about how (process) to solve real problems (content) (Gill and Johnson, 2002). This may have a very practical focus (applied research), with an emphasis on achieving measurable outputs that are specific to a particular organization. The results of such research may be of significance to that organization, but difficult to generalize elsewhere. On the other hand, organizational research may also be concerned with clarifying, validating or building a theory (basic research). Its importance to individual organizations may be determined by the extent to which this theory is translatable into a specific organizational context. However, most organizations will only see research as valid if it is seen to lead to practical outcomes (Easterby-Smith et al., 2002). Then there are forms of research comprising collaboration between the researcher and professional practitioners (**action research**). Table 1.1 provides a summary illustrating a continuum between basic and applied research.

Organizational research is not an easy option. First, there is no single subject called 'organizational research'. It draws upon fields of inquiry such as sociology, anthropology, philosophy, communication, economics and statistics. This often means having to adopt an inter-disciplinary approach, incorporating ideas

Table 1.1
Basic and applied
research
Source: Adapted
from Saunders
et al., 2000

BASIC RESEARCH	APPLIED RESEARCH
Purpose	*Purpose*
Expand knowledge of organizational processes	Improve understanding of specific organizational problems
Develop universal principles	Create solutions to organizational problems
Produce findings of significance and value to society	Develop findings of practical relevance to organizational stakeholders

and approaches from a diverse range of subject backgrounds. Secondly, organizations are complex and the people working within them very busy, making it often difficult for the researcher to gain access to the people that can provide information. Key research sponsors, gatekeepers or stakeholders may also have their own agendas that are not necessarily the same as those of the researcher. Thirdly, research may be influenced by the fact that organizations are working in a world of competition, market influences and financial constraints. Research projects may have to be modified or cancelled. Research sponsors may criticize what they read in research reports, especially when these reveal organizational inefficiencies.

We have looked, briefly, at organizational research, but what do we mean by the 'real world'? To many, it means businesses, companies, hospitals, schools, colleges or other organizations, and certainly these are important sites for, and sponsors of, research. The real world, however, can also include communities where people live, including residential areas, parks, shops, local amenities or areas where young people congregate. It could also mean networks such as community groups, educationalists, professional associations, management associations or trades unions. Increasingly it could also include virtual communities where people communicate with each other through the Internet. In other words, the real world comprises any setting where human beings come together for communication, relationships or discourse.

The real world, of course, contains a myriad of subjects that lend themselves to research. Table 1.2 provides just a general 'feel' for the kinds of areas that this book will explore. You will, of course, be thinking about or developing a research topic of your own.

But how do we go about addressing these kinds of research areas? One way to solve any problem in the real world is to do so *systematically*. While Figure 1.1 presents a very simplified version of such an approach (which will be modified in later chapters), it does at least offer a starting point. Gill and Johnson (2002) rightly caution that the wise researcher is one who gives equal attention

4   DOING RESEARCH IN THE REAL WORLD

Table 1.2
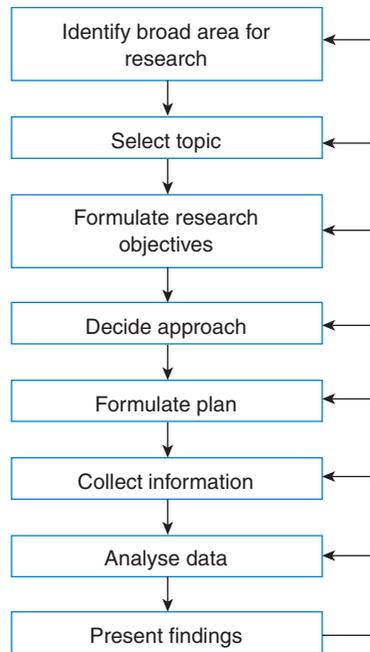
Examples of real world research topics

