

Chapter 1

What is research, and why would anyone want to do it?

Nick Lee and Ian Lings

SUPERVISOR'S VIEW: PROFESSOR KWAKU ATUAHENE-GIMA



Research, contributions, knowledge and who knows what! As you embark on an academic career, the two potholes that will make or break that journey are in the form of two words: 'contribution' and 'new'. When I was in graduate school, my professors always told me to endeavour to 'make a contribution' – not only that, but also that the contribution must be 'new'. When I began my academic career, the emphasis on these two words became deafening at research conferences, seminars and workshops. When pressed for better explanations of what is a 'new contribution', many presenters would respond with something like: 'say something interesting', 'create new knowledge', 'develop new theory', etc. Hardly ever would anyone explain what 'interesting' and 'new' meant. More important, how one judges the 'interestingness' and 'newness' of a research contribution is a question that is often left unanswered.

Coupling my industry and research experiences, I have come to realise that research is about *conversations*, and that I am on a personal journey of learning and discovery – learning from what others have done and are doing to discover how and why I can contribute to their conversations. I believe that I do not create knowledge with my research and publications – rather, I participate in a conversation about issues of interest to academicians and practitioners. To the extent that my participation leads the audience to judge that I have enhanced the conversation with insights and understandings that are *new to them*, I have contributed new and interesting knowledge. Yet, I have not created new knowledge – rather the audience has created new knowledge that helps in their continuing the conversation along new and different avenues of understandings. As you read onwards, think about this and how you will offer opportunities for your academic and practitioner audiences to create their own new and interesting knowledge. This, in my view, is the beauty of research and is what makes the research journey interesting and worthwhile in spite of the deep potholes.

VIEW FROM THE TRENCHES: ANOUCHE NEWMAN



When I try to explain to my friends and family what I do, nobody really understands me, or their eyes glaze over and I change the subject. A friend recently asked me what I would do when I finished my Ph.D.: ‘Are you going to get a real job afterwards?’ Well, this *is* my real job. Why do I do research? I don’t know why I am doing what I am doing. I just fell into it and here I am. Some days I wake up and think it is the worst thing in the world. Research is not easy and it can be incredibly frustrating. On other days the very reason I hate being a researcher is why I love my job, because I like to be faced with research problems that are exciting and challenging at the same time.

When I first started ‘doing’ research, I had no idea what ‘research’ really meant. I just thought it was cool that I was getting paid to carry on studying. To be honest, I am still getting to grips with what doing research involves, and my views and opinions regarding what research actually means are evolving as I gain more experience. Research can mean different things to different people. And what constitutes ‘good’ research can also mean different things to different people. It is important that you form your own opinions. That’s one of the things that makes your research unique – along with the fact that you are supposed to be doing something that no one else has ever done before. Some people might disagree with what you believe; that’s what research is all about. You have to show those people *why* your opinion is valid. Of course, there is no right or wrong answer to any one research problem and, on occasion, your best ideas are from people who see the world in a different way to you. Be open to the different views and opinions that exist around you.

I cannot offer you a definition of research that will help you understand what it is or how to do it. You have to live it to know it and you will always be learning something new about what you think research is supposed to be.

So, you stand here at the beginning, or somewhere along the way, of a journey, that of **discovery**. You’ve already heard from some people who have successfully negotiated many of the hazards of that journey (Professors Clegg and Atuahene-Gima), and from Anouche – soon to be Dr Newman – who is only just beginning to lose sight of the early shores (we like to call this ‘leaving the beach’). If you are reading this book, we can only assume that you are interested in research in some way (well, you could be one of our Mums we guess, hello Mum – you appear later so keep reading!) You might be a research student who is only just

starting out, you might be a more experienced researcher who is looking for some ideas, or like us, you might just be interested in reading and writing about research itself. Whoever you are, as long as you are interested in thinking about research, we are writing this book for you.

This chapter is about setting out very clearly a perspective on research, and also about explaining exactly what this book is trying to do, and maybe more importantly what it is *not* trying to do. Furthermore, we are hoping desperately that you will enjoy it enough to keep reading the rest! After all, it's taken us two years to get this far so we'd really like you to read it.¹ This chapter is being written about 30,000 feet above the Atlantic Ocean on a flight to Reykjavik in Iceland. While we are there we will present the results of various research projects, some conducted with our students. Two weeks ago Nick was invited to Helsinki to speak on a panel about research, and in a month or so he will be doing the same in Disneyworld, Orlando, in the US. Research has provided each of us with what many would see as an amazing life so far. We've been to places we'd only ever heard about as kids growing up in small towns in New Zealand (Nick) and England (Ian). We've done things we'd never have dreamed of, and met some of the most amazing people in the world, many of whom have done us the honour of working with us (in fact, lots of them will appear throughout this book), and it never ceases to amaze both of us that even one person is interested in what we have to say. It's fair to say that this thing called 'research' is responsible for all of this. Well, it certainly can't be our respective good looks!

But what *is* research? This chapter is aimed at explaining that question in some way. However, as you will see as you read on through this book, there are many, *many*, different perspectives and answers to that question. We have our own perspective for sure, but we really want to give you enough information so that you can make your own mind up. Nevertheless, one really important thing to keep in mind is that to be a great researcher, you can never stop learning. We spoke above about the idea of this being a journey, and it is exactly that. However, the *journey of discovery never ends*. Every day we learn something new, and the day we stop being excited by that is the day we will think about finding a new job.

