

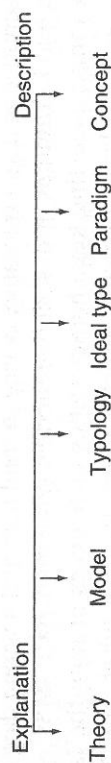
2 The 'Nuts and Bolts' of Research

Chapter 2 introduces:

- The key tools used in research: *theory, model, typology, ideal type, paradigm, concept* and the abuse of concepts
- The key terms used in research: *methods and methodology*

tools I shall introduce except the concept of 'theory'. While the tools below may have a generic meaning that can travel across disciplines, 'theory' is less easy to pin down. This is due to the role theory plays in social research, a role complicated by the fact that it is utilised for different purposes by different academic perspectives, working in different philosophical traditions (see chapter 5). For this reason I shall not include a discussion of theory here, but rather in chapter 6 which is devoted entirely to understanding theory and its role in research.

A good way to introduce key concepts used in research is to suggest a continuum of research tools that have as their intention 'explaining' social phenomena at one end and 'describing' social phenomena at the other. This is, of course, an oversimplification for the purpose of understanding. Along this continuum it is possible to place the tools in question (they are: **theory, model, typology, ideal type, paradigm and concept**):



In general terms the above continuum can be understood as a range of tools employed in social research for different purposes. As with all the broad categorisations made throughout this book, the above continuum is a rough guide and not a precise description. I have listed the research tools in order of their ability to *explain* social phenomena. All of these tools can be looked upon as classificatory devices; that is, they help us make sense of, categorise, understand and explain diverse social phenomena. Theory is the most complex tool used in social research and concepts are the least complex, although this is not to suggest that some concepts or 'concept-clusters' (i.e. more than one concept constituting a phrase, for example 'conditional loyalty' – see below for more on this) cannot be made to accommodate complex issues. An 'explanation' is not to be understood as being better or more significant than a 'description' of an event. The point is that different academic disciplines have different purposes and aims: scholars undertaking historical studies in general do not employ a specific 'theory' or 'model', but would not be averse to employing a 'typology', 'ideal type' or set of 'concepts' to describe and attempt to understand particular events. Many historians and numerous other scholars in

In this chapter I set out to 'demystify' the research process by introducing and explaining the generic meanings of the key tools and terms used in research across the human sciences. Naturally, I have been very selective in the choice of tools and terms included; however, most students will come across them in their studies. You should look upon them as the 'scaffolding' around which the language of research is built. Now, this may strike you as an exercise akin to watching paint dry, yet, as I highlighted in the previous chapter, if you learn the 'language' of research, you are far more likely to produce a clear and precise piece of work. The tools and terms discussed in this chapter are often understood wrongly, used indiscriminately and employed interchangeably. The result is confusion within disciplines and a lack of dialogue between disciplines.

► The tools of research

It is my contention that while *discipline-specific* terms and concepts exist and have their uses (e.g. 'supply and demand' in economics; 'policy-transfer' in political science; 'social stratification' in sociology, etc.), generic research terms and concepts *have the same fundamental meaning in whatever discipline they are used*. This holds true for all the

different disciplines who maintain that they simply 'get on with the job of research' and leave 'theorising' to methodologists, are, ironically, making theoretical claims about the status and nature of knowledge (on historians see Fulbrook 2002). As I shall show, *all* research is underpinned by meta-theoretical assumptions (see chapters 4 and 5 for a deeper discussion of this). On the other hand, many political scientists would want to 'explain' or even attempt to 'predict' future events or actors' behaviour by adopting and using models and theories.

The following section runs through the terms on the continuum, giving their root definitions and examples of how they are used in research.

