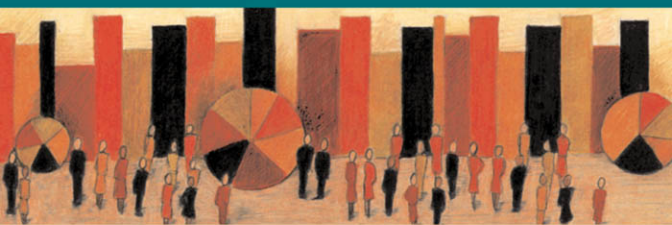


RESEARCH IN ORGANIZATIONS



Foundations and Methods of Inquiry

Richard A. Swanson
Elwood F. Holton III
Editors

An Excerpt From

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Foundations and Methods of Inquiry***

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Foreword

Advancing Research in Organizations through Learning Communities

Andrew H. Van de Ven, *University of Minnesota*

The primary purpose of this book is to advance research in organizations. As discussed throughout its chapters, research in organizations presents a milieu of challenges and opportunities that are unique. The challenge that this book confronts is to introduce organizational scholars to the vast landscape of methods of inquiry and research that can be utilized to advance research in organizations. Two overarching themes of this book are (1) that conducting research in organizational contexts demands that traditional research methods be adapted and adjusted to fit organizational realities, and (2) that researchers' toolkits must include the entire array of quantitative and qualitative methods. In doing so, I suggest that it lays the foundation for inquiry that can build what I (Van de Ven, 2002) and Herbert Simon (1976) have advocated as learning communities to significantly advance organizational research and practice.

THE UNIQUE CHALLENGE OF ORGANIZATIONAL RESEARCH

Scholarship is the creation and dissemination of knowledge about research, teaching, and practice. In his 1996 Academy of Management Presidential Address, Rick Mowday (1997) called for us to reaffirm our scholarly values by adopting Ernest Boyer's (1997) engaged view of "scholarship" as the scholarship of discovery, teaching, practice, and integration. Just as the development and testing of new research knowledge are central to informing our teaching and practice, so also the discovery of new questions and ideas from teaching and practice should nourish and guide our research.

It is vain to think that researchers have a monopoly on knowledge creation. Practitioners and consultants discover anomalies and insights from their practices, as teachers do with their students and scientists do with their research. The knowledge that researchers, teachers, consultants, and practitioners learn by themselves is different and partial. If it could be coproduced and combined in some novel ways, the results could produce a dazzling synthesis that might profoundly advance theory, teaching, and practice.

Rynes, Bartunek, and Dalt (2001), along with many others, claim that academic research has become less useful for solving the practical problems in organizations. The gulf between science and practice in organizations is widening. There is growing criticism that findings from academic and consulting studies are not useful for practitioners and do not get implemented (Beer, 2001). There is also growing debate between advocates of normal science and action science methods (Beer & Nohria, 2000). In short, academic researchers are being criticized for not adequately putting their organizational knowledge into practice. But this criticism goes both ways. Managers and consultants are not doing enough to put their practice into theory. As a result, organizations are not learning fast enough to keep up with the changing times.

I do not believe this gulf is due to a lack of interest or commitment. On the contrary, in our interactions with students and managers, we struggle each day with the challenges of developing and applying management principles in practice. This is no longer a luxury of time—it is a necessity. In this knowledge-intensive economy, it is incumbent on managers, consultants, and academics to develop valid knowledge.

BUILDING LEARNING COMMUNITIES FOR RESEARCH AND PRACTICE

The gap between research and practice of organizational knowledge is a complex and controversial subject. As he did on so many topics, Herbert Simon (1976) provided a useful way to frame this problem. He proposed that a basic challenge for scholars in professional schools is to contribute to both organizational science and practice—not either/or. The information and skills relevant to accomplishing this came from the social system of practitioners and the social system of scientists in the relevant disciplines. These social systems have elaborate institutions and procedures for storing, transmitting, developing, and applying knowledge. Each represents a different community of practice, and the main way to understand each community is to participate in it.

Simon (1976) points out that a social system, if left to itself, gravitates toward an equilibrium position of maximum entropy. One segment gets absorbed in the applied culture of managers and organizations. It is dependent on the world of practice as its sole source of knowledge inputs. Instead of creating new knowl-

edge that can advance the profession, this segment becomes a slightly out-of-date purveyor of almost current organizational practices.

The other segment, often trained intensively in a basic discipline, gets absorbed in the culture of that discipline and is largely dependent on it for goals, values, and approval. For the most part sealed off from the practitioner's community, these disciplinary scientists begin to view organizational practice as an irrelevant source for generating, developing, or applying new knowledge. If left unchecked, this evolutionary drift breeds intolerance and polarized conflicts.

Simon cautions that building a culture that respects and tolerates diversity among researchers and practitioners is very much like mixing oil with water. It is easy to describe the intended product but less easy to produce it. And the task is not finished when the goal has been achieved. Left to themselves, the oil and water will separate again. This natural separation occurs not only between practitioner-oriented and discipline-oriented members but also between scholars from different disciplines.

I may be dreaming, but wouldn't it be nice if professional learning communities could be created that nurtured the coproduction of organizational knowledge? These learning communities could be gathering places and forums where academics, consultants, and practitioners would view each other as equals and complements. Through frequent interactions, these individuals could come to know and respect each other and could share their common interests and different perspectives about problems and topics. They could push one another to appreciate issues in ways that are richer and more penetrating than we understood before.

As you know, all kinds of basic and applied scholarship go on, and you might think that I am advocating that more applied and less basic research should be conducted. That is clearly not my intention. On the contrary, following Simon, I am arguing that the quality and impact of fundamental research can improve substantially when scholars do three things: (1) confront questions and anomalies arising in organizational practice, (2) conduct research that is designed in appropriate and rigorous ways to examine these questions, and (3) analyze and translate research findings not only to contribute knowledge to a scientific discipline but also to advance organizational practices (Van de Ven, 2005).

Simon points out that significant invention stems from two different kinds of knowledge: (1) applied knowledge about practical issues or needs of a profession and (2) scientific knowledge about new ideas and processes that are potentially possible. Invention is easiest and likely to be incremental, when it operates in one extreme of the continuum. For example, applied researchers tend to immerse themselves in information about problems of the end users, and they then apply known knowledge and technology to provide solutions to their clients. Such transfer and application of knowledge to solve practical business problems often does not result in creating new knowledge that advances the discipline and the profession.

At the other end of the range, pure scientists immerse themselves in their disciplines to discover what questions have not been answered, and they then apply research techniques to answer these questions. If scientists cannot answer their initial questions, they modify and simplify them until they can be answered. If this process repeats itself, as is customary, the research questions and answers become increasingly trivial contributions to science and even more irrelevant to practice.

But if scholars are equally exposed to the social systems of practice and science, they are likely to be confronted with the real-life questions at the forefront of knowledge creation—a setting that increases the chance of significant invention and research. As Louis Pasteur stated, “Chance favors the prepared mind.” Research in this context is also more demanding because scholars do not have the option of substituting more simple questions if they cannot solve the real-life problems. But if research becomes more challenging when it is undertaken to answer questions posed from outside science, it also acquires the potential to become more significant and fruitful.

The history of science and technology demonstrates that many of the extraordinary developments in the pure sciences have been initiated by problems or questions posed from outside. Necessity is indeed the mother of important inventions. Thus, a professional learning community, as proposed here, can be an exceedingly productive and challenging environment for making significant advances to organizational disciplines and practices.

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Preface

Researchers from many disciplines are interested in conducting research in organizations. The context of organizations dominates most societies and serves to mediate the majority of human activity. The complexity of organizations and the people who create them and function in them are fodder for important questions posed by researchers and practitioners.

PURPOSE OF THIS BOOK

The purpose of this book is to help beginning and expanding scholars learn about research in organizations. It is a textbook to learn about the foundations and methods of inquiry from multiple perspectives. There is no one-approach-fits-all when it comes to research in organizations. This book embraces multiple approaches to research and includes perspectives from distinguished scholars who are grounded in a wide variety of disciplines—human resource development, management, anthropology, psychology, organizational behavior, education, leadership, history, and more.

The origin of this book is rooted in an earlier complementary book that we edited, *Human Resource Development Research Handbook: Linking Research and Practice*. The purpose of that book was to speak to both practitioners and scholars about research, whereas this book strives to speak to scholars across multiple disciplines.

We asked the authors to do two things in their chapters. First, we asked them to provide a conceptual overview and introduction to each research method appropriate for beginning researchers. The chapters are not designed to be a complete guide to all the technical issues involved in using each method. Thus, the second thing we asked each author to do was to provide references to the key sources to which researchers should turn if they plan to use a particular methodology. As a result, this book provides a broad introduction to the full array of research methods an organizational researcher needs and connections to critical resources for the method(s) he or she plans to utilize.

OVERVIEW OF THE CONTENTS

Research in Organizations: Foundations and Methods of Inquiry is organized into four major parts. The two chapters in Part I, Research in Organizations, set the stage for organizational research and the important process of the framing research. The ten chapters in Part II, Quantitative Research Methods, provide an orientation to quantitative research and specific methods. The five chapters in Part III, Qualitative Research Methods, discuss qualitative research and specific methods. The four chapters in Part IV, Mixed Methods Research, describe mixed methods research and specific methods. The concluding two chapters in Part V, Research Resources, highlight the use of contemporary information sources and the management of research projects.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

The uniqueness of this book could not have been achieved without the generous contributions of the chapter authors. We take our hats off to each—thank you. We also want to acknowledge the sponsorship of this book by the Academy of Human Resource Development. This book advances the Academy's vision of leading the profession through research.

There is an emotional journey in creating a book—from the original concept to holding the finished product. The reality is that book authors are generally the only ones to experience the full process, the highs and the lows. If you are fortunate (and we have been), you have a publisher that is with you all the way. Once again, we gratefully acknowledge Berrett-Koehler Publishers for contributing to efforts in advancing inquiry and understanding.

Richard A. Swanson
St. Paul, Minnesota, USA

Elwood F. Holton III
Baton Rouge, Louisiana, USA

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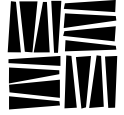
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Research in Organizations

CHAPTERS

1. The Challenge of Research in Organizations

RICHARD A. SWANSON, *University of Minnesota*

2. The Process of Framing Research in Organizations

RICHARD A. SWANSON, *Univeristy of Minnesota*



The Challenge of Research in Organizations

Richard A. Swanson, *University of Minnesota*

CHAPTER OUTLINE

Definition of Research

The Research Process

Rationale for Conducting Research in Organizations

Challenges of Conducting Research in Organizations

General Strategies for Conducting Research in
Organizations

The Theory-Research-Development-Practice Cycle

Conclusion

References

The title of this book, *Research in Organizations*, was purposeful. It is not simply about research *on* organizations. The context of the organization is fundamentally interesting to most people. Without any obvious initiation, organizational questions arise about leaders, purposes, strategies, processes, effectiveness, trends, workers, customers, and more.

Organizations are human-made entities. There are for-profit and nonprofit organizations, global and small locally held organizations, organizations having multiple purposes, and organizations producing a mind-boggling range of goods or services. As human-made entities, organizations engage all kinds of human beings. No wonder organizations and the functioning of human beings in relation to organizations are of such great interest to so many fields of applied endeavor.

Applied disciplines, by their very nature, require that theory and practice come together (Dubin, 1978; Lynham, 2002; Van de Ven, 2002). When they do not come together, there is angst. This angst of not knowing is a signal to both practitioners and scholars that there is work to be done. Clearly, scholars from disciplines such as human resources, business, organizational behavior, education, sociology, and economics see organizations as meaningful contexts for their inquiry.

DEFINITION OF RESEARCH

Research is often thought of in terms of a job or a task. Actually, research is a process having a specific type of outcome. *Research is an orderly investigative process for the purpose of creating new knowledge.* Furthermore, the simple dictionary definition portrays research as “1. Scholarly or scientific investigation or inquiry; 2. Close and careful study” (*American Heritage College Dictionary*, 2002, p. 1182).

Each of you reading this chapter has most likely done research and may even do research on a regular basis in certain arenas of your work and personal lives. You may not call it research. Even so, the psychological barriers to officially doing research remain and are typified by (1) the pressures of time limitations and/or (2) the concern over being criticized as to the significance, method, or conclusions. They are part of the human side of the research process.

In balancing the two barriers, researchers talk about the importance of humility and skepticism as attributes of a scholar. Certainly the press of time and the potential of criticism help keep the researcher humble. Internal skepticism keeps the researcher motivated. Researchers are skeptics extraordinaire. When somebody says, “I know everything will turn out well,” the researcher will retort, “Not necessarily.” When somebody says, “I know everything will go badly,” the researcher will similarly retort, “Not necessarily.” Unverified generalizations do not satisfy the researcher. They are the beginnings of research, not the conclusions.

THE RESEARCH PROCESS

While the general research process typically starts with a problem and ends with a conclusion, research is not just a problem-solving method. Problem solving is

situational and is judged by the results, with or without a theoretical explanation. If through trial and error you learn to kick the lawn mower engine that will not start, and then it starts, the problem of getting the mower engine running is solved without any theoretical understanding. Yet, there is a point when problem solving and the generation of new knowledge touch or overlap. Very thorough and systematic problem solving that purposefully retains and reports data can move into the realm of research. Many people involved with research in organizations talk about *action research*. For example, action research is not considered research by some scholars. They would classify action research as a formalized method of problem solving relevant to a particular organization or setting.

As scholars in applied disciplines, the theory–practice dilemma is of particular importance. Most scholars in applied disciplines recognize *practice-to-theory* to be as true as *theory-to-practice*. Scholars are respectful of the fact that theory often has to catch up to sound practice in that practitioners can be ahead of researchers. Thoughtful practitioners often do things that work, and scholars learn how to explain the successes at a later time. For applied research in functioning organizations, the concept of the practitioner being a research partner is legitimate and crucial to the maturity of related applied disciplines.

From my experience in the profession, it is clear that thoughtful and expert practitioners do indeed apply research findings in their day-to-day work decisions. Whether they are *advancing* theory and practice is another matter. It is critical to the profession that numerous thoughtful practitioners recognize that they are in a perfect position to help advance the scholarship related to organizations (Swanson & Holton, 1997).

RATIONALE FOR CONDUCTING RESEARCH IN ORGANIZATIONS

Organizations are messy entities. Just studying people within organizations is challenging. Studying the information flow in organizations is challenging as well as studying power in organizations. Studying the external economic forces and their impact on an organization adds another challenge. The list goes on.

Although scholars from many applied disciplines are drawn to the organization as the ultimate context of their scholarly focus, it is not always easy to conduct research in organizations. Organizations are worth studying, yet it is important to recognize that they are

- complex systems
- open systems
- dynamic systems

These system realities are the source of many scholarly and practitioner questions and the need for research-based answers. Such inquiry is for the sake of understanding of the organization itself, a phenomenon operating within a host organization, or the behavior of the phenomenon in the context of the organizational and its external environment.

While scholars from many applied disciplines are drawn to the organization as the ultimate context of their scholarly focus, it is not always easy to conduct research in organizations. It is the very attractiveness and complexity of organizations that stimulate this book focused on the principles and methods of inquiry for conducting research in organizations.

GENERAL STRATEGIES FOR CONDUCTING RESEARCH IN ORGANIZATIONS

Specific disciplines and individual scholars tend to rely on favored research methods. This condition will not likely change, and if there is change, it will likely be evolutionary. An important message of this book is that there are alternative inquiry methods that allow scholars to investigate a wider range of phenomena and to ask a wider range of important questions that exceeds any single research method.

This book is not intended to fuel epistemological discord among philosophers of research. Our position is that to bombard beginning scholars with this issue is counterproductive to the advancement of sound research in most applied disciplines. Most professions are complex enough that they deserve scholarship from all corners. Our role is to be rational and inclusive. Our simple overarching paradigm for research in organizations is to classify research into

- quantitative methods of research
- qualitative methods of research
- mixed methods of research

Quantitative research relies on methods based on “cause and effect thinking, reduction to specific variables and hypotheses and questions, use of measurement and observation, and the test of theories” (Creswell, 2003, p. 18). Qualitative research relies on methods based on “multiple meanings of individual experiences, meanings socially and historically constructed, and with the intent of developing a theory or pattern” (Creswell, 2003, p. 18). Mixed methods research relies on both quantitative and qualitative methods that are “consequence-oriented, problem-centered, and pluralistic” (Creswell, 2003, p. 18).

Readers wanting greater familiarity with these three approaches to research at this time may want to jump ahead and read the introductory chapters in each of these sections of the book (i.e., chapters 3, 13, and 18).

THE THEORY-RESEARCH-DEVELOPMENT-PRACTICE CYCLE

Theory, research, development, and practice together compose a vital cycle that allows ideas to be progressively refined as they evolve from concepts to practices and from practices to concepts. The theory-research-development-practice cycle illustrates the systematic application of inquiry methods working to advance the knowledge used by both organizational researchers and practitioners (see Swanson, 1997).

Although we find no historical evidence in the philosophy of science that an a priori linkage among theory, research, development, and practice was ever established, a relationship among these elements has emerged within and across professional disciplines. The call to inform practice with theory, research, and development has come relatively recently in such fields as human resource development and management (Passmore, 1990; Torraco, 1994; Swanson, 1997; Van de Ven, 2002; Wilson, 1998). Other fields of study, such as medicine, have had a longer tradition of pursuing research, development, practice, and theory in ways that are mutually beneficial to each element.

However, there are those who caution us in constructing the relationships among research, development, practice, and theory. In offering the notion of a scientific *paradigm*, Kuhn (1970) compelled philosophers and researchers to rethink the assumptions underlying the scientific method and paved the way for alternative, postpositivistic approaches to research in the behavioral sciences. Ethnography and naturalistic inquiry allow theory to *emerge from data derived from practice and experience*; theory does not necessarily precede research, as theory can be generated through it. The model of theory, research, development, and practice for applied disciplines embraces these cautions (see Figure 1.1).

The cyclical model brings theory, research, development, and practice together in the same forum for research in organizations. The union of these domains is itself an important purpose of the model. Two other purposes also exist. First, each of the four domains makes a necessary contribution to effective practices in organizations. There is no presumption about the importance to the profession of contributions from practice versus theory. The model demonstrates the need for *all* domains to inform each other in order to enrich the profession as a whole. Second, exchange among the domains is multidirectional. Any of the domains can serve as an appropriate starting point for proceeding through the cycle. Improvements in the profession can occur whether one begins with theory, research, development, or practice. The multidirectional flow of the model is examined next.

The process of working through the theory-research-development-practice cycle demonstrates how any of the four domains can be used as a starting point for knowledge generation. As one starting point of the cycle, *research* is under-

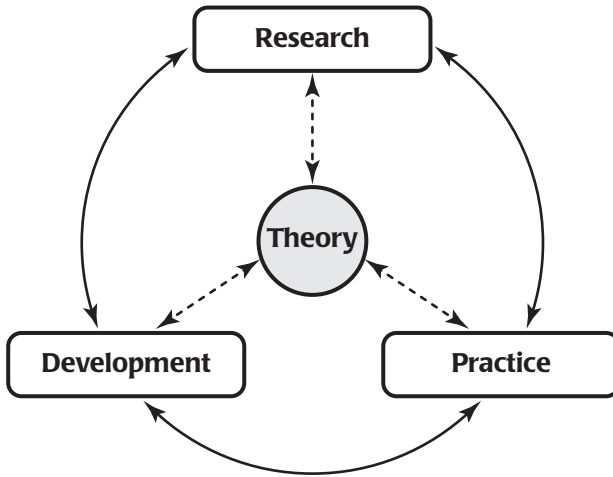


Figure 1.1 Theory-Research-Development-Practice Cycle

Source: R. A. Swanson (1997), "HRD Research: Don't Go to Work without It," in R. A. Swanson & E. F. Holton III (Eds.), *Human Resource Development Research Handbook* (San Francisco: Berrett-Koehler), pp. 3–20.

taken to expand our professional knowledge base and frequently yields recommendations for the development of new systems or the improvement of practice. This link from research to *practice* is illustrated by influential research that has yielded innovative models of job design, work motivation, performance analysis, organizational change, and other products of research that have led directly to improvements in the profession.

Research can also proceed along the cycle to produce *theory*. Theory building is an important function of research that will be addressed in later chapters. Although applied disciplines focused on organizations have benefited from a rich foundation of theories, many have originated in related fields of study. Additional theories are needed for greater understanding of a wide range of human and organizational phenomena. Thus, research serves a dual role in advancing organizational knowledge. Research provides knowledge that can be directly applied to the improvement of practice, and it is used to develop core theories.

Organizational *development* efforts offer a unique opportunity to enter the cycle. The demands of practice and the need for fundamental change establish the conditions for the creation of fundamentally new organizational models and methods. An organization intervention is viewed as a subsystem within a larger system. The subsystem and system influence one another to the point that innovative and practical new developments often become bold starting points of activity and inquiry.

Illustrations of development efforts that have stimulated advances in the profession (theory, research, and practice) have come from large-scale change ef-

forts, military training challenges, global economy issues facing multinational corporations, and the introduction of new information technologies. In this realm of research, a rigorous development process that embraces the organization's quality requirements is as important, or more important, than the evaluation of the effectiveness of the end product. For example, Sayre's (1990) research on the development and evaluation of a computer-based system for managing the design and pilot testing of interactive videos necessarily invested much more effort in development than in summative evaluation.

When starting with practice, there is no shortage of problems and challenges facing functioning organizations. These challenges provide an inexhaustible source of researchable problems. Proceeding from practice to research or practice to development along the cycle traces the familiar path between the problems that continuously arise in organizations and the research and development efforts they stimulate. For example, research is often stimulated by the need for organizations to improve core processes and their effectiveness. New methods, new process techniques, and alternative providers of services are just some of the recurring practice options. Other problems occur when new technical systems are acquired before personnel have the expertise to use them. Research continues to identify effective ways of developing the expertise to take advantage of emerging technologies. Scores of other practical research projects are undertaken to address pressing problems of practice.

Each of the domains of the theory-research-development-practice cycle serves to advance research in organizations. Each can be a catalyst to inquiry and a source of verification.

The cycle frequently starts with theory when it is used to guide and inform the processes of research, development, or practice. The variables and relationships to be considered are identified by reviewing the literature, which includes relevant theory. For example, if we wish to examine the influence of recent changes in work design on work motivation, we might start with existing theories of work motivation and identify variables from these theories that are relevant to our question. In the realm of work analysis, Torraco (1994) challenged this large area of professional activity as being highly researched but essentially atheoretical given the contemporary conditions under which organizations may function.

In summary, the process of knowledge generation can begin at any point along the theory-research-development-practice cycle, and flow along the cycle is multidirectional. The researcher or practitioner can start at any point and proceed in any direction. Thus, each of the cycle's domains both *informs* and *is informed by* each of the other domains.

This continuum provides a context for theory that helps explain why theory has so many important roles. Whether one is an organizational researcher or practitioner, theory serves several roles that can greatly enhance the effectiveness of our work.

CONCLUSION

As human-made entities, organizations engage all kinds of phenomena. No wonder organizations and the functioning of human beings in relation to organizations are of such great interest to so many fields of applied endeavor. All forms of research and all forms of researchers are needed to take on the challenge. The purpose of this book is to provide the basic principles and methods needed to take up this challenge.

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The Process of Framing Research in Organizations

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CHAPTER OUTLINE

Identifying Important Problems

Philosophy of Research

Choosing the Most Appropriate Questions,
Paradigm, and Method

Conclusion

References

This chapter focuses on the task of identifying important research problems and connecting them to appropriate research questions, paradigms, and methods. This is viewed as the process of framing research in organizations (see Figure 2.1). To accomplish this, the chapter aims to move from valuing the idea that research and the generation of new knowledge is important (chapter 1) to learning about specific research approaches and methodologies (remainder of the book). Although this transition sounds easy enough, it is indeed a thorny patch. Three hurdles are standing in the way:

- Identifying important problems from the milieu of existing knowledge
- Understanding the philosophy of research
- Choosing the most appropriate research question and method

The process of framing research in organizations begins with an initial problem area and ends up with specific research-planning decisions. The three hurdles in this process serve as organizers for the remainder of the chapter.

IDENTIFYING IMPORTANT PROBLEMS

Almost everyone reading this book on research in organizations has an applied orientation. Applied disciplines, and the organizational contexts that they purport to focus on, are almost always messy—messy in the sense that research-based theories and practices must ultimately be verified in practice. A problem can be thought of as “a situation, matter, or person that presents perplexity or difficulty” (*American Heritage Dictionary*, 2002, p. 1110). Problems generally lead researchers to questions that search for solutions, meaning, or for both meaning and solutions.

In chapter 1, the case was made for the synergy among research, development, practice, and theory. Scholars focused on research in organizations are clear about the prerequisite need to have studied or experienced organizations in order to be able to identify important problems. Research provides two kinds of knowledge: *outcome knowledge*, usually in the form of explanatory and predictive knowledge, and *process knowledge*, in the form of understanding how something works and what it means (Dubin, 1978; Lynham, 2002). To these ends, Van de Ven (2002) carefully instructs those conducting research in organizations to “ground the research problem and question in reality.” He goes on to prod the researcher to observe the problem or issue by talking to people who know the problem, giving examples from experience, presenting evidence for the problem’s existence, and reviewing the literature on the problem (p. 20). This advice is consistent with my methodology (Swanson, 1996) for analyzing knowledge tasks in organizations, which involves conducting direct observation and interviews, reviewing the relevant literature on the phenomenon, as well as providing eight knowledge synthesis methods for gaining understanding.

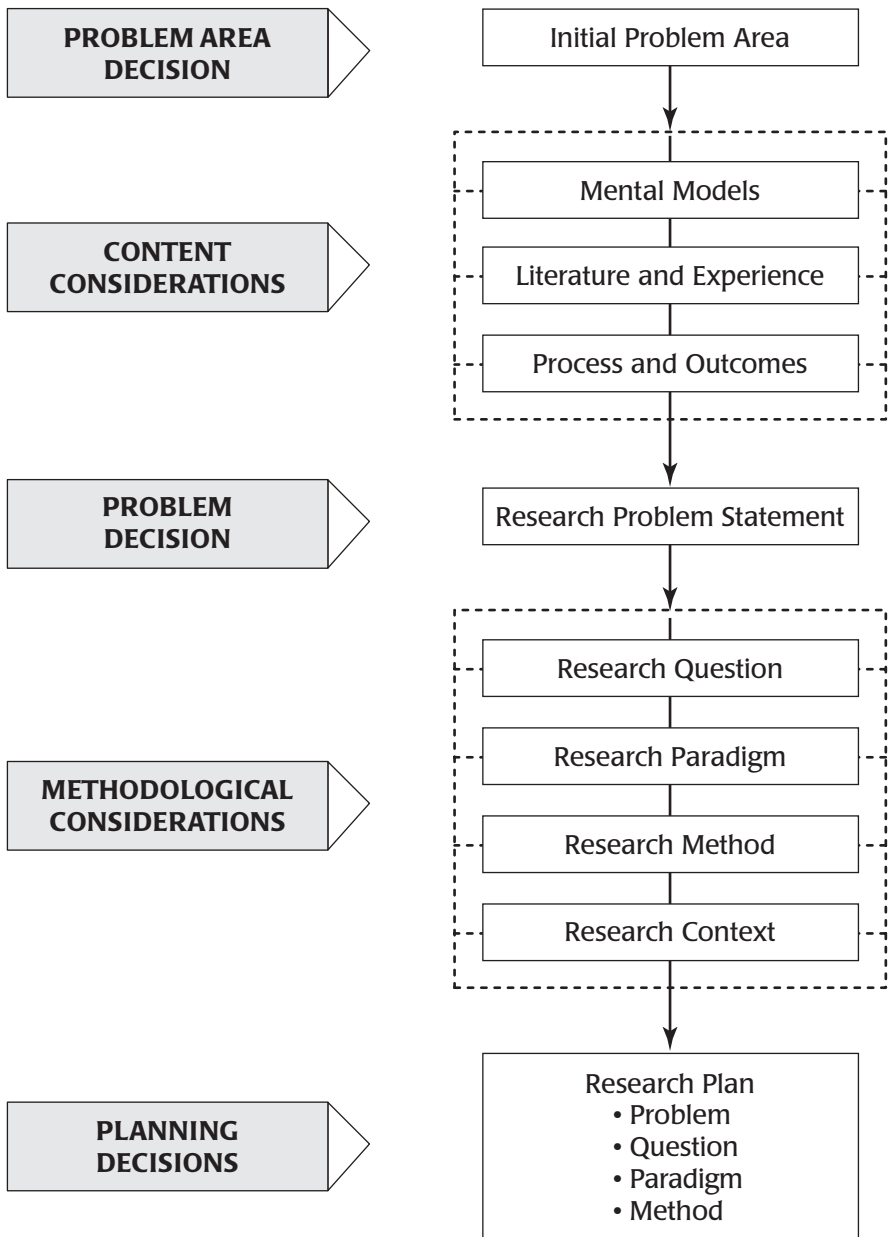


Figure 2.1 Process of Framing Research in Organizations

Far too many research problems are grounded solely in the researcher's superficial interest or the researcher's preferred research paradigm. These are important considerations, but they should not rule the problem selection decision. It is highly unlikely that researchers will choose a problem they have no interest in or follow a research paradigm or method they feel ill equipped to carry out. Thus, it is not fruitful to spend inordinate amounts of time reflecting on one's full range of interest areas or the philosophical underpinnings of various research paradigms.

Researchers searching for a research problem are better advised to gain additional knowledge and experience related to a problem area as the basis for selecting a problem to study. Once done, the specific research question, research paradigm, and research method will follow. The following three strategies contributing to identifying research problems are portrayed as content considerations in Figure 2.1: (1) mental models of organizations, (2) literature and experience, and (3) processes and outcomes.

Mental Models

We all have mental models of organizations and of phenomena related to organizations. For some people, the models are conscious and well defined. For others, they are subconscious and ill defined. Along the consciousness continuum, the mental models can be either simple or complex. For example, Rummler and Brache (1998) present a *complex and well-defined* model of organizations as a system (Figure 2.2), and Morgan (1996) presents a *simple and well-defined* model of organizations as matching one of the following metaphors:

- Organizations as machines
- Organizations as organisms
- Organizations as brains
- Organizations as cultures
- Organizations as political systems
- Organizations as psychic prisons
- Organizations as instruments of domination

Making our own model of organizations explicit helps us identify researchable problems. It also helps us understand our view of the organization, to understand the limitations of our view, and to expand on our view(s). Figure 2.3 presents a worldview mental model focused on performance improvement that organizational researchers could find useful in thinking about research problems.

This presentation is an open systems model that situates the organization as the focal point. The overall features of the organization (mission and strategy, organization structure, technology, and human resources) are presented. The systemic

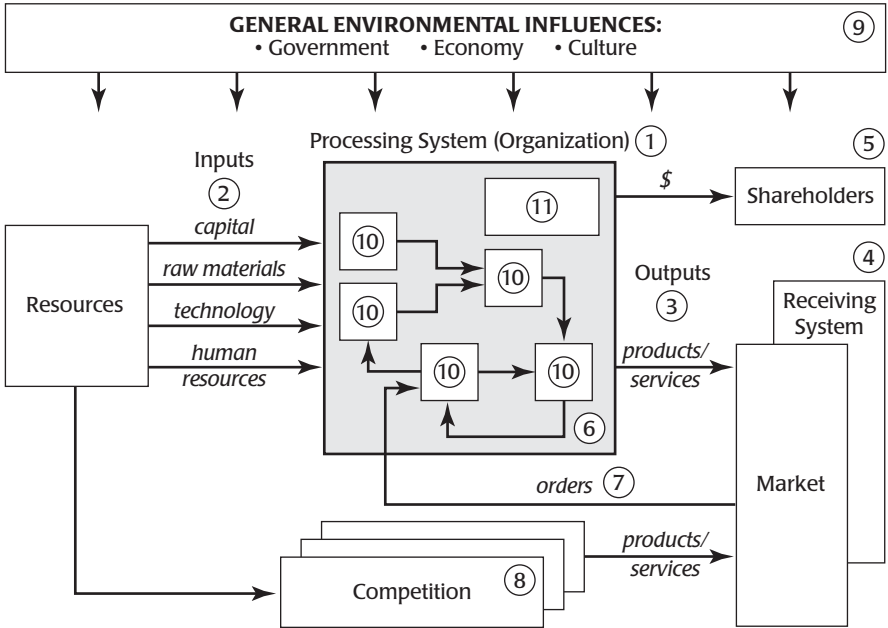


Figure 2.2 An Organization as an Adaptive System

Source: G. A. Rummler & A. P. Brache (1995), *Improving Performance: How to Manage the White Space on the Organizational Chart* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass), p. 10. Reprinted with permission.

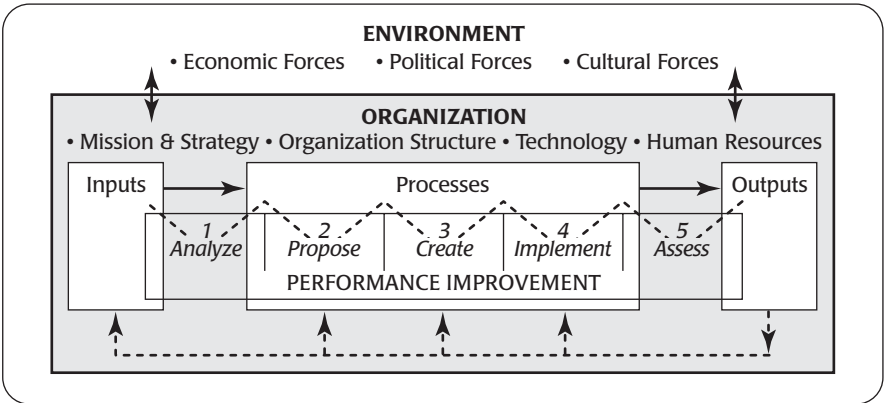


Figure 2.3 Systems Model of Performance Improvement in Organizations

Source: R. A. Swanson (1996), *Analysis for Improving Performance: Tools for Diagnosing Organizations and Documenting Workplace Expertise* (San Francisco: Berrett-Koehler), p. 20.

perspective of the organization itself (inputs, processes, outputs, and their connections) are also portrayed. In addition, the external environment in which the organization functions is specified (economic, political, and cultural forces). Also portrayed in Figure 2.3 is one selected organizational subsystem (subprocess): performance improvement and its interactions. Numerous other parallel processes are working to achieve the goals of the organization that can be inserted in the model.

This model, and similar mental models of organizations, can help researchers think about and locate research problems. One way a model like this helps is in its ability to reveal the complexities surrounding the problem. Having an organizational worldview mental model can also help in refining or redefining problems from the milieu of existing knowledge. In addition, an organizational mental model can help to identify important and relevant problems more accurately. One vivid example has been the long-suffering topic of improving learning transfer in organizations. So much of this research has been tightly focused through a mental model of the learner and the content to be learned. The larger transfer problem was actually investigated years ago by organizational practitioners who demonstrated the need to first focus on the system and its required outcomes (Dooley, 1944). Yet, the psychology–learning worldview has focused on the internal processes of the learner. Recent work by Holton and Baldwin (2003) attempts to modify that narrow transfer mental model by taking an organization view.

The criticism of having defined mental models is that they can become so technical and rigid that they can blind the researcher to important problems. The original premise was that we have these models at either the conscious or unconscious levels. Thus, I argue that mental models should be conscious, with the caution that having mental models that are either too simplistic or too complex can be limiting. I also contend that having a mental model of phenomena with no related personal experience with that phenomena can be very limiting.

Literature and Experience

The case was made earlier for the importance of collecting information from literature and experience (firsthand or observation) to help identifying important research problems. Research in organizations by people who have no firsthand work or observational experience comes off lacking credibility. The naive questions and simplistic “connection of the organizational dots” often reveals the lack of direct experience.

In terms of literature, it is easy to see that much of the business research literature opens with examples from experience to gain credibility with the reader before presenting the research and results. In contrast, the business practitioner literature often claims results, with or without actual evidence beyond self-report perceptions and a text of homilies.

Those wanting to conduct research in organizations should rigorously follow both the literature and experience tracks as important steps in verifying an im-

portant research problem area and in fine-tuning the focus of the research problem. And, these efforts, combined with mental models, will enhance the quality of the research focus.

Processes and Outcomes

Those interested in conducting research in organizations need to be keenly aware of the perspectives of processes and outcomes. People who feel responsibility for organizations have a pragmatic view of outcomes. They ask big performance outcome questions (Swanson, 1996):

- Will the organization perform better?
- Will the process perform better?
- Will the individuals perform better?

And, they ask questions about results from multiple perspectives (Swanson & Holton, 1999):

- Has performance increased (system level and financial performance)?
- Have people learned (knowledge and expertise learning)?
- Are people satisfied (participant and stakeholder satisfaction)?

This does not mean that they do not ask questions about specific sub-processes or the state of a narrow element in the organization. Scholars and organizational decision makers may value a specific factor (e.g., employee satisfaction) and value gains in that factor (e.g., significant gains in employee satisfaction), but at some point the question of costs and benefits to the organization will arise. It is best to think about the direct and extended connections between processes and outcomes when identifying a research problem. One example here is when a researcher started with a need to improve leadership development as the initial problem, which then led to a need to better define leadership, and then finally the realization that the important problem was a need to fill the void of research-based leadership theory having any direct connection to performance (Lynham, 2002). The assumption that leadership was connected to enduring results was missing from reports of practice and theory.

In summary, the three strategies for identifying research problems include (1) mental models, (2) literature and experience, and (3) processes and outcomes. These three strategies assist in leading the scholar to a defensible research problem.

PHILOSOPHY OF RESEARCH

Sometimes it feels like too much has been written and said about the ideology and philosophy of research by those who have done very little research. Passmore's

(1990) sage advice is to choose a paradigm, any paradigm. In the end, researchers need to conduct rigorous research and let time test the ultimate integrity of the inquiry. Ultimately, research rigor and impact, not philosophical debate as to worthiness of various research paradigms, comprise the true grist of active scholars (unless you are in the discipline of philosophy).

Even though I have taken the stance described here, it is important to understand the philosophical discord that does exist among some scholars (Geddes, 2003; Ghoshal, 2005; Wilson, 1998a, 1998b). The position taken here is that understanding the rival philosophical views can allow for expansion, tolerance, and inclusion in research thinking and methodology instead of rivalry and exclusivity. It is deemed shallow and immature to justify one's research question and methodology by discounting an alternative research paradigm. The arguments supporting a chosen research question and methodology should stand on their own two legs.

