RESEARCHING ORGANIZATIONS

The Practice of Organizational Fieldwork

SAGE

Los Angeles | London | New Delhi
Singapore | Washington DC

2

Research and Organizations

Chapter objectives

- to identify the distinctive characteristics of organizations as sites of social research
- to identify some key forms of organizational research
- to identify some key dimensions of variation between types of organization

Calling a book *Researching Organizations* might seem to suggest, at the very least, that organizations constitute a distinct context for research – a book called *Researching Nothing in Particular* might be expected to have rather less appeal. The title could also be seen to suggest, however, that organizations are relatively homogenous as a research context and that organizational researchers face a common set of issues. In this chapter various characteristics of organizations, forms of organizational research and dimensions on which organizations may vary are discussed to explore the extent to which either of these assumptions is valid.

Just what is it that makes organizations so different as sites for research?

Most organizational behaviour textbooks, generally written for students taking business and management courses, are surprisingly short on definitions of what an organization is, perhaps because the answer is seen as so self-evident as to require no discussion (although their assumptions are often revealed in their focus on 'firms', 'companies' and occasionally public sector bodies). Where they do discuss the nature of organizations (e.g. Mullins, 2010) it seems to be much easier to identify examples of organizations than to suggest how they differ from other forms of social group. Such texts may also seek

to identify 'common factors in organizations', e.g. people, objectives, structure and management (Mullins, 2010: 78–9), although, again, these may be seen as reflecting the interests of their audience rather than providing a comprehensive definition.

In Chapter 1, therefore, organizations were defined as a relatively enduring group of people with some degree of coordination around a common principle that has a more or less identifiable boundary. This was intended to avoid the rather functionalist assumptions of the organizational behaviour textbooks, while providing some basis for differentiating organizations from other types of social group. Transient groupings, such as commuters passing through a railway station, are therefore not an organization, nor are a group of teenagers who hang around a village bus stop, even though they may do this regularly for quite a period of time. The same commuters or teenagers could become an organization, however, if circumstances led them to coordinate in, say, agitating for better facilities at the station or leisure activities in the village. Coordination around principles also allows churches or clubs and societies to be considered as organizations, where the more common language of objectives may be seen as inappropriate. In many larger organizations this coordination is likely to be formalized in hierarchical power relationships, but this would not seem a necessary feature of organizations per se (and such relationships may also be found in other forms of social group).

While the boundaries of an organization may not always be clear-cut, it would seem an important characteristic of an organization that it should be possible to identify the people who form part of this group (if not all to the same degree). The boundaries of organizations need not be physical, although in some cases (think of a high-security prison), this may be a key characteristic. Boundaries may also be legal, for example in the form of a contract of employment, or simply by personal subscription or mutual identification.

Although it may be helpful to adopt a broad definition of organizations for the purposes of distinguishing organizations from other forms of social group, the sorts of business and public sector organizations that are the focus of organizational behaviour textbooks are probably the most common sites for research in organizations. Such organizations tend to be relatively formal in their structuring, to have clear physical boundaries, to have more explicit objectives and to be seen as persisting over a reasonable span of time. The larger and better-established of these organizations also tend to be economically powerful and may have their own capability for, and interest in, research.

Although individually these characteristics are not exclusive to organizations (a family, village or street-corner gang may be relatively persistent and well-bounded, for example) it is their combination that distinguishes organizations from other types of social group. These characteristics may also affect how research may be undertaken in organizations.

Table 2.1 The distinctive character of organizations

Characteristics of organizations that make them distinctive as research sites:

- coordination
- common principle
- boundary
- relative persistence.

In business and public sector organizations these characteristics may be more formalized and they may also exhibit:

- economic power
- capability for, and interest in, research.

The coordination exhibited by organizations, for example, is often viewed in terms of structure and management. In larger organizations this may be highly formalized and even expressed in an official organigram, defining the organizational hierarchy and the places of particular individuals within it. As will be discussed in later chapters this structure may be important in research, for example in determining the scope of access that an individual may be able to grant or how an association with particular individuals may be viewed by others in the organization. It is not that there is no equivalent structure in other social groups, but that the bureaucratic character of many organizations means that these effects pertain to the structural positions of the individuals as much as to the individuals themselves. A Head Teacher acquires a certain status by virtue of their role that does not depend on their personal qualities as an individual. Management also implies some formal power relationship of particular individuals over others (even if this may not always be informally observed). Sensitivity to both the formal and informal structure may therefore be important in the conduct of organizational research.

The common principle(s) of an organization may be symbolically important as values with which researchers may need to present their work as aligned, or at the very least not in conflict. Gaining access to a commercial organization, for example, may require a case to be made that the costs of participation in the research will be minimal and that it may indeed have economic benefits, while a healthcare organization may be more persuaded by arguments that research will improve patient care. That there are common principles that an organization is said to subscribe to, need not imply that all individuals in the organization do so with the same enthusiasm, or even that some organization members do not reject them. Organizations are not necessarily unitary and sensitivity to conflict and factions within an organization may be essential to effective research practice.

The boundaries of formal organizations are often clearly demarcated and access inside them tightly controlled. There may be literal gatekeepers (such as receptionists or security personnel) whose role it is to police these boundaries. It

is therefore often difficult to undertake research in organizations without formal permission because their practices are often not visible in the public realm.

While organizational boundaries may be a barrier, the persistence of organizations may facilitate research. Most organizations are likely to remain in existence for the duration of a research study. This is not to say that this apparent stability may not mask considerable internal change (departments may be restructured, individuals join and leave the organization, or change jobs), but the formal entity endures.

The economic power of organizations, especially large commercial ones, enables them to exert a degree of potential control over research that can weaken the researchers' position. It means, for example, that they can afford to resort to the law to protect their interests against research findings that they are unhappy with, or can enforce non-disclosure agreements. