

# 2

## The Key is in the Reading: 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, p.111).

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 a particular context. 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 and ontological

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, p.9), their relevance (Rynes et al., 2001) and their introduction of the new (Alvesson and Sandberg, 2011, p.247), and are understood as discipline-shapers (Vermeulen, 2005, p.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, p.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 represents a valuable connection to a wider literature. Before proceeding 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. If you fail to understand this subtlety from reading the existing literature, then 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 the 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 here. 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 to which the study will be contributing. 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, the title *Consumption, Markets and Culture* 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