Moving on, at the end of this chapter we really hope you have come to terms with these key ideas:

- What is the purpose and added value of *this* book over other books on the same general subject?
- What is academic research, and what is knowledge?
- How can you 'contribute' to knowledge?

¹In case you are wondering, this chapter was written last, it hasn't taken us two years to write ten lines! Actually, maybe it did take *Ian* two years to write ten lines...

- There are many ways of doing research, and no one single right way.
- What the four 'ologies' are, and how they link together.
- How research can link the theoretical world, to the real world, and how this then relates to knowledge creation.

Why is it Important to Know This Stuff?



This chapter is a very important one for a number of reasons. First of all, it 'sets the scene' for all of the information to come. This is necessary because there is a heck of a lot of information, theories, ideas and questions all about to hit you. You are going to need some kind of structure in place to help you try to absorb all of that information, or else you will get overwhelmed. In fact, the information in this book is the culmination of probably a decade of doing, thinking and writing about this kind of thing, so mainlining it straight into your brain is probably going to be a bit of an overdose!

We are hoping that this chapter will give you an idea of what the book is about, and also about our own personal perspective on research. From here, you're going to be in a good position to learn more, or even decide whether you want to learn more, before you commit to the whole thing (you have bought this already haven't you? If not, go and buy it, then come back and continue reading).

In this chapter, we are going to try to set out a few key things we wished we'd known before starting out, which would have helped us a lot. We are also going to try to give you some indications of the unique features of this book, and why we spent two years writing it, rather than just recommending some other book to people who ask. With this knowledge in hand, you should be able to get the most benefit out of the book, which is very important to us.

However, maybe the most important idea we are trying to get across is that **research is fun**. Well, perhaps it's more accurate to say research *can be* fun, when you are confident in yourself and what you are trying to do. The task we set ourselves at the start of this project was to give you that confidence. Research is also a *human process*; it's done by people like you and us, not computers or robots. Researchers are real people, who have alternative opinions; they disagree, argue, make mistakes and are subject to all of the other natural social interactions like any other group. We want to get this feeling across here, and in the rest of the book. Ignoring these processes paints a very inaccurate picture of how most academic research gets done. So, read on, learn and laugh (or at least pretend to laugh when it looks like we are making a joke – that's just common courtesy).

Why (yet) another research book?

Trust us, you don't have to ask that question! Over the last couple of years we have asked ourselves that question so many times we've lost count. Actually, there are two questions: (a) why did we start writing the book; and (b) why did we continue writing it when things got tough? The answers to both are linked, but also quite separate. And both those answers illuminate the purpose of this book nicely.

The idea behind this book came from a conversation between us, Dr Nick Lee and Dr Ian Lings, in a bar called 'The Sacks of Potatoes'. If you want to find it, it's pretty well located on the campus of Aston University in Birmingham (that's in the UK, not Alabama). They do a lovely pint of bitter. Both of us had had our Ph.D.s for a couple of years, and we had each been teaching at Aston for maybe five years. We had just been given the opportunity to create a course in 'Marketing Science', which was designed to give students the academic research skills to do a good research dissertation, and maybe inspire some of them to go on to do a Ph.D. We took this as a chance to teach students 'our way' of doing research. In other words, the way we had been taught by our own supervisors and senior colleagues. However, when it came to finding a textbook for this course, we were shocked to discover that there was no single book which set everything out in one place. In fact, we had to take chapters from maybe 10 or 15 books and put them together in a readings pack. At the same time Nick was trying to teach research methods to our Doctoral students, and again finding it very hard to locate appropriate material all in one place.

What we were looking for was not a book which went through the fine details of statistical formulae or sampling, or the 'technical' side of research. That kind of thing is pretty easy to find (and you know what, it's not really the hard part). No, what we wanted was a book which taught you how to **think** about doing research. We wanted an easy-to-follow resource which showed how philosophical issues linked with practical and technical issues, and then how students should think and write about those things. In other words, *how do you make decisions about what to do when you are doing research*, and then *what are the implications of those decisions for your research?* Bits and pieces of this were available in many different books and articles, but we couldn't locate an integrated source. As well as this, we were beginning to find that we were continually answering the same questions asked of us by research students. We began to think 'wouldn't it be great if we could somehow clone ourselves in miniature, and sit on people's bookshelves ready to answer those fundamental questions'. This would save a lot of time. However, we were informed that such technology was not available right now (and to be fair it might be a bit weird). So, we decided that the next best thing would be to try to pack all of the experiences and things we had discovered about research (mainly through making mistakes) into a book. Then, we could just force – I mean suggest – that people buy that book.

This is the book you now hold in your hands. To us, it's the cumulative result of a lot of mistakes, a lot of questions, not as many definitive answers and a heck of a lot of fun over

the last ten years since we both started researching. We both hope you enjoy it, and, most importantly, that you learn from it.

So, what *is* research?

If you open up any research methods text, you'll get a definition about what research is. However, most texts, even those which are supposed to be aimed at doctoral and postdoctoral-level researchers, will give you a definition which is implicitly (or explicitly) based on the viewpoint of the author. You may, or (more likely) may not yet, understand that there are many different definitions of research, based on many different philosophies and opinions about the world. As you move through the book, you'll discover the characteristics of these opinions and views, and you will begin to clarify your own personal view of the world and research.

Chapters 2 and 3 will spend a lot of time and ink on outlining two very different approaches to research, and Chapter 15 will look at how they are incontrovertibly opposed and undeniably similar at the same time. But right here we don't want to get into that. What we do want to do is define research in such a way that it does not overly bias one position over another, and taps into the real commonality of what research is all about. So, um, here goes: ***Research is about generating knowledge about what you believe the world is.***

Pretty simple huh? Well, actually, it's deceptively so. As you will come to see, there are very different definitions about what knowledge is, what the 'real world' is and also about what 'type' of knowledge we can generate – and even about what the knowledge generation process should be. In other words, within this definition can live an almost unlimited number of different flavours and styles – most of which are founded on reasonably solid principles. So don't get too complacent! The rest of this section will deal with a few key principles of research, which will be of varying relevance to each of you, depending on how you got here in the first place.

Induction and deduction

The two concepts of induction and deduction are vitally important for any consideration of research, and they will appear repeatedly throughout the book. They are both concepts from elementary logic,² and can help you link together the 'thinking' parts of research with the 'getting out there and doing' parts. **Deduction** is basically the process of drawing conclusions from rational and logical principles. In the terms of logic a valid argument is one in which there is no situation where the principles (which are called premises) are true and the conclusion is not true, and this is a good place to start talking about research. Let's look

²Learning the basics of logic is quite handy actually; if you are interested we will suggest a book to start off with in the 'further reading' section.

at an example. The classic principles of deduction (and induction) were laid down by the Ancient Greeks – who you will hear about later – and concern the idea of moving from a general law to a conclusion about a specific instance. For example, the premises that ‘writing a book always makes the author(s) rich’ and ‘Nick and Ian are writing a book’ together lead to the conclusion that ‘Nick and Ian will become rich’. That is only valid, however, if the premises are true. If only it were so! You can consider the premises to be examples of ‘theory’, which you will learn about later. In most scientific situations, and especially social science, we are not sure about whether our theories are true. In this case we need to go and somehow test our theories, usually by designing some kind of *research*, most often collecting some real-world data.

Induction is essentially the opposite of deduction. It is the process of moving from specific observations to a more general theory. So using the example above, we might observe Nick and Ian finishing the book, and then accruing vast quantities of wealth, and perhaps other authors doing the same, and therefore come to the inductive conclusion that ‘writing a book makes the author rich’. So in this case you are moving from observations of the world to general theories about it. However, it’s not quite as simple as it seems. In most real-world research contexts, induction and deduction tend to be linked together, almost sequentially in some cases. Figure 1.1 shows this in graphical terms.

Different research traditions and philosophies tend to emphasise either induction or deduction. But in the real world these distinctions are rarely as clear as advocates of each position would have you believe. Figure 1.1 implies that in the real world we often alternate between deduction and induction. Figure 1.2 shows the process as more of a ‘spiral’ which is similar to how you could interpret Nick’s own Ph.D. project. This begins from his supervisor’s (Professor John Cadogan’s) incidental observations during the course of his own M.Phil. research in 1993–4, to an inductive idea generation phase, until Nick came on board in 1998 and took the project on in a deductive fashion to begin with, followed by an

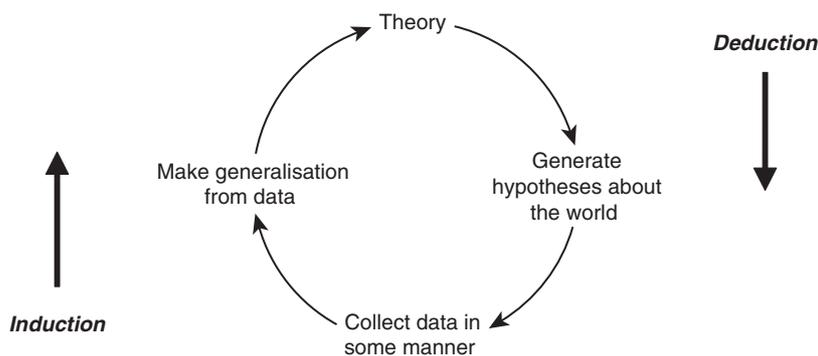


Figure 1.1 Induction and deduction in social science theory

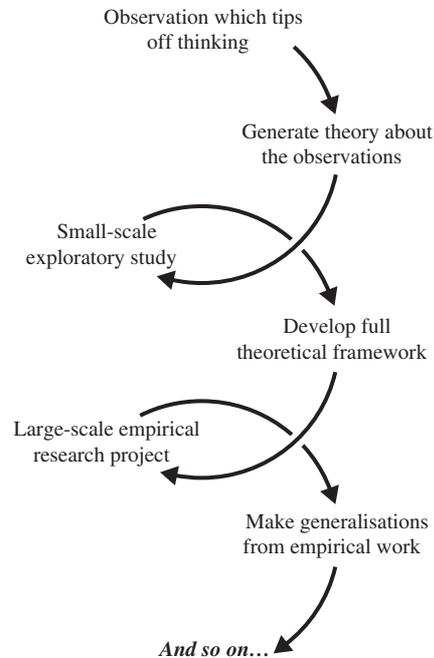


Figure 1.2 Induction and deduction in practice

inductive stage, and so on. In fact, the project as a whole is still continuing in this spiral, and you may be able to follow the trail of research studies which come out of it over the coming years (hopefully!). In this figure is the first use of an important word for the rest of this book; **empirical**. The word empirical refers to something which is observable by the senses. In other words, to most intents and purposes, it means observable data from the world around us. Unfortunately, there is sometimes confusion over the use of this word. We have both been made aware of situations where ‘empirical’ has been used to refer to ‘quantitative’ or experimental observations. The use in this book, however, will be the more general one, where empirical refers to *all* observable data, both quantitative and qualitative. That said, don’t get ‘empirical’ confused with **empiricism**, which is a distinct philosophy that will be discussed in the next chapter.

It’s likely you will feel more or less comfortable with either the inductive or deductive approach, and this opinion will begin to form more firmly after you have read the first three chapters. However, it is important to realise that (a) there are valid arguments for both positions, and (b) in the real world we tend to incorporate more of a spiral process over the course of an entire research project, particularly in the social sciences where theories are much less fully formed than in the natural sciences such as physics.

Commercial versus academic research

Or, the ‘real world’ versus the ‘ivory tower’ as some have put it. You might see some of the ideas in this short section discussed using the names ‘pure’ and ‘applied’ research in other books; however, there are some important differences which need discussion. First things first, this is not a book about how to do ‘commercial research’ – although in our opinion a lot of commercial (e.g. consultancy) research projects would be far better if they used the principles discussed here. Many of you reading this book will have come from commercial backgrounds, where you will have had experience of either doing, commissioning, or interpreting the results of market and commercial research. While this will give you a decent start, you should be aware that the academic research environment is *very* different from the commercial environment. In the commercial research world, a client comes up with a brief for research, aimed at tackling a specific problem for their organisation. What is important is *solving the problem*. For example, if the brief is ‘find out why sales of my Fizzy Sugar Water drink are falling’, the company only wishes for an answer to that question. Furthermore, that answer is likely to be guarded jealously by the company as a competitive advantage. Without an understanding of much of the rest of this book, it is hard to show how this is different from an academic study, but we can give you some brief ideas. For example, there is very seldom any ‘theory’ underlying the commercial research project, instead the researcher simply goes out into the world and looks for answers. This approach ignores vast swathes of prior work that has been done, which may be applicable to the situation. Furthermore, commercial researchers tend to be led by the data they collect (we call it being ‘data driven’) rather than interpreting data in the light of prior theory. This can lead to answers which are applicable to the single situation – which is of course the objective of commercial work – but have little value to other contexts. However, as you will see later on, academic research takes a far broader approach.

Academic research is usually concerned with generating new knowledge about something. This knowledge can be general or applied to a specific situation. However, the important distinction from commercial research is that it *rests on a theory of what knowledge is and what it is not*. What we mean is that for commercial research the ‘knowledge’ is not important for its own sake, just for solving a problem, whereas in academic research it *is* important. Our knowledge of the world increases in incremental fashion as more and more researchers discover new things, which add on to other things which we already ‘knew’. In order for this process to be coherent, we must understand exactly what knowledge is, and how we can generate it. In doing so we can develop some level of appreciation as to how that piece of knowledge fits with the rest of cumulative human knowledge. In a commercial context, this is not important in the slightest. You tend to find that academic research projects are concerned with general theories rather than specific problems. For example, you might find a study on ‘factors which influence the sales of fast moving consumer goods’, rather than one aimed at a specific brand of fizzy sugar water. Such a study would often have

to spend considerable time on understanding previous theories before ever going out into the field to collect data. The aim of such a project would not necessarily be to solve a management problem, but to further develop theory. This type of research is often called **pure research**. It is research done for the sake of improving knowledge. It is part of the duty of academic researchers to disseminate the findings of their work in an open fashion, such as through books, research articles in journals, and things like that. Such work can be aimed at discovering new things, or extending existing knowledge and theories into new contexts. The key, however, is that every academic/pure research study should make a *contribution to existing knowledge*. In other words, it must (a) **tell us something we didn't know before**, and (b) **be conducted in a rigorous way**. The rest of this book will be about how you can do that.

This is not to say that the findings from academic research are of no use to anyone except other researchers. Indeed, in the social sciences (and especially the business research fields) it is often part of the remit of the academic researcher to produce findings which are of some use to the relevant practitioner. That's why in many management and business research journals you will find a section marked 'managerial implications', where the researchers try to show how managers can take this new knowledge and improve their performance in some way. The term **applied research** is often used to refer to research that is aimed at solving a particular problem. However, it is our opinion that it should not be confused with the commercial research above. Applied research, to us, should be considered as a form of academic research which is aimed at providing answers to a specific problem, *as well as contributing to theory*. Often, we can take existing theory and apply it into a specific business context. But this work must still be based on theory and knowledge, rather than just starting from scratch every time. Sometimes, applied research is funded by private organisations, who wish to use the findings to improve their processes or performance. In this case it is vital that you (and they) understand the rights you have to publish that work in academic journals, or more importantly your final thesis (if you are doing one). If possible, get a signed agreement before you put in any of your own efforts and resources.

What is knowledge?

In the previous section, we repeatedly used the term 'knowledge' as an important distinction between different types of research. What then is knowledge? Actually, it's a really hard question. Many people never really think about what characteristics a belief or piece of information must have in order for it to be classed as 'knowledge', but Chapters 2 and 3 deal with knowledge in much more detail, and will show you that there are in fact a lot of smart people who have thought about it. Perhaps you remember as a child being told about something which was called 'common sense'? We never quite uncovered

what this common sense was, but it seemed to be something which was quite obvious to anyone, and you didn't have to be really intelligent to understand that it was right.³ But what makes this 'common sense' worth believing? There never seems to be any evidence attached to common sense, it is just there, blindingly obvious. Nick once got a review back from a very well-regarded academic journal, saying that he had merely provided some evidence to support 'common sense that all sales managers would surely know already'. And herein lies to our mind the difference between 'common sense' and 'knowledge'.

In order for something to be knowledge, *it must rest upon some kind of reliable evidence* at least. Now there are different ideas as to what makes evidence reliable, which will be discussed in the following chapters. However, you must somehow be able to justify a piece of information in order for it to be knowledge. Common sense by itself is not knowledge, unless it rests on a body of evidence (induction) or a reliable theory (deduction). The need to switch off the power before changing an electrical socket is both common sense and knowledge. It is deductive knowledge for most of us because it rests on a reliable theory of electricity; it is inductive knowledge as well for Nick as he once electrocuted himself trying to fix something. Common sense which is not also knowledge is questionable, so make sure you do question it when someone next says to you 'but it's just common sense'.

But how are you supposed to contribute to this thing called 'knowledge', if you don't even know what it is? Well, as you move through the book, you will begin to understand the different ideas about what knowledge can be and how you can generate it. Before then, you need to have some tools in your armoury. These are what we call the 'ologies'. They are four key terms for different concepts of the knowledge generation process, which can differ according to how you perceive the world and what we can know about it:

- **Ontology:** Ontology is the study of the nature of reality. For our purposes, you can think of an ontology as being a set of beliefs about *what* the world we are studying actually is. For example, is reality objective and independent of our perception of it, or is it constructed by those who experience it? Does it exist apart from our experience of it?
- **Epistemology:** An epistemology should follow from an ontology. Epistemology is the study of what we can know about reality, and is dependent in many ways on what you believe reality to be. For example, can we generate unbiased, generalisable knowledge about the world, or is this knowledge specific to a particular time and place?
- **Axiology:** Axiology is in essence about the 'aims' of your research, and receives a little less attention than the other three in this list. In a basic sense, what are you trying to do? It follows again from ontology. For example, do you try to explain and predict the world, or are you only seeking to understand it? Can you even do one without the other?

³In fact, one of Nick's (many) sayings is that 'common sense is what dumb people use to make smart people feel stupid'.

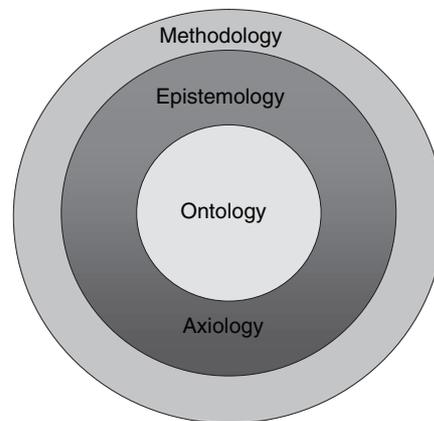


Figure 1.3 Linking the 'ologies' together

- **Methodology:** Finally, methodology is the least important, but most discussed, of these concepts for most researchers. Methodology is basically *how* you are going to go about your research. It is fundamentally dependent on the first three, as you will discover in the rest of this book. For example, are you going to use qualitative or quantitative methods?

Figure 1.3 shows one way of looking at the link between these four concepts. In fact, one way of looking at the rest of the book is as a long discussion on each of these concepts, and how they link together.

Theory, knowledge, research

So, we've discussed quite a few different bits and pieces so far, but let's have a go at linking them all together in some way. First, consider the idea of **theory**. Theory is a strange kind of concept, and Ian will deal with it in some depth in Chapters 4 and 5. There are many complex ways of defining theory, but we won't belabour the point at this stage. In simple terms, you can think of a theory as being a set of interrelated ideas, which is an attempt at explaining some aspect of the real world. Many people think of theory as being represented by words and statements; however, theories can be represented in different ways, and they sometimes get given different names when this is done. For example, a **model** is a representation of a theory, usually in some graphical or mathematical form. While we might wish our theories to include all things relevant to the aspect of the real world we are studying, this is generally impossible. Instead, theories are *simplifications* of the real world. Part of the researcher's job is to work out just how much simplification can be done beyond which nothing of interest can be found. One interesting distinction for our

purposes is between **normative** and **positive** theory (Nick will discuss this in some more depth in the next chapter). Positive theory is what most of this book is implicitly concerned with, it is that type of theory which is concerned with what is actually happening, not what ought to happen. In fact, Babbie (2006) says that this is all that social science theory is concerned with. **Normative** theory, on the other hand, is about the ‘right’ way to do things. This can be concerned with ethical right and wrong, or a more rational type of right and wrong, such as how to make the ‘right’ decision in a business context. Indeed, it is the case that a reasonable amount of managerial and organisational research could be considered to have normative overtones at least. Interestingly, it is only in the relatively recent past that the great minds have focused solely on positive theory. If you begin to study philosophy in any depth at all, you’ll no doubt find that philosophers in history tended to mix considerations of what *was* happening, with what *should* be happening. But that is by-the-by.