The rival philosophical views around research are focused on overarching philosophical research paradigms. A *paradigm*, according to Kuhn (1970), is the dominant understanding of a particular class of phenomena at a particular time. This book is structured around the apolitical research paradigm of

- quantitative research,
- qualitative research, and
- mixed methods research.

Alternative Paradigms and Research Methods

Gephart (1999) has discussed succinctly the rivalry among research paradigms; the essence of his essay is presented here. He discusses the alternative philosophical paradigm of positivistic, interpretative, and critical science research.

Recently there has been interest in the role of philosophical assumptions and paradigms in conducting research. During the late 1900s, concerns about the dominant positivistic research paradigm and the limits of quantitative data and methods connected with positivism have been raised. Positivism assumes that an objective world exists and that scientific methods can mirror and measure while seeking to predict and explain causal relations among variables. Conversely, critics take the position that positivistic methods remove meaning from contexts in the pursuit of quantifying phenomena (Guba & Lincoln, 1994, p. 106). The exclusion of meanings and interpretations from quantitative data is seen as a fundamental shortcoming in that contrived quantitative methods are believed to impose meanings and ultimately their interpretation. "And they require statistical samples that often do not represent specific intact groups and which do not allow generalization to or understanding of individual cases. Finally, quantitative and positivistic methods tend to exclude discovery from the domain of scientific inquiry" (Gephart, 1999, 1).

It is fair to say that positivism dominates research in organizations. Even so, scholars regularly challenge this dominance from two alternative interpretive and critical science approaches (Hatch, 1997). Both raise philosophical challenges for positivism and offer alternative methodological approaches to research in organizations. These philosophical perspectives are believed by advocates to address issues that positivistic or quantitative researchers have tended to overlook.

Interpretive scholars have challenged the positivistic approach to uncover truths and facts using quantitative methods. They contend that these methods impose a view of the world rather than grasping and describing these world-views. Critical scientists go further in saying that these imposed views implicitly support forms of positivistic knowledge and advance capitalist organizations and inequality.

This brief discussion summarizes the three *philosophical* views—positivism, interpretivism, and critical science (postmodernism)—presented by some organizational researchers. Interpretivism and critical science are present in organizational scholarship, though they are still outliers compared to quantitative research. The core features, such as assumptions and goals, for each of the three paradigms are summarized in Figure 2.4 (based on Gephart, 1999).

The abbreviated comparisons are intended to highlight different ways of thinking and researching so that the various philosophical perspectives can be understood and potentially combined for the advancement of new and important understandings.

Positivism

Positivism assumes that the world is objective. Therefore, positivist researchers generally seek out facts in terms of relationships among variables. They focus on quantitative methods used to test and verify hypotheses. Logically, then there is also a focus on falsification rather than verification given the complexity of organizational phenomena. The challenge is to assess all essential variables to verify that a relationship is consistent in like conditions. Effort is made to establish the generalizability of findings based on careful sampling.

Interpretivism

Interpretive research is concerned with meaning; it seeks to understand organizational members' meaning of a situation (Schwandt, 1994, p. 118). Interpretive researchers assume that knowledge and meaning are individual interpretations. Thus, there is no objective knowledge apart from individual interpretations by reasoning humans. Although there are numerous interpretivist perspectives, they all are focused on subjective meanings as to how individuals or members apprehend, understand, and make sense of events and settings and how this sense making produces features of the very settings to which sense making is responsive.

One form of interpretive research is *social constructionism*, which seeks to understand the social construction dialectic, involving objective, intersubjective,

	Positivism	Interpretivism	Critical Science
Assumptions	Objective world that science can “mirror” with privileged knowledge	Intersubjective world that science can represent with concepts of actors; social construction of reality	Material world of structured contradictions and/or exploitation that can be objectively known only by removing tacit ideological biases
Key Focus or Ideas	Search for contextual and organizational variables that cause organizational actions	Search for patterns of meaning	Search for disguised contradictions hidden by ideology; open spaces for previously silenced voices
Goal of Paradigm	Uncover truth and facts as quantitatively specified relations among variables	Describe meanings, understand members’ definitions of the situation, examine how objective realities are produced	Uncover hidden interests; expose contradictions; enable more informed consciousness; displace ideology with scientific insights; change
Nature of Knowledge or Form of Theory	Verified hypotheses involving valid, reliable, and precisely measured variables	Abstract descriptions of meanings and members—definitions of situations produced in natural contexts	Structural or historical insights revealing contradictions
Criteria for Assessing Research	Prediction-explanation	Trustworthiness	Theoretical consistency
	Rigor; internal and external validity, reliability	Authenticity	Historical insights Transcendent interpretations Basis for action; change potential and mobilization
Unit of Analysis	The variable	Meaning; symbolic act	Contradictions; incidents of exploitation
Research Methods and Type(s) of Analysis	Experiments; questionnaires; secondary data analysis; quantitatively coded documents	Ethnography; participant observation; interviews; conversational analysis; grounded theory development	Field research; historical analysis; dialectical analysis; deconstruction; textual analysis
	Quantitative: regression; Likert scaling; structural equation modeling	Case studies; conversational and textual analysis; expansion analysis	
	Qualitative: grounded theory testing		

Figure 2.4 Alternative Paradigms for Research in Organizations (adapted from Gephart, 1999)

and subjective knowledge (Berger & Luckmann, 1967; Knorr-Cetina, 1981; Gephart, 1978). This philosophical view investigates how the objective features of society (e.g., organizations, social classes, technology, and scientific facts) emerge from, depend on, and are constituted by subjective meanings of individuals and intersubjective processes such as discourses or discussions in groups (Gephart, 1993, 1999).

Critical Science

The third philosophical paradigm, *critical science*, is a combination of critical theory and postmodernism. Critical theory was developed by the Frankfurt School (Germany) and is based on the politics and philosophy from Marx, Kant, Hegel, and Weber (Kincheloe & McLaren, 1994, p. 138). Critical theorists separate from Marxism on numerous points, but they retain a focus on challenging capitalism along with the domination, injustice, and subjugation that they believe capitalism produces.

Critical science can take various forms, including historical essays, field research, and case studies (Boje, Gephart, & Thatchenkery, 1996). Philosophically, critical postmodern research is consistent with Marxist, critical, and postmodern concepts (e.g., commodification, alienation, and contradictions). Critical science also seeks to provide historical understandings through the reexamination of important events to surface unacknowledged forms of exploitation and domination.

Alternative Paradigms Conclusions

Positivism continues to dominate research in organizations and those specific disciplines doing organizationally related research. However, challenges to the limits of positivism and the rise of alternatives to positivism challenge the landscape of research (Ghoshal, 2005). Interpretive research offers ways to understand members' own meanings and theories of the world, a fundamental challenge for any scholarly inquiry seeking to have practical relevance. Critical science challenges the value-neutral nature of positivism and interpretive research.

CHOOSING THE MOST APPROPRIATE QUESTION, PARADIGM, AND METHOD

There are two intense focal points in the process getting to the point of specifying the planning decisions (research question, paradigm, and method). These points are the *content considerations* and the *methodological considerations*.

Content Considerations Revisited

Mental models, literature and observations, and processes and outcomes are the *content considerations* leading to the identification of a research problem. While

the content considerations (as presented earlier) serve in making the *problem decision*, they are also helpful in dealing with the *methodological considerations* and making the *planning decisions* (choosing the most appropriate question, paradigm, and method).

The content considerations provide a lens for the researcher when entertaining the research questions, paradigms, and methods considerations. In other words, content consideration information moves forward and is added to the methodological consideration information, and both ultimately help shape the planning decisions.

Methodological Considerations

The process of framing research in organizations (see Figure 2.1) is the primary focal point of this chapter. It is worth repeating that this process is different than the processes commonly followed by many beginning scholars. They will often follow inappropriate or inadequate processes such as the following:

Research Paradigm → Research Question → Research Plan

Research Method → Research Question → Research Plan

Research Question → Research Method → Research Plan

By engaging in all three of the content consideration strategies, the research problem can be identified, and there then will be a focus on a limited range of rational research question, paradigm, method, and contextual options. (Note that the research problem is missing from all three of the inadequate processes cited above.)

It is important to note that when it comes to methodological considerations, phenomena that are not well understood will likely give rise to specific research questions of meaning or contradictions. These questions would more naturally move into qualitative methods. In contrast, well-understood phenomena will likely give rise to specific research questions of action and verification. These questions would more naturally move into quantitative methods.

It is important for the researcher not to have the specific research question, paradigm, methodology, or context firmly established before identifying the research problem. Not following this advice will find the researcher arguing about the significance of the question (which should have been clearly established) and the philosophy of research (usually deriding alternative research paradigms and methods).

Research Questions

Once you have identified a research problem in the form of a knowledge void, numerous valid research questions can be asked, not just one. This is a simple and critical point often misunderstood. Research questions develop out of the research problem previously framed by content considerations, including a deep knowledge of the literature and experience with the phenomenon, and consider-

ation of the mental models, processes, and outcomes operating within the initial problem area (see Figure 2.1).

A common mistake is to focus on the formulation of research questions before gaining a deep understanding the phenomenon through experience and the literature. The research questions develop and evolve from a deeper understanding of the phenomenon through an iterative process of formulating a question that drives one back to experience and the literature, which then brings one back to refine the question, and so forth. This iterative process between developing research questions and the other steps in framing research continues forward into the planning decisions.

Research questions have an interactive relationship with the other methodological considerations—the research paradigm, the research method, and the research context. Typical research methodology tells us that the research method and context are derived from the research question. However, the method and context also shape the question making the entire process more coherent. It is critical first to identify the initial problem area, then to consider the content of the problem area and decide on the frame of the research problem before refining research questions.

Developing research questions is an ongoing activity throughout the entire process of framing the research. For example, Boeker (1992) identified a problem of not knowing who controls the process of chief executive succession. Depending on how much is known about chief executive succession, the research questions could range from how succession is handled in a particular organization to surveying the top 500 corporations in the United States to determine which of the preestablished methods they use and why. Clearly, the research question being entertained should first be judged as appropriate through the lens of the content considerations that justified the research problem. The key is to determine whether there is anything illogical about the proposed research question based on the substance of the content considerations.

Research Paradigms

The apolitical research paradigm of quantitative, qualitative, and mixed methods research has been adopted for this book. Although ideological differences undergird many research paradigms, the intent here is to be aware of those differences and to be intellectually agile enough to move across paradigms logically, not ideologically.

An example of this logical agility would be Danielson's (2004) work related to organizational socialization. Her theory development research recognized that there was extensive empirical research related to organizational socialization and that it focused on the individual being socialized into a static organization. Her research problem was that contemporary organizations keep changing and that the present theory is of minimal use. She went on to pose the research question "Can an alternative theory of organizational socialization be developed to facilitate

continuous organizational renewal and agility?" (p. 357). Her research question was justified by the content considerations and was aligned to her mixed methods research paradigm of theory-building research.

Research Methods

The bulk of this text covers numerous research methods within the paradigms of quantitative, qualitative, and mixed-methods research. Choosing a research method requires logic and judgment.

For example, a researcher drawn toward qualitative research methods and, more specifically, phenomenology needs to reach back logically to the research problem decision and the tentative research question. Although the problem area is of high interest to the researcher, if the researcher does not bring forward the *content considerations*, he or she may naively choose a favored methodology (e.g., phenomenology) when a great deal is already known related to the research question by the way of self-report and storytelling data. An extreme case could be the availability of extensive quantitative research on the topic as to justify a meta-analysis.

Research Context

The most pragmatic and powerful methodological consideration for doing research in organizations has to do with the research context. The context of research in organizations almost always offers opportunities and constraints. Opportunities entice and constraints redirect efforts. Organizations collect data, address questions and problems, experience processes and events within established time frames, and have people and resources with particular characteristics and varying accessibility.

For example, one time I was consulting with a VP of a Fortune 50 firm in the realm of plant startups. He began to agonize about the fact that he believed that spending money on training associated with organizational performance requirements had a great return on investment but that his organization had no research or substantiated rules of thumb about such investments. The agonizing turned into a funded experimental research study (Swanson & Sawzin, 1976). The opportunity caused me to reprioritize my research agenda (new problem), and the constraints caused the firm to accept an off-site experimental research study with high-fidelity organizational simulation so as to honor the ability to answer the causal research questions they wanted answered.

In the end, there must be harmony or logical trade-offs among the chosen research question, research paradigm, research method, and research context. These considerations are not linear, and tentative decisions in one realm will influence the other three realms. For example, the pragmatic impact of using a survey method with a particular population and sample may modify the research questions as it becomes apparent that particular data will or will not be available.

CONCLUSION

The process of framing research in organizations (Figure 2.1) focuses on the task of identifying important research problems and connecting them to appropriate research questions, paradigms, and methods. In order to do this work well, researchers need to be knowledgeable of a variety of specific research methods within research paradigms. The next 19 chapters of this book cover specific research methods that are categorized into the three sections: “Quantitative Research Methods,” “Qualitative Research Methods,” and “Mixed Methods Research.”

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