Women firefighters – breaking down barriers to recruitment
Disability awareness training – does it change attitudes?
Project management in virtual organizations
Identifying the factors that influence youth club membership and attendance
Why don't people buy recycled paper?
The feasibility of transferring advanced horticultural practices to a poor developing country. A case study of three Romanian villages
Does targeted neighbourhood policing work?
Housing association accommodation and services – an evaluation of tenant attitudes
How can call centre response times and the quality of feedback to customer queries be improved?
The impact of intensive 'exam culture' on pupil sickness and medical referral
An evaluation of government 'special measures' on pupil attainment and teacher retention
Working trajectories – getting disaffected youths from ethnic communities into the jobs market
Measuring and improving customer satisfaction in a library

to each of these phases. Many naive researchers are tempted to rush into the 'collect information' stage without first very clearly defining the research topic, and its objectives. The results of this fuzziness only become transparent later on, with the effect that the researcher has to cycle back to an earlier stage in the research process, or to start again.

Figure 1.1 shows that it is possible, in principle, to move from the identification of the research focus right through to the presentation of the findings in a neat sequence of steps. This, however, is an idealized model and is not necessarily the norm. The complexities of researching in the real world mean that the researcher may often have to revisit previous stages in the research process. For example, at the analysis stage it might emerge that the collection of important **data** has been overlooked. New plans will have to be formulated and the data collected before the researcher is able to return to the analysis and presentation of the findings. Indeed, as we shall see in later chapters, it is also valid for the researcher to enter 'the field' to gather data, with only the most general of notions of what she/he is looking for, and for the data to help in the generation of concepts and theories.

Figure 1.1 implies that the research process in a highly practical one. You identify a problem, decide on how to tackle it, collect data (which often

Figure 1.1
Overview of the
(simplified) research
process (adapted
from Gill and
Johnson, 2002)

Identify broad area for
research

Select topic

Formulate research
objectives

Decide approach

Formulate plan

Collect information

Analyse data

Present findings

involves discussions with other people), analyse and present findings and take
action. But research, as was mentioned above, is more than a mere pragmatic
activity; behind it lies the foundations of academic theories that have emerged
through the process of scientific enquiry and investigation over many decades
and even centuries. To theories we now turn.

THE NATURE OF THEORIES

A theory has been defined as:

> A set of interrelated constructs (concepts), definitions, and propositions that
> present a systematic view of phenomena by specifying relations among vari-
> ables, with the purpose of explaining and predicting phenomena. (Kerlinger and ,
> Lee, 2000: 9)

One might, for example, have a theory of business failure. The factors that might
explain this could be: poor management practices, antagonistic labour relations,
insufficient staff training, or a lack of investment. The actual failure of the busi-
ness has to be explained by examining and understanding the interrelationship
between these factors. Such understanding may take the form of a theory that is

predictive or explanatory in nature. Indeed, a theory is only worthy of the term if it has some predictive qualities. As we shall see, if a theory is no longer predictive, a crisis ensues and the theory will, over time, be challenged and replaced by a new one.

There is no reason, however, to denigrate organizational research activity that is not theory-orientated. In both educational and organizational research it may be quite valid to undertake an investigation that merely seeks to find the immediate goal of a relationship between two **variables** (a characteristic that is measurable such as income, attitude, action, policy, etc.) But as Kerlinger and Lee (2000) point out, the most satisfying and usable relationships are those that can be *generalized*, that is, applied from the specific instance of the research findings to many phenomena and to many people. This is the nature of theory.

Activity 1.1

Examine each of the following statements and decide whether you agree with them. A theory:

- Is an accumulated body of knowledge, written by acknowledged experts.
- Informs 'state-of-the-art' concepts and innovations.
- Is a body of work where inconsequential or misleading ideas can be filtered out.
- Represents knowledge that should be viewed critically and rejected when incompatible with practice.
- Adds interest and intellectual stimulation to a project.
- Acts as a model against which 'live' business processes can be evaluated.
- Guides the execution of research **methodology**.

Suggested answers are provided at the end of the chapter.

Source: adapted from Gill and Johnson, 2002

THE ORGANIZATION OF THE BOOK

The book is divided into four parts. Part A prepares the way by looking at the underpinning philosophy of research and the selection of suitable research topics. In Chapter 2 the nature and significance of theory is justified and the epistemological (philosophical) basis of theory explored. The chapter also describes how different epistemological perspectives provide the basis for research

methodologies like **experimental research, surveys, grounded theory** and action research, all of which are discussed in detail in later chapters. If you have little or no previous experience of philosophy you may find this chapter rather daunting, but you are encouraged to tackle it, as it will help you to understand the approaches taken in later chapters.

Having provided an overarching view of research philosophy, methodologies and methods, Chapter 3 gets down to the practical issue of selecting and planning a research project. Advice is offered on how to identify research topics that meet your personal needs and experience and how to write a successful research proposal.

Chapter 4 on **ethics** in research is a new chapter for this 2nd edition, the subject now given a chapter in its own right in recognition of the growing importance of ethical principles in research. It is increasingly the case that students and professional researchers have to abide by the ethical frameworks devised by their educational institutions or professional associations. This chapter shows you how to construct research designs that follow these important principles.

Chapter 5 looks at some of the many ways in which you can begin to locate, search and use the literature on your chosen subject. It shows you how to plan your search, store data and undertake a critical review of your literature sources.

Part B deals with research methodology, beginning with quantitative research designs, including experimental and **quasi-experimental design** (Chapter 6). This is an appropriate place to begin our discussion of methodology since this is one of the oldest and, in a sense, the classical approach to research design. The chapter not only describes and justifies alternative experimental designs, but introduces concepts (such as validity and reliability) that are appropriate for, or at least addressed by, many other research methodologies. Chapter 7 provides a description of various qualitative designs, while Chapter 8 takes you a step further by introducing the notion of combining quantitative and qualitative designs to produce a mixed methods approach. Mixed methods can help you by combining some of the best elements of quantitative and qualitative approaches.

In Chapter 9 we take another, and increasingly popular, research methodology, surveys, and describe different types of survey and the process of survey design. A distinction is made between self-administered and interview-administered surveys and the merits of each are discussed. Partly because of their scale, surveys can be prone to sources of error such as sampling error, data collection error and interviewer error. Some practical advice is provided on how to cope with these.

Another widely used research methodology is the **case study** (Chapter 10). For many years, the case study approach has been wrongfully denigrated by some researchers as lacking in rigour, partly because it is often based upon a

small number of cases. However, as this chapter shows, case studies, if care-
fully planned, can provide a powerful means of exploring situations where
there is uncertainty or ambiguity about phenomena or events.

While some research methodologies attempt to uncover new knowledge,
evaluation (Chapter 11) involves exploring how existing knowledge is used to
inform and guide practical action. Hence, evaluation might be used to gauge
whether a teaching or training programme has been successful. But evaluation
can also be used to report on much larger units of analysis such as national
policies or government-sponsored intervention programmes.

Chapter 12 completes Part B by exploring the purposes and methods behind
action research. In Chapter 12, and, indeed, throughout the book, we look at
real world issues and problems. Action research is about addressing and, in
some cases, solving these problems. The key focus is not research for the sake
of expanding knowledge but on achieving change (often in a company, school,
college or community setting).

Of course, whichever research methodology (or combination of methodolo-
gies) we use, none can be successful without the use of sound and reliable data
collection tools (Part C). We start here with a look at, perhaps, one of the most
commonly used research instruments, the questionnaire (Chapter 13). This
chapter shows how designing valid and reliable questionnaires requires adher-
ence to a large number of design considerations that range from the writing of
individual questions to the layout of the questionnaire itself.

Questionnaires are often used as the data gathering instrument for struc-
tured or semi-structured interviews. But interviews (Chapter 14) also necessi-
tate that the researcher acquires a wide range of other skills associated with
actually conducting the interview. This chapter, then, provides some practical
advice on planning and conducting a variety of interview approaches.