Model, typology and ideal type

Model

A model is a representation of something, in the way that a model aeroplane is a replica of a real aeroplane. A model can be both a descriptive and an exploratory device. A road map and a wiring diagram are good examples of descriptive models (Walliman 2001: 248), with the former selecting key characteristics or features of how the land lies and the latter depicting *exactly* where the live wires are. The accuracy of a wiring diagram is a case of life and death. In social research, on the other hand, models are less accurate and this inaccuracy is rarely so dangerous. Some academics attempt to represent reality by a series of boxes and arrows which depict and attempt to make explicit significant relationships between specific aspects of the model; thus a model 'enables the formulation of empirically testable propositions regarding the nature of these relationships' (Frankfort-Nachmias and Nachmias 1992: 44). A significant number of academics in political science, and especially economics, swear by the use of modelling as a way of ensuring rigorous research. Models can help us 'predict' human actions, for example how people are likely to vote. Such assumptions about the ability of social research to 'explain' human behaviour are usually linked to the research tradition of 'positivism' and those academics operating within it (see chapter 5 for a further discussion of this and other research traditions). A number of scholars, as I shall show, share neither the assumptions made by positivists (and the language they employ) nor the modelling method used to study human behaviour. It is less important *whether* you use a model in your work, but more *what you believe* your model can tell us about social reality.

Box 1 What does a model do?

A model is:

an abstraction from reality that serves the purpose of ordering and simplifying our view of reality while still representing its essential characteristics.... A model, then, is a representation of reality; it delineates certain aspects of the real world as being relevant to the problem under investigation, it makes explicit the significant relationships among the aspects, and it enables the formulation of empirically testable propositions regarding the nature of these relationships. (Frankfort-Nachmias and Nachmias 1992: 44)

A model, like theory, is an abstraction of reality, and can be a good way of visualising some of the relationships between concepts. **Hypotheses** are often depicted using models (i.e. boxes and arrows). The boxes and arrows themselves do not mean anything, except that they depict, in this case, the effect of one variable (let us say a person's dietary intake) on another (let us take level of fitness). If this relationship between two **variables** is written in text, the reader has to imagine it in his or her mind. By using a model, however, the reader receives an abstract picture of the relationship. This becomes more important when you add a list of other factors that may influence a person's level of fitness, for example housing, upbringing, jogs around the block, weight, etc. All of these influences can be schematically laid down to assist our thought processes. You are more likely to come up with other relationships, causal or otherwise, by using a model than if you attempt to store this information in your head.

I think you should avoid conflating the term 'model' with 'research paradigm or tradition' and 'research perspective', as David Silverman does (2000: 77–8). For example, he cites 'functionalism' as a 'model' in social research. To be more precise and less confusing, it is a research 'perspective' in several disciplines, most notably sociology, and it is also a good example of a 'grand theory' (see chapters 5 and 6 for an explanation of 'functionalism'). It falls within a certain 'research paradigm', namely that of 'positivism'. By contrast, a model is a representation of reality imposed on raw data so as to draw out possible relationships among variables.

Typology

Typologies – and, in this rare case, we can use this term interchangeably with 'taxonomies' – are similar systems of classification to ideal types.

They consist of 'a system of categories constructed to fit empirical observations so that relationships among categories can be described' (Frankfort-Nachmias and Nachmias 1992: 40). These devices can be seen as loose frameworks within which to organise and systematise our observations. Typologies do not provide us with explanations; rather they describe empirical phenomena by fitting them into a set of categories. What they do help researchers with is the organisation of a wide range of diverse facts that can be structured into logical, but sometimes arbitrary, categories, which facilitates understanding of complex matters. Bailey sums it up thus: 'One of the chief merits of a typology is **parsimony**. ... A well-constructed typology can work miracles in bringing order out of chaos. It can transform the overwhelming complexity of an apparent eclectic congeries of numerous apparently diverse cases into a well-ordered set of a few rather homogenous types' (cited in Neuman 2000: 44). In comparative politics, the typology has a slightly different role. Built on the earliest classification scheme proposed by Aristotle (see box 2), it serves to 'reduce the complexity of the world by seeking out those qualities that countries share and those that they do not share' (Landman 2000: 5).

Box 2 Aristotle's typology of regime types

Formally speaking, the construction of typologies is the attempt to develop a single variable through the interaction of two or more further variables. And this is exactly what Aristotle did in his attempt to classify regime types:

by taking the 'form' of rule (either 'good' or 'corrupt') (variable 1) and factoring in the different number of rulers making up the decision-making body (either 'one', 'few' or 'many') (variable 2), Aristotle came up with six different types of regime (variable 3): monarchy, aristocracy and polity (the 'good' regime types) and tyranny, oligarchy and democracy (the 'corrupt' regime types). (for more on this see Heywood 2002: 27-8)

In the more recent literature, analyses are usually statistical in nature and a typology can be seen as an initial stage on the way to theory-building (Peters 1998: 95), and for this reason I have placed this tool before ideal types, which, as we shall see, are similar classificatory tools.

Ideal type

The ideal type is, like theory, a construct that represents an intellectual description of a phenomenon in its abstract form and, like typologies (taxonomies), does not provide us with explanations. It should not be understood as an 'ideal' standard 'in the sense of being perfect, but rather that it is "ideal" in the sense of being an intellectual construct that may never exist in the real world' (Peters 1998: 105). This confusion has arisen to a great extent because of the translation from the German (Blaikie 2000: 165). Attributed to the founder of modern sociology, Max Weber, who was greatly influenced by economic modelling in his day (Weber 1949: 89-90; Ringer 1997: 110-21), an ideal type is a conceptualisation, such as, for example, the 'working class', with which the researcher can compare reality on the ground (empirical evidence). Ideal types are thus hypothetical constructs formed by emphasising aspects of behaviour and institutions which are (generally) empirically observable. These constructs isolate 'those variables central to the study of a problem, putting aside those aspects of the reality which seem inessential to the analysis' (Engerman 2000: 258). An ideal type does not, however, posit relationships among variables. Box 3 gives an abridged version of the classic example of an ideal type: Friedrich's and Brzezinski's categorisation of a totalitarian regime.

Box 3 Ideal type of 'totalitarianism' by Friedrich and Brzezinski, 1956/1965

In this ideal type a totalitarian dictatorship exhibits the following characteristics:

- 1 An elaborate ideology, consisting of an official body of doctrine covering all vital aspects of man's existence to which everyone living in that society is supposed to adhere.
- 2 A single mass party typically led by one man, the 'dictator,' and consisting of a relatively small percentage of the total population (up to 10 per cent) of men and women.
- 3 A system of terror, whether physical or psychic, effected through party and secret-police control, supporting but also supervising the party for its leaders.

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- 4 A technologically conditioned, near-complete monopoly of control, in the hands of the party and of the government, of all the means of effective mass communication.
- 5 A similarly technologically conditioned, near-complete monopoly of the effective use of all weapons of armed combat.
- 6 A central control and direction of the entire economy through the bureaucratic coordination of formerly independent corporate entities.

They furthermore suggest that "These six basic features, which we think constitute the distinctive pattern or model of totalitarian dictatorship, form a cluster of traits, intertwined and mutually supporting each other, as is usual in "organic" systems. They should, therefore not be considered in isolation or be made the focal point of comparisons" (Friedrich and Brzezinski, 1956/1965, 21-2).

You can see that this is only a yardstick or **heuristic tool** for analysis, as this particular ideal type has been heavily criticised for its ideological baggage, that is, it comes from a particular ideological angle, and for the way it was employed during the cold war (see Ross and Grix 2002).

Weber himself suggested that the 'ideal typical concept will help develop our skill in imputation in research: it is no "hypothesis" but it offers guidance to the construction of hypotheses' (Weber 1949: 90).

Box 4 Weber's ideal type

According to Weber an ideal type:

is not a description of reality but it aims to give unambiguous means of expression to such a description.... An ideal type is formed by the one-sided *accentuation* of one or more points of view and by the synthesis of a great many diffuse, discrete, more or less present and occasionally absent *concrete individual* phenomena, which are arranged according to those one-sidedly emphasized viewpoints into a unified *analytical* construct. In its conceptual purity, this mental construct cannot be found empirically anywhere in reality. (Weber 1949: 90)

The 'one-sided' emphasis on specific characteristics in institutions and people is something Weber has become well-known for; for example, his ideal types of 'bureaucracy' and 'charisma' have enjoyed a wide currency among academics.

Paradigm

There are three ways in which the term 'paradigm' is used in the human sciences. The first draws directly on Thomas Kuhn, who depicts a paradigm as an institutionalisation of intellectual activity which, in effect, socialises students into their respective scientific community. Kuhn explains:

By choosing [the term paradigm], I mean to suggest that some accepted examples of actual scientific practice – examples which include law, theory, application, and instrumentation together – provide models from which spring particular coherent traditions of scientific research.... The study of paradigms... is what mainly prepares the student for membership in the particular scientific community with which he will later practice. Because he there joins men who learned the bases of their field from the same concrete models, his subsequent practice will seldom evoke overt disagreement over fundamentals. (1996: 10-11)

In the human sciences, the term has come to mean, or is not dissimilar to, 'an established academic approach' in which academics use a common terminology, common theories based on agreed paradigmatic assumptions and agreed methods and practices (see Rosamond 2000: 192). Furthermore, paradigms are often overtaken, replaced or placed alongside other paradigms, leading to what is commonly called a 'paradigm shift'. In academic disciplines, 'dominant' paradigms exist and are often challenged. However, we are not talking about the same kind of 'paradigm' that dominated the natural sciences, as the human sciences are characterised by the plurality of theories that coexist in the many disciplines that make them up (see Dogan 2000: 104-5).

Box 5 Example of a 'paradigm' shift

In macroeconomics the neoclassical paradigm (or 'school of thought') and its world-view has, since the late 1960s/early 1970s, taken over as the dominant approach from its predecessor, Keynesianism. Both of

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these paradigms are based on specific ontological and epistemological assumptions which are reflected in the emphasis and priority they place on specific factors, although there is, of course, limited variation on these matters within both paradigms among protagonists. Whilst neoclassical economists advocate the virtues of an unfettered market and a small role for the state, Keynesian approaches usually call for a more active role of the state in stimulating the economy.

Technically, the 'paradigm shift' example above is really talking about 'perspectives' within the study of economics (see chapter 5 for more on this).

The second way in which 'paradigm' is used in research is when students and researchers describe crude and broad groupings of certain **approaches** to the study of a specific topic – for example, on the collapse of communism, the academic literature can be broken down into 'top-down' and 'bottom-up' research paradigms. The former concerns itself with, *inter alia*, power-wielding élites, the latter with the role of citizens in the regimes' maintenance and collapse. Alternatively, you may separate out those approaches which focus on structural explanations of an event and those that focus more on agents (see below for the 'structure-agency problem'). This is a general method of broad categorisation of roughly cognate approaches to specific phenomena – it has little to do with the Kuhnian sense of paradigm in the natural sciences. What it does do is allow you to focus and structure your observations; otherwise, you will end up writing an interesting story without being able to begin to differentiate, at least between the way in which people approach a specific topic.

Finally, the term 'paradigm' is used for describing broad approaches to research, for example the 'positivist' or 'interpretivist' paradigms, within which many academic perspectives draw from similar ontological and epistemological roots. This is the manner in which I have used the term in chapter 5 when I outline key academic perspectives within broad research paradigms (or 'traditions').

Box 6 What's in a paradigm?

You need to differentiate between the following three concepts:
paradigm: this should be reserved for broad definitions, for

example the 'positivist' paradigm of research (within which there will be vast differences between proponents; see chapter 5)

discipline: this usually applies to 'traditional' academic disciplines like economics, history, political science, etc. (disciplines also contain a multitude of subdisciplines and are not paradigms themselves)

perspective: an academic perspective pertains to (a) certain approaches *within* a discipline, for example, new institutionalism and rational choice in political science, and (b) approaches that transcend narrow academic disciplines, for example, a feminist or post-modern perspective.

Concepts

Concepts are the building blocks of theory, hypotheses, explanation and prediction. A concept can be seen as an idea, or notion, expressed and compressed into one or more words. Concepts represent the least complex stage on our continuum of abstraction. That is not to say that concepts cannot be extremely complex. A concept carries with it a certain perspective and certain built-in assumptions, or ways of looking at empirical phenomena (Neuman 2000: 44), and can be seen as an agreed-upon term among scholars. The agreement, however, is only on the term's existence and not its meaning, as much scholarly debate revolves around precisely this point. A concept is an abstraction of empirical phenomena based on certain assumptions, and can be used as a type of shorthand in explanation. For example, the concept 'book' 'assumes a system of writing, people who can read, and the existence of paper. Without such assumptions, the idea of *book* makes little sense' (Neuman 2000: 44).

Box 7 Take care with concepts: all kinds of 'trust'

The concepts you use in your work usually have referents in the empirical world, so they need to be well defined. If you are interested in say, gauging the level of trust in a specific community, town or country, you would need to be fairly precise about what type of trust you are seeking to uncover. Trust is a multi-faceted concept that, for clarity, is best divided into several subgroups. There are evidently a variety of types of trust that need to be distinguished in order to lend them any operationalisability. For example, interpersonal trust is clearly different from trust in institutions – or perhaps, more precisely,

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the actors who populate them. Furthermore, the creation of 'generalised trust', trust beyond the individual and group members and extended to strangers, is again different, but not necessarily divorced from, the above two varieties. 'Horizontal' trust between citizens is different from trust between élites and citizens (Grix 2001b: 194–6).

Let us consider the concept cluster 'conditional loyalty', which I used in my own research to capture the relationship between the majority of citizens in the GDR (German Democratic Republic) and the GDR regime. This simple concept was used to suggest that the majority of citizens did not undertake any regime-threatening actions as long as certain 'conditions' were met. My aim was to trace the decline in this 'loyalty' over time and to give reasons for this, all as a way of contributing to an explanation of the regime's collapse (Grix 2000). By developing Albert O. Hirschman's well-known model (see below for more on this), I was able to show how 'loyalty' of citizens to the regime was only 'conditional' on subsidised consumption and by being afforded 'niches' in the dictatorship within which to live reasonably. This short example reveals the work a single conceptual phrase can be made to do and how much information can be packed into it. The key is to be as precise as possible about what you mean by 'conditional', what exactly the conditions are and, of course, what the social, economic and political contexts are in which the action you describe is taking place. **Operationalising** concepts, that is, translating them into measurable variables for data collection, is one of the hardest jobs in research.

Another, more colourful use of concepts is when they are used as a metaphor. Metaphors can be useful in capturing certain characteristics of an institution, country or person. William E. Paterson has made an art form out of employing metaphors to explain Germany's behaviour: he described pre-1990 Germany as a 'Gulliver' (the giant Gulliver in Lilliput) bound by multilateral arrangements and commitments and therefore unlikely to repeat the bellicose behaviour of years previous (Bulmer and Paterson 1989). After German Unification in 1990, Paterson penned an illuminating article entitled 'Gulliver Unbound?', posing the vexing question of whether German unity would take us from a European Germany towards a German Europe (Paterson 1996). You can see how such simple imagery can be used as explanatory tools to capture complex relations between social phenomena.

The abuse of concepts

Researchers must take care not to employ wrongly context-dependent concepts that have been developed at a specific point in time to describe specific phenomena. This can happen if an 'original' concept is referred to by an author, but without her actually revisiting the original texts to substantiate her claims and, importantly, without taking into consideration the changes that may have taken place in the world since the concept was introduced.

Examples abound where concepts and terms have been rendered hollow or extremely hard to define due to this overuse and abuse. Take, for example, the concepts 'stakeholder' and Albert O. Hirschman's schema 'Exit, Voice and Loyalty' which have, to a certain extent, suffered this fate (for the original theory, see Hirschman 1970; for a brief overview, see Grix 2000: 18–22). The use of 'stakeholder' in Britain, which was popularised by Will Hutton (1996; 1999) and the Labour Party, came to mean, among other things, giving a person a stake in society. The term was used so frequently, and in so many different situations, that its original meaning is now somewhat obscured. Albert Hirschman's 'Exit, Voice and Loyalty' scheme, which has been used in as wide a range of settings as social capital (see chapter 4 for an overview of this debate), was reduced simply to 'Exit' and 'Voice' in numerous explanations of the collapse of the German Democratic Republic. The original schema, presented by Hirschman in 1970, is hardly ever referred to, and the third pillar of the scheme, loyalty, is hardly discussed at all (see Grix 2000: 21–2).

Another danger is for concepts to be diluted into a catch-all term like 'civil society', which is impossible to pin down, but regarded as somehow signalling something desirable. The concept of civil society is an interesting one, as it experienced something of a renaissance during the peaceful revolutions of 1989 that marked the beginning of the end of communism. However, the concept has been associated mainly with Western capitalist societies, and simply extending the term to countries transforming from years of dictatorship to some form of democracy is not without its problems. Moreover, it can come across as prescriptive if Western countries state that they will not assist these fledgling democracies until they have a functioning civil society, presumably based on the Western model. This becomes particularly problematic when one considers the differences between countries, their cultures and their citizens who have had to live under dictatorial conditions. How can concepts developed in one cultural, political, economic, social and psychological context capture the complexities of, and be transferred to, another?

The point here is not to suggest that all concepts are context-specific and therefore of not much use outside the region or country for which they were developed. Far from it – the fact that it can transcend boundaries is the mark of a good concept and theory. The point is, however, to make you aware of the danger of *not* considering the origins of a concept (i.e. the context in which it has evolved) and the changes in society since the original concept was introduced.

► Key terms in research

The following section continues with the clarification of the language of research by turning to the two key terms that are often misunderstood, taken as given – and thus never properly explained – and misused in research.

Methods

At the root of all research lies what the ancient Greeks termed *methodos*. On the one hand, the term means ‘the path towards knowledge’, and, on the other, ‘reflections on the quest for knowledge-gathering’. Many of the central concerns of research have their roots firmly in the work of ancient Greek philosophers. Witness, for example, the manner in which Socrates, Plato and Aristotle employed classificatory systems or typologies of states, types of rule, etc., to make sense of the social phenomena surrounding them.

I follow Norman Blaikie’s (2000) more modern definition of **methods** and **methodology**, two words that are often confused, used interchangeably and generally misunderstood (see also Blaxter et al. 1997: 59). The former is easier to explain and understand than the latter. Research methods, quite simply, can be seen as the ‘techniques or procedures used to collate and analyse data’ (Blaikie 2000: 8). The method(s) chosen for a research project are inextricably linked to the **research questions** posed and to the **sources** of data collected.

Research methods come in all shapes and sizes, ranging from in-depth interviews, statistical inference, discourse analysis and archival research of historical documents to participant observation (see chapter 7 for a brief overview of the most common types of method). The choice of methods will be influenced by ontological and epistemological assumptions and, of course, the questions you are asking, and the *type* of project you are undertaking, e.g. either researching individuals’ attitudes or institutional change. However, methods themselves should be

seen as *free from ontological and epistemological assumptions*, and the choice of which to use should be guided by your research questions.

Box 8 The link between research questions, methods and sources

If I wish to understand how the policy on a specific issue was made in the European Commission, I would have to think of a way of obtaining information with which to answer this question. One method could be to speak to those who implement policy, or, probably better still, those people who work for key decision-makers in the Commission. In interviews (structured, semi-structured or unstructured – see chapter 7) with key people, I would have to pose questions in such a way as to shed light on the specific area of policy-making in which I was interested. The interviewees may, if I am lucky, point me to specific documents or further discussion partners. Thus, my original question has led me to:

- the interview technique (a research method)
- interview transcripts (raw data derived from interviews)
- (possibly) key documents as source material to analyse (sources of information).

Therefore a research question (RQ) should lead to our method (M) and sources (S) (RQ→M→S). The RQs we ask are guided by our ontological and epistemological positions (see chapter 4).

In the minds of many researchers, certain methods are inextricably bound up with certain ontological and epistemological assumptions: for example, try asking an enthusiastic rational-choice theorist what she thinks of discourse analysis. The important thing to note here is that it is the researcher who employs a particular method in a particular way, thereby associating it with a specific set of ontological assumptions. It is not the method that approaches scholarship with pre-existing baggage, but rather the researcher. However, within the academic community, some methods are looked upon and associated with ‘good research’, whilst others are not. Remember that good scholarship is not just the result of a specific method, but the result of *how* you employ, cross-check, collate and analyse the data that methods assist you in collecting. Your work should be judged on how its constituent parts logically link together, not by which methods you use.

