

2

Finding a Project

Andrew MacLaren and Emma Hill

“When you have eliminated the impossible, whatever remains, however improbable, must be the truth?”

Sherlock Holmes, *The Sign of Four* (Conan Doyle, 1890: 111).

In this chapter ...

Arthur Conan Doyle’s Sherlock Holmes has an infamous method of creative reasoning that generates the ideas with which he solves the unsolvable. Ideas can be groundbreaking and positive but can be equally destructive if they are not understood, framed and appropriately applied. Luckily for his clients (and unluckily for the criminals), Sherlock Holmes is not only a master-generator of ideas, but has supreme control of his ‘mind palace’ in which his ideas are framed, judged and contextualised. The following chapter leads you through where ideas come from, how they can be moulded to attend to a problem space, how they are framed appropriately and ultimately how they can underpin a solid and realistic research proposal.

One of your first challenges will be to come up with an idea for your research project. Ideas do not exist on their own: they have a past and a potential future; stakeholders and context. Ideas emerge when an opinion is challenged or a perspective is offered; they are both socially dynamic and socially dependent, and have roots in and grow from the context from which they emerge. Ideas are always part of a theoretical network and come with a heritage of theoretical and philosophical assumptions: Newton’s theory of gravity may have fallen from the sky in apple form, but it was supported and developed by his knowledge of his discipline; Archimedes’ ‘eureka!’ moment may have come as he displaced the water from his bath, but it was informed by the scientific principles of his time. In your research, your idea will come from (literal or figurative) conversation, and it will also interject in conversation – your job will be to navigate these discursive networks and present a well-informed account of your journeys and discoveries there.

In this chapter you will be steered towards understanding your ideas in the context of academia so that, even if you thought your idea was a 'eureka!' style moment, you will also be able to give it roots in extant and firmly-founded scholarship. In Management studies, ideas are valued for their 'innovation', (Bartunek et al., 2006: 9), their relevance (Rynes et al., 2001) and their introduction of the new (Alvesson and Sandberg, 2011: 247), and are understood as discipline-shapers (Vermeulen, 2005: 978). Broadly and philosophically speaking, in Western culture from antiquity to present day, the focus of the 'idea' has shifted. It might be observed that whilst how an idea is created has changed, what an idea does has not (Lovejoy, 2009; Dupre, 2004, Cline Horowitz, 2005; Megill and Zhang, 2013: 340-345). The idea – or the idea of the idea – nonetheless endures; for whether through critique, development or invention, ideas promise a progression of knowledge and longevity of their field.

The first section of this chapter relates to grounding your ideas in the literature. In research, your idea must be developed relative to the existing literature on the subject as, whether you like it or not, it is that same literature-base that led you to come up with the idea in the first place.

Research v. re-search: Where might ideas come from?

A research project requires that your idea is contextualised within a particular scholarly tradition and within an existing academic conversation. Your idea will likely fall into one of two categories: either it will target a perceived research black hole about which little has been written, or it will attempt to correct, advance or redirect existing concepts. Either way, your idea gains a scholarly past, present and future that represent a valuable connection to a wider literature. Before you proceed with your research, you should be able to identify and clearly state your position relative to your academic peers.

■ Everything comes back to the literature

The key is in the reading; there are two reasons for this. First and foremost your conclusions and the 'contribution' of your study/dissertation/project/thesis will be measured relative to the literature it discusses, thus for academic research, individual ideas mean little without being contextualised in a particular literature. Second, ideas that are not developed at least in part through consultation with the literature tend to be broader in scope and lacking nuance and complexity. Nuance and complexity are essential

to an academic contribution so if you fail to understand this subtlety from reading the existing literature, your idea will struggle to do full justice to your study from the beginning.

■ What does the literature tell us?

The body of literature to which you will be referring consists of a range of different types of study: qualitative/quantitative, inductive/deductive, conceptual/empirical. Other chapters in this book should help you make sense of these and other descriptors of research. Your aim is to understand such features of prior contributions to the literature with which you are engaging in order to determine what it is exactly they are telling you and how this is taking you closer towards an idea. A piece of published research that you consult in the pursuit of ideas will have core characteristics, it will most often have:

- A contextual literature that it references in the generation of its own particular idea
- A broader body of theory that underpins that literature
- A form of contextual literature relating to, commonly in management, a specific industry
- An articulated methodological approach.

Think back to Sherlock Holmes: there is some detective work to be done. Look for the clues that tell you what area of literature this study belongs to and in which field it is looking to contribute. The clues are in the language and terminology used within the writing but you will also find clues that support your detective work elsewhere in a peer-reviewed journal article. The title of the journal in which the article is published will give you clues as to the sort of home-based literature the study will be contributing to. The *Academy of Management Review* publishes scholarly articles that review concepts and literature which could directly impact on business and the way it is conducted. However, *Consumption, Markets and Culture's* name tells us that there is perhaps a broader sociological interest in this journal and thus the literature used will relate more to theories from sociology. This is one clue we can get as to the sort of literature you might see being referenced in an individual article. The other considerable source of clues about an article is its reference list. The list of references will present the field of enquiry that an article is hoping to make a contribution to, as it must use the existing

literature in the field to form its ideas, just the same as you are having to do in the formation of our own ideas.

Learning to recognise the constituent parts of published research and interpret the messages that they communicate to us is necessary for forming a strong idea of your own. For example, if you can recognise that there has been a large amount of conceptual work into the consideration of the use of WiFi in customer relationship marketing in the retail sector in the UK then you will see that there is a space in which you may be able to contribute empirical research to this area.

■ **Creating a space for your idea**

It is important to be clear about the space in which you locate your idea and your research. Because of the characteristics already described (qualitative/quantitative, inductive/deductive, conceptual/empirical) it can be a challenging task to squarely define the space in which you wish to locate your study. That space is likely to be complex and require a degree of understanding of the literature in order to appreciate it fully, so the clearer you can make it, the more effectively you can defend it - as a space that represents an opportunity for contributing to the literature. In turn, this will appeal to your audience (i.e. your supervisor(s) and others who will read and mark your dissertation) because it demonstrates that you are working with a viable idea. That space can be defined relating to the aforementioned types of characteristics; for example, there may be little empirical enquiry into an area, in which case there is a space in which your ideas may contribute to the prevailing discourse. Alternatively, there may be an apparent assumption within the literature that has not been interrogated for its counter-theory, for example a body of literature may imply that "all storytelling in organisations is used as a force for good." In this case your idea may be to explore the potential for destructive stories that do harm in organisations.

Of course, if you are reading widely and diversely, you may identify different research spaces which clash with each other. It is best to keep a record of your reading so that you remain on top of your literature. It is surprising how quickly one article or paper blends into another when you are reading a large volume of material and you will need to be able to justify why you have decided to investigate your chosen research path at the expense of other avenues. Figure 2.1 suggests how you might systematically approach each article, such that you can both manage and analyse content and record any ideas that arise from your analysis.