But how do we know that interviewees tell the truth? It may be that they do
not know the answer to a question or that they want to hide something from us.
Another data gathering method, then, is observation (Chapter 15), which could
be used either instead of an interview or as a supplement to it (to verify the
data). As this chapter shows, observation might be undertaken overtly, where
the subjects of the research know that they are being observed or covertly where
the role of the researcher is disguised. Observation can also be conducted as
either a participant in the research setting or as a non-participant.

One of the problems in using questionnaires, interviews and observations is
that they are potentially reactive – that is, the data may become contaminated
because of, say, the bias of the research instruments or the way data are inter-
preted by the researcher. An often neglected but equally powerful data gather-
ing method is what is termed 'unobtrusive measures' (Chapter 16), which offer
the benefit of being non-reactive. Unobtrusive measures include physical evi-
dence, documentary evidence and archival analysis, including documents held
on the World Wide Web. **Unobtrusive measures** can offer flexible, creative and

imaginative ways of collecting data, often to verify findings from the use of other data collection methods.

Having collected data, they have to be analysed and the results presented (Part D). Of course, plans and designs for analysis should have been completed long before this stage. Chapter 17 looks at techniques for presenting and analysing quantitative data, including ways of categorizing quantitative data and cleaning and coding data. This chapter also examines ways of analysing data using descriptive statistics and the use of some elementary inferential statistical techniques using SPSS.

In contrast, Chapter 18 looks at approaches to how qualitative data can be analysed. It looks particularly at **content analysis** and grounded theory methods and also includes approaches such as the use of **narratives, conversational analysis** and **discourse analysis**. You will probably notice in reading Chapters 16 and 17 how some of the philosophical issues raised in Chapter 2 are given substance in terms of what is researched, and how the research is conducted.

After you have collected your data, you now want to present them in a way that enhances their credibility and impact. Chapter 19 looks at different types of research report including organizational and technical reports, and studies written up as part of an academic dissertation or thesis. Advice is given on key features, such as the use of appropriate language and writing style for the intended audience, and the structure of the report. Finally, Chapter 20 explores the 'art' of giving a presentation (often required at the end of an academic programme) and passing a viva.

HOW TO USE THE BOOK

How is the book best used as an aid to research? You could think of it as a research manual that also explains the theoretical underpinnings of research methods and provides guidance on where to find further information. It is recommended that you read through the book, focusing on the objectives listed at the beginning of each chapter. Try to get a feel for which aspects will be of particular interest to you, noting any ideas or topics, approaches and practices that strike you as relevant to your research. During the research process revisit these parts and if you need further guidance, check with the Further readings lists at the end of each chapter, which include brief details of the nature of the sources mentioned. Note also any associated Case Studies (which are designed to illustrate key research methodologies or approaches) and Activities (designed to promote thinking, reflection and skills development and, in the case of websites, a guide to additional information or resources). It is not expected that you attempt to complete all Activities – tackle those that you think would be most useful. Where it is felt appropriate, suggested answers are given for some Activities at the end of the relevant chapter. You will also find a new feature in this 2nd edition of the book,

'On the Web', which encourages you to visit useful websites that often provide valuable additional information.

TOP TIP 1.1

Finally, take time to read the Top Tips. These are specifically designed to focus and give constructive, practical advice on those topics that students often struggle with. These include help with overcoming popular misunderstandings and misconceptions.

SUMMARY

- The growing complexity of the world means that research in the real world is of growing importance. An understanding of the world is underpinned by theory.

- Basic research seeks to develop universal principles and to produce findings that are of value to society; applied research seeks to create practical solutions to organizational problems.

- Organizational research draws upon fields of inquiry such as sociology, anthropology, philosophy, communication, economics and statistics, often adopting an inter-disciplinary approach.

- A theory consists of a set of interrelated concepts, definitions and propositions that demonstrate relationships between variables.

- In using this book, do take the time to read the Case Studies, undertake the Activities and to visit the 'On the Web' sites.

SUGGESTED ANSWERS FOR ACTIVITY 1.1

Actually, it is all of them!