An advanced undergraduate essay, dissertation or doctoral thesis without any method, however loosely defined, is an out-and-out contradiction. In research, methods have two principal functions:

- They offer the researcher a way of gathering information or gaining insight into a particular issue.
- They enable another researcher to re-enact the first's endeavours by emulating the methods employed.

The former is essential for concentrating and narrowing our line of enquiry when analysing a particular topic. The latter is essential in **validating** research.

Methods can be used in either **quantitative research**, which is concerned predominantly with quantity and quantifying, or **qualitative research**, which is concerned with interpreting the subjective experiences, i.e. the perspectives, of the individuals being studied (see chapter 7 for a further discussion of methods).

Methodology

Methodology is concerned with the logic of scientific enquiry; in particular with investigating the potentialities and limitations of particular techniques or procedures. The term pertains to the science and study of methods and the assumptions about the ways in which knowledge is produced. The difficulty in understanding just what the term 'methodology' means has not been helped by the fact that it is used interchangeably with 'research methods' and is often considered, mistakenly, to be close in meaning to 'epistemology', 'approach' and even 'paradigm'. Epistemology should be looked upon as an overarching philosophical term concerned with the origin, nature and limits of human knowledge, and the knowledge-gathering process itself. A project's methodology, on the other hand, is concerned with the discussion of how a particular piece of research should be undertaken and so can best be understood as the critical study of research methods and their use. The term refers to the *choice* of **research strategy** taken by a particular scholar – as opposed to alternative research strategies. The methodology section of a Master's or doctoral thesis, which is, especially in political science, often replaced with a section on 'ontology and epistemology', has come to mean 'the difficult bit' among students, through which they have to wade before being allowed to go off 'in the field' and enjoy themselves. A student's methodology is driven by certain ontological

and epistemological assumptions and consists of research questions or hypotheses, a conceptual approach to a topic, the methods to be used in the study – and their justification – and, consequently, the data sources. All of these components are inextricably linked to one another in a logical manner. The methodology section of a dissertation or thesis embraces, then, the key components: it sets out how you have gone about acquiring the answers to your research questions and/or hypotheses; a discussion of the conceptual approach being adopted, including the research paradigm from which it draws (see chapter 5); the research methods to be used, their limitations and potential and, finally, the sources to be consulted. This is usually the section that can take the most time – especially in postgraduate degrees – as students attempt to place their work among the canon of existing works on their topic, drawing on insights from wide-ranging literature reviews, and developing an 'innovative' angle on events.

Summary

This chapter has been concerned with the pre-research stage, outlining some of the most important tools and terms you should know *before* you begin your research. The major point I have attempted to get across is that familiarity with the tools and terminology of research is essential if you are to complete successfully a high-quality, precise piece of work. Of equal importance is the ability of the researcher to pick and choose *which* conceptual tools to use for her particular project. If you do not know or understand what is on offer, you are unlikely to make the best choice. To sum up the advice of this chapter:

- Take time to learn the 'tools of the trade' (use the glossary at the end of this book).
- Familiarise yourself with the central concepts you are likely to come across in research.
- Reflect on the concepts you are using in your research. Consider their origins and whether they are suitable for the context in which you wish to employ and defend their use. Avoid at all costs the 'abuse of concepts' outlined above.
- Remain aware of the relationship between your research question(s) and the methods and the sources you use.

► Essential reading

- Blaikie, N. (2000) *Designing Social Research*, Cambridge, Polity Press, chapter 1.
 Frankfort-Nachmias, C. and Nachmias, D. (1992) *Research Methods in the Social Sciences*, London, Edward Arnold, 4th edn.
 Kuhn, T.S. (1996) *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*, Chicago and London, University of Chicago Press.

► Further reading

- Gerring, J. (2001) *Social Science Methodology. A Criterial Framework*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, chapters 1 and 2.
 King, G., Keohane, O. and Verba, S. (1994) *Designing Social Inquiry. Scientific Inference in Qualitative Research*, Princeton, NJ, Princeton University Press.

3 Getting Started in Research

Chapter 3 introduces:

- The language used when getting started in research, including the all-important literature review (x3), research question and hypothesis-building
- The key terms and debates to consider when starting research: levels of analysis, structure and agency and types of study

This chapter introduces the language of getting started in research. It does so by describing the process by which you can begin your research projects. There are various ways of deciding on a topic of study and this chapter will offer examples to help you focus your initial thoughts. The most common of these, the literature review, is given special attention, as everyone has heard of it, but not everyone knows exactly what it is for, and *all* dissertations or theses will have to engage with a body of existing scholarly work. By dissecting the literature review and looking closely at its constituent parts, the aim is to make clear its central purpose in research.

Closely interwoven with the literature review is the process of devising research questions and hypotheses. The purpose of arriving at a more precise research question is to give your study some kind of order and to assist you in narrowing down your topic to something that is manageable within the time you have for your particular degree. Time restrictions are tough, but they can be very good for disciplining your thoughts. This chapter deliberately goes over in detail the terms and terminology associated with hypothesis-building. This is not to advocate a specific type of research or epistemology, but rather to help clarify what is meant by terms such as an 'independent variable'.

5 Introducing the Key Research Paradigms

building upon the so-called 'scientific method') and interpretivism. By adding a third research paradigm, I am following other researchers (Marsh and Furlong 2002, Guba and Lincoln 1998, Robson 2002) in offering you a broad overview of the research paradigms you are likely to encounter in the human sciences. This overview will help 'place' the main academic perspectives – discussed in the second half of the chapter – according to the research paradigms within which they operate. Such a broad presentation of the -isms of the human sciences has a number of benefits:

- It allows us to understand the intellectual foundations of the core perspectives in the mainstream human-science disciplines.
- It helps us to see how close many of the perspectives in different academic disciplines actually are.
- Finally, such an undertaking familiarises us with the language, terms, limitations, potential, key components and core texts associated with the main perspectives we are likely to encounter.

Such a broad-brush approach also has a number of disadvantages – for example, what about the perspectives I do not mention? Also, many proponents of the research paradigms and perspectives outlined below would argue for a more differentiated or even a completely different categorisation. Nonetheless, I believe the advantages of this exercise outweigh the disadvantages. What this discussion does do is to introduce you to many of the most important terms you are likely to meet throughout your studies. It is useful to know the difference between say 'positivism' and 'realism' in international relations. The former should be used for broad categories of research, as I have done here; the latter refers to a specific perspective, which draws on many of the assumptions found under positivist research.

I should like to make it clear that the following discussion, although based on traditional academic disciplines, in no way attempts to uphold the often rigid boundaries between the disciplines I am outlining. In fact, a further aim of this chapter is to encourage you to look beyond your own discipline by showing that disciplinary perspectives draw from wider roots which are common to many of them. A final section of this chapter deals exclusively with the notions of disciplines and interdisciplinarity.

I commence with a brief outline of the key research paradigms, which consists of boiling them down to ten core premises. While this involves oversimplification, I believe it will be enough for students to locate their projects amidst the bewildering array of -isms frequently used in

Chapter 5 introduces:

- *Three key research paradigms: positivism, post-positivism (critical realism) and interpretivism*
- *A brief overview of post-modernism and feminism*
- *A discussion of the key perspectives in economics, political science, international relations, sociology and history*
- *A brief discussion of disciplines and interdisciplinarity*

This chapter provides a broad overview of the key tenets in the traditions of research and the key perspectives in core academic disciplines in the human sciences that derive directly from them. It is by no means exhaustive, but is limited to the main research paradigms and a selective discussion of central **perspectives** in the following disciplines: economics, political science, international relations, sociology and history.

The purpose of expounding on the research traditions in the human sciences is to equip you with enough knowledge of the language used and issues raised in discussions on the roots of research to enable you confidently to read and orientate yourself through the material pertaining to your research. The following is *not* intended to replace an in-depth discussion of the philosophy of research. Under the broad headings I use below, many 'families' of research strands are gathered and although there are qualitative differences between such strands, it aids understanding if we know that they are linked to cognate areas.

A great number of research books on the market skip this section altogether, or they divide the traditions of research into two, neat, opposing paradigms (see, for example, Denscombe 2002): positivism (usually