We’ve discussed knowledge in some more depth already, so let’s talk about research now. In simplistic terms, and drawing from all of the previous discussion so far, research can be thought of as the process of generating some kind of evidence with which to support (or refute) your theory. Well, that would be a deductive way of looking at it, anyway. An inductive way of considering research would be as the process of generating information with which to form some kind of theory. In fact, we like to think of the research process as one of *linking together the theoretical world and the ‘real’ world*. This is exemplified in Figure 1.4, which will form an overarching structure for this book. Each chapter is designed in some way to illuminate this link in a different way.

The *theoretical world* is the world in which our ideas, theories, and concepts exist. Part of the research process exists solely in this world. That part concerns linking together different

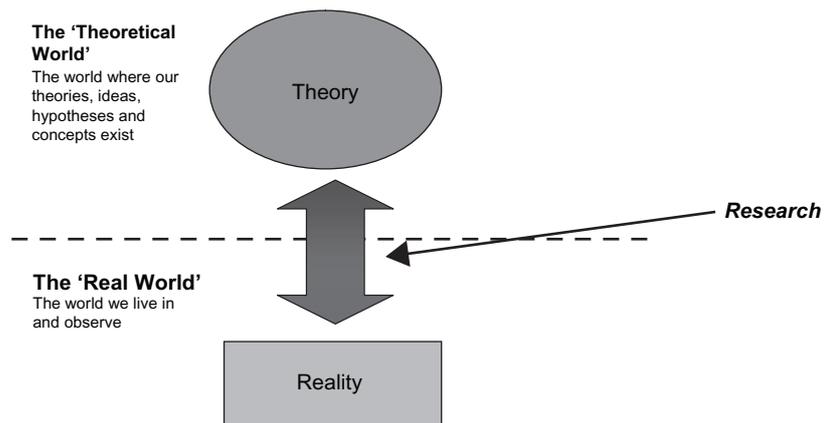


Figure 1.4 Theory, reality, research

ideas, theories, concepts, laws, generalisations, and the like. If this process results in something which makes enough of a contribution to our knowledge in itself, it can be the subject of an entire research project or dissertation. However, this book is more about the type of research which tries to link theory with ‘reality’ – whatever your beliefs about the nature of reality. The conception of knowledge we’ve outlined earlier is the *result of research*. Whichever way that research is conducted, if it is done so in a justifiable way, then it should either (a) create new knowledge, or (b) add evidence to our existing knowledge. Both of these are contributions to knowledge, and are appropriate to different situations. As you move through the rest of this book, you will begin to learn about the different ways you can justifiably conduct research and create knowledge, and how proponents of one view may differ from, and disagree with, proponents of another.

Some practical tips and advice

So, after the information about what this book is about, it would be useful to tell you what it is *not* about. Although before you read on, perhaps you should go to the counter and purchase this? Go on, you know you want to!

Now you’ve paid for the book, here’s the bad news. This book is *not* a handbook on how to do your research degree from choosing a topic to writing your dissertation. There are a number of very good books on that topic (some of which we refer to at the end of this chapter). This book is – as we have already mentioned – for somebody who wants to learn how to *think* in the way that is required to become a good researcher. It’s not a ‘cookbook’, or a step-by-step guide. It’s designed to show you the different ingredients, explain how they link together, and then allow you to design your *own* recipes. Then, each time you have to do research, you won’t have to find a recipe to copy, you’ll have the skills to design your own. So you won’t be finding sections on how to choose a topic, how to manage your supervisor and your time, and all of that. You can get that stuff elsewhere. It’s useful, but it won’t make you a good researcher. Although you may become a good mimic of one! Which is fine until you hit something you didn’t prepare for ... However, we do recognise that a large amount of the audience of this book will be those who *are* candidates for higher research degrees. So even though we don’t want to spend a lot of time on it, we would like to dispense some helpful advice on the ‘practical’ side of doing a research degree. Which we shall do so here.

First of all, we believe the key factor in succeeding in a research degree of whatever form is not intelligence, is not having a good supervisor, and is not choosing the right topic. These things are useful for sure, and they make you more likely to succeed (usually). However, the key to success in a research degree is **hard work**. If you are willing to put in the required effort, and do whatever you have to do to succeed, then you *will* succeed almost every time (barring unforeseen catastrophes and the like). This is true whatever

your research goal is,⁴ whether it be to publish in the top journal in your field, or achieve a big research grant; anything is possible if you are *genuine* in your willingness to do whatever it takes to get there. So ask yourself before you start, are you willing to make sacrifices to get through? If not, think very carefully about starting a research degree, and a research career, because it is *not* an easy ride. The other question you need to ask yourself is **why are you doing this?** It is very important that you have a goal in mind which completing a research degree will help you achieve. Both of us did Ph.D. degrees because we wanted to be academics, and this goal helped us when times get tough. If you are just doing it because you don't have anything else to do, then you are setting yourself up for disaster.

Secondly, while learning the conceptual, technical, and methodological tools outlined in this book should give you a huge head-start on becoming a great researcher, you also need to realise that researchers like us, you, and your supervisors and colleagues are **human**. These collections of humans in academic departments are just the same as all other social systems. They are subject to (sometimes huge) egos, politics, emotional entanglements, romantic intrigues, friendships, nemeses, and all of the rest. And when you start going to academic conferences things will get even more interesting! With this in mind, as a research student you should make yourself aware of the political situation in your department, and your academic field. Who is powerful? What viewpoints on the subject are dominant? Things like that are very important to your success. Not that you have to follow the crowd at all. Please be different and original. However, if you are going to be controversial you need to pay attention to who is likely to be with you, and who is likely to be against you. Don't go barging in like you are the greatest thing ever seen (even if you think that you are⁵). Remember, even though *you* think your work is the most important thing in the world, academics have many other demands on their time and mental resources. So do try to balance your demands with the other demands on your supervisor and colleagues. Our advice is to try to integrate yourself with your academic department socially, but don't feel you have to become 'best friends' with anyone in particular. Of course rules are made to be broken, but do remember that close personal relationships can make your life more difficult. If you are happy with that, then go for it. Conversely, being likeable and respectful, and participating in social activities, can help you immensely. So what we are saying is try to understand the social situation of being a researcher, and balance these things out.

Finally, let's talk briefly about topic choice. Simply put, there are no real rules here. It's important not to do something you hate or fundamentally disagree with, but then again this could lead to some very interesting angles on a topic. Most books advise you to do something you are 'interested in', but sometimes this advice is not very helpful. In fact, if

⁴Incidentally, it's true of pretty much everything in life!

⁵For those of you who knew Nick as a Ph.D. student, yes he is aware of the irony of these statements, thank you.

you get too involved in your topic, you will have major problems writing it up – since most of the time this involves some ruthless cutting of prized work (we'll talk about this in Chapter 16). We've both seen Ph.D. students have real problems finishing off as they just didn't know when to stop, and didn't want to take advice on changing things to give them the best chance of passing the examination. Their topic was so special to them that they couldn't look at it rationally. What is very important is that your *supervisor is interested in the topic*. Remember, they have many demands on their time, so if they love your work they are much more likely to engage with it. Topic choice should really be in conjunction with your supervisor in our opinion, but some good tips on choosing a topic are:

- Do try to be interested in some way in the topic, it does help.
- Make sure your supervisor is interested in it, and is competent to supervise the topic.
- It also helps if your supervisor has an idea of the methods you will use and can assist you in learning about them.
- Make sure you are not doing something too outrageous. It is attractive to do something 'radical', but it often leads to major difficulties later on.
- That said, make sure you are doing a topic which has scope for development and flexibility. You need to make sure you can make enough of a contribution to knowledge to justify your degree.

Final points, and how to use this book

We hope that this chapter has given you a flavour of what this book is about and how it can help you. As you have probably worked out already, we think research is a wonderful business to be in, even though it can sometimes be incredibly frustrating! Our idea is that you will be able to use this book as a central source for your development as a researcher. When you need something more specific, you can begin by referring to the sources which are presented at the end of each chapter. Most definitely we don't think this book is everything you need to know to be a great researcher. But we do think it is the best *starting point* available to someone who wants to become an academic researcher in a social or organisational research field.

One of the reasons we believe this is that it contains an integrated and in-depth view of things which you don't often find in a single source. For example, it is rare to find such attention given to philosophy of science in a foundational book (see Chapters 2, 3, and 15), as well as information on measurement (Chapters 6 and 7), literature and theory development (Chapters 4 and 5), and both qualitative and quantitative research methods. However, we think that a key strength of the book is its integration. At many points we have tried to link together philosophical issues with practical and technical ones, to show how they are inseparable.

With this in mind, a key goal was to write the book in such a way that a reader would feel comfortable reading it from cover-to-cover (as well as being able to dip in and out).

We don't feel that one can truly appreciate the research process in a piecemeal fashion. As we have hopefully hammered you over the head with in this chapter, research is a set of inextricably interlinked parts – like a puzzle with an almost infinite variety of answers. We do appreciate (more accurately, our Ph.D. students have forced us to accept) that many of you will dip in and out of this book as you hit on certain problems. However, we have tried very hard to cross-reference throughout, so maybe you will be inspired to read other parts of the book as well.

Before we finish, we'd like to draw your attention to some of the more unique features of the book – to help you get the most out of it. You'll no doubt be aware that the first section of this chapter contained three interesting things you might not have seen before in a research book, and these are repeated at the start of each chapter. First, we have a viewpoint from a leading scholar who is an acknowledged expert in their field, with special knowledge or skills in the topic of the chapter. These academics have been specifically selected as having interesting and important information about the topic, and maybe even viewpoints that differ from ours! As we keep saying, research is about different perspectives, and we hope to give you as many as possible in this book, while still being somewhat coherent. Secondly, we have a corresponding viewpoint from a researcher who is closer to the beginning of their careers, perhaps a research student, or someone who has recently finished a research degree. We call this the 'View from the trenches' as it is a view from the front lines of actually doing research. These contributors were selected specifically as they dealt with the topic of the chapter in some depth when they were 'learning the ropes'. We hope they will let you in on a few secrets that your supervisors and more experienced colleagues might not tell you about, and show you how to avoid common pitfalls. Finally, there is a section entitled 'Why is it important to know this stuff?' We developed this section because we were told that – to our shock – students tend not to read things just for the sake of it. This section will tell you *why* the topic of the chapter is vital to your development as a researcher, whatever research path you travel down.⁶

Within each chapter you will also find two different types of box. **Alternative views** show that there are indeed different ways of looking at a particular topic, and give you pointers about how you can find out more, or extend your own knowledge. On the other hand, **Illustrations, Definitions and Examples (IDEs)** extend the body text a little more, sometimes giving examples of how you can apply concepts practically, sometimes giving extended definitions of concepts which don't 'fit' in the main body. At the end of each chapter you will find a list of our favourite books and articles on the topic of that chapter, with some brief details about why we think they are so great. The full reference for each of these is provided in the Bibliography section at the end of the book. Finally, you'll find

⁶At this point Anouche Newman and Laura Chamberlain deserve significant thanks for coming up with the ideas of the 'View from the trenches' and 'Why is it important to know this stuff?' sections respectively.

some exercises which you can go through to help you cement the content of this chapter in your mind. The exercises are designed to be (at least a little) fun, and also to help you realise that – even though it may sometimes feel like it – your research career is not the only thing of importance in life!

Finally, we'd just like to make a short note on who we are, and our own research standpoints and backgrounds. As you already know if you were paying attention earlier, this book was jointly conceptualised by both of us, while we were colleagues at Aston Business School. However, Ian subsequently moved to the University of Technology in Sydney, and thus the lion's share of the writing was done by Nick, with Ian's contributions explicitly noted at the beginning of the relevant chapters. Both of us did our Ph.D. degrees at Aston Business School in the UK, and we share a similar view on research. This view on research would most clearly be expressed by the content of the next chapter – so we won't go into it here in any depth. While this may seem self-explanatory to many, we both believe that there is an external world out there to be observed, explained, and ultimately predicted, and that the knowledge we generate in one situation can (within limits) be generalised to other contexts. However, we are aware that this is not the view held by all researchers, and we have tried very hard to provide enough information about alternative views to allow you to make your own minds up on what you believe about reality, knowledge, and research (see especially Chapter 3). Nevertheless, methodologically speaking we are both eclectic, having published work using qualitative and quantitative methods, as well as work which has been purely theoretical.

So, onwards into the great wide open! We hope you have taken the following points from this chapter:

- Being a researcher can be a rewarding choice of career; but it is a process of constant learning as well.
- This book is about learning how to *think* about doing research, much more than it is about technical processes such as formulae and numbers.
- Research has many different definitions, but one overall common characteristic is that it concerns the generation of knowledge about the world.
- There are some differences between inductive and deductive processes of research, but in practical terms we often incorporate both in any given project, especially in the social sciences.
- Academic research must make a contribution to knowledge, or in other words, tell us something we didn't know before. That said, there are many ways of conceptualising just what a contribution to knowledge actually is.
- Knowledge is information which has some degree of justification, but that justification can differ according to one's epistemology and ontology.
- Ontology, epistemology, axiology, and methodology are key concepts, and are all linked together.
- On one level, research is the process of linking theory to reality, whatever your beliefs about these things, and it results in the creation of knowledge.
- This book is about knowledge creation through research, and we hope it adds something to the already vast literature on the subject.

Further reading

There are many, many outstanding books on research and research methods out there in the world. In some ways, we would like this book to act as a central point, from which you can go out and learn more as required. With this in mind, and as we already mentioned, at the end of each chapter we will provide a list of our favourite books and articles on the topic, for your reading delight. We refer to many books which have relevance to the content of this chapter later on, in other chapters, but some which do not appear later are:

- *The Practice of Social Research* by Earl Babbie. This book is popular in the US, but not so much in Europe. This is a shame, as we think it offers an excellent insight into the theory of research, as well as the social practice of it.
- *How to Get a Ph.D.* by Estelle M. Phillips and D. S. Pugh. This book is as much about the process of the Ph.D. as it is about research itself. It is a useful resource on lots of things we don't cover here – like managing your supervisor, time management, and all of that stuff.
- *Logic* by Wilfred Hodges. Logic is a useful tool for aspiring researchers in many ways, and this book is a nice introduction to it.

There are what seem like hundreds of other books on the market which are called things like 'Doing a Dissertation', 'Research Methods for ...' and the like. We wouldn't want to recommend any specific ones from this group. After all, if they did what we wanted, we wouldn't have written our own! Nevertheless, each of them offers some unique insight, and they can all contribute to your development.

Unlike the rest of this book, we have only one exercise for you this time. However, we think it might be the most important of the lot!

1. Write down in less than 300 words an answer to the question: *Why are you doing research?* In it, consider the following points:
 - a. What are the aims of your project?
 - b. What do you hope to get out of it?
 - c. How committed are you to this goal?
 - d. What are the implications of the first three issues on the effort you are willing to put in to the project?

It's important to note that there are no right or wrong answers here, but clarifying your feelings at the start will help you immensely to direct and channel your efforts, as well as set your expectations as to the likely outcomes. Remember, you can be as successful as you want, as long as you are willing to put the effort in. It's up to you!
