

Formulating and clarifying the research topic

Learning outcomes

Empower researchers to:

- Generate ideas that will help in the choice of a suitable research topic
- Identify the attributes of a good research topic
- Turn research ideas into a research project that has clear research question (s) and objectives
- (Start thinking about how to ...) Draft a research proposal.

Formulating and clarifying your research topic

The important steps

- Identifying the attributes of a good research topic
- Generating ideas that help you select a suitable topic
- Turning ideas into clear research questions and objectives
- Writing your research proposal

Attributes of a good research topic (1)

Capability: is it feasible?

- Are you fascinated by the topic?
- Do you have the necessary research skills?
- Can you complete the project in the time available?
- Will the research still be current when you finish?
- Do you have sufficient financial and other resources?
- Will you be able to gain access to data?

Attributes of a good research topic (2)

Appropriateness: is it worthwhile?

- Will the examining institute's standards be met?
- Does the topic contain issues with clear links to theory?
- Are the research questions and objectives clearly stated?
- Will the proposed research provide fresh insights into the topic?
- Does the research topic match your career goals?

Attributes of a good research topic (3)

And - (if relevant)

Does the topic relate clearly to an idea
you were given -

possibly by your organisation ?

Generating research ideas

Useful Techniques

Rational thinking

Creative thinking

Searching the literature

Scanning the media

Brainstorming

Relevance Trees

Exploring past projects

Discussion

Keeping an ideas notebook

Rational thinking

- Examining your own strengths and interests
- Looking at past project titles
- Discussion
- Searching the literature
- Scanning the media

Creative thinking

- Keeping a notebook of ideas
- Exploring personal preferences using past projects
- Relevance trees
- Brainstorming

Rational thinking and creative thinking

- These techniques will generate possible projects with one of two outcomes:
 - One or more possible project ideas that you might undertake
 - Absolute panic because nothing in which you are interested or which seems suitable has come to mind.

Examining own strengths and interests

- Having some academic knowledge
- Look at those assignments for which you have received a good grade.
- You may, as part of your reading, be able to focus more precisely on the sort of ideas about which you wish to conduct your research
- There is a need to think about your future

Looking at past project title(s)

- Dissertations.
- Theses.

Scan your university's list of past project titles for anything that captures your imagination

- Scanning actual research projects.

You need to beware. The fact that a project is in your library is no guarantee of the quality of the arguments and observations it contains.

Discussion

- Colleagues, friends, university tutors, practitioner and professional groups.

Searching the literature

- As part of your discussions, relevant literature may also be suggested.
- Sharp et al, (2002) discuss types of literature that are of particular use for generating research ideas. These include:
 - Article in academic and professional journals
 - Reports
 - Books

Scanning the media

- Keeping up to date with items in the news can be a very rich source of ideas

Keeping a notebook of ideas

- One of the more creative techniques that we all use is to keep a notebook of ideas.
- All this involves is simply noting down any interesting research ideas as you think of them and, of equal importance, what sparked off your thought.
- You can then pursue the idea using more rational thinking technique later.

Exploring personal preferences using past project(s)

1. Select six projects that you like
2. For each of these six projects, note down your first thoughts in response to three questions(if responses for different projects are the same this does not matter).

What appeals to you about the project?

What is good about the project?

Why is the project good?

Exploring personal preferences using past project(s)

3. Select three projects you do not like.
4. For each of these three projects that you do not like.

What do you dislike about the project?

What is bad about the project?

Why is the project bad?

Brainstorming

- Define your problem – that is, the sorts of ideas you are interested in – as precisely as possible.
- Ask for suggestions, relating to the problem
- Record all suggestions, observing the following rules:
 - No suggestion should be criticized or evaluated in any way before all ideas have been considered.
 - All suggestions, however wild, should be recorded and considered.
 - Review suggestions and explore what is meant by each.
- Analyze the list of suggestions and decide which appeal to you most as research ideas.

Writing research questions

Write research questions that are

- Consistent with expected standards
- Able to produce clear conclusions
- At the right level (not too difficult)
- Not too descriptive
- Use the 'Goldilocks Test'

Clough and Nutbrown (2002)

Turning ideas into research projects (1)

Examples of research ideas and their derived focus questions

Research idea	General focus research questions
Advertising and share prices	How does the running of a TV advertising campaign designed to boost the image of a company affect its share price?
Job recruitment via the Internet	How effective is recruiting for new staff via the Internet in comparison with traditional methods?

Table 2.2 Examples of research ideas and their derived focus research questions

Turning ideas into research projects (2)

Useful techniques

- Start with a general focus question
- Discuss areas of interest with your tutor

Turning ideas into research projects (3)

Writing clear research objectives

- Check your examining body's preferences for stated objectives
- Use a general focus question to achieve precise objectives

Saunders *et al.* (2009)

Turning ideas into research projects (4)

Include SMART Personal objectives

Specific: What precisely do you hope to achieve from undertaking the research?

Measurable: What measures will you use to determine whether you have achieved your objectives?(Secured a career-level first job in software design)

Achievable: Are the targets you have set for yourself achievable given all the possible constraints?

Realistic: Given all other demands upon your time, will you have the time and energy to complete the research on time?

Timely: Will you have time to accomplish all your objectives?

The importance of theory

- Asking for opinions and gathering facts – '**what**' questions (descriptive research)
- Using questions that go beyond description and require analysis – '**why**' questions

Phillips and Pugh (2005)

In order to:

Explain phenomena

Analyse relationships

Predict outcomes

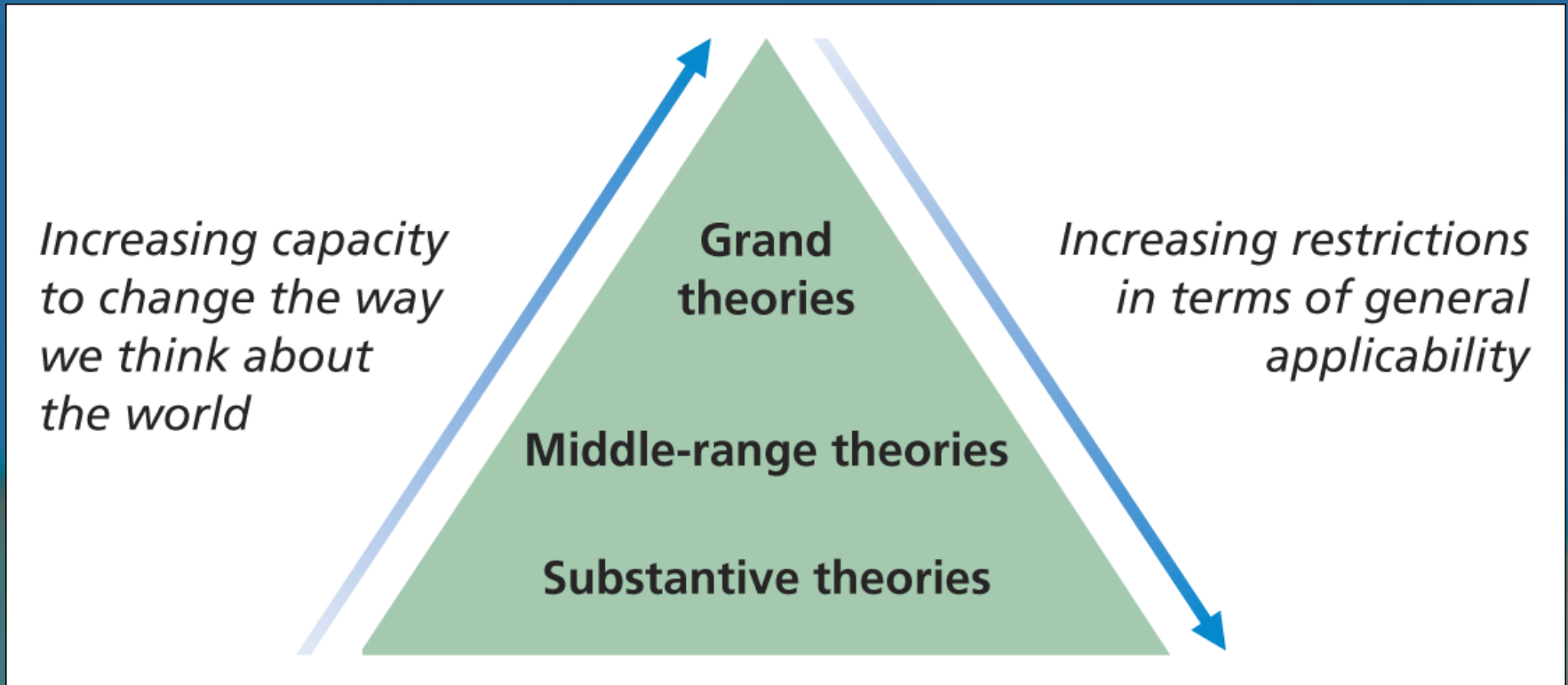
Compare and generalise

Theory

- “ A formulation regarding the cause and effect relationship between two or more variables, which may or may not have been tested”

Threefold typology of theories

Grand, middle range and substantive theories



Creswell (2002)

Figure 2.1 Grand, middle-range and substantive theories

Threefold typology of theories

- Grand theories: Usually thought to be province of natural scientists . (that will lead to a whole new way of thinking about management).
- Middle range theories: which lack the capacity to change the way in which we think about the world, but are nonetheless of significance . (for example, some of the theories of human motivation well known to manager would be in this category).
- Substantive theories : that are restricted to a particular time, research setting, group or population or problem
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Deductive approach and inductive approach

- This discussion of theory does assume that a clear theoretical position is developed prior to the collection of data (the deductive approach).
- This will not always be the case. It may be that your study is based on the principle of developing theory after data have been collected (the inductive approach)

Writing your research proposal

Purposes of the research proposal

- To organise your ideas
- To convince your audience
- To contract with your client (your tutor)
- To meet ethical requirements

Content of your research proposal (1)

- Title - likely to change during the process
- Background - context within the literature
- Research questions and objectives - what you seek to achieve

Content of your research proposal (2)

- **Method** - can be in two parts: research design and data collection
- **Timescale and Resources** - (finance, data access, equipment)
- **References** - include some key literature sources

Evaluating research proposals

- How the components of the proposal fit together
- Viability of the proposal
- Absence of preconceived ideas

Summary: Chapter 2

The best research topics

- Formulate and clarify the topic
- Meet the requirements of the examining body
- Use a variety of techniques when generating research ideas
- Are focused on clear questions based on relevant literature

Summary: Chapter 2

The best research topics

- Are theory dependent
- Have a proposal containing organised ideas

Tell the reader:

- What will be done and why
- How it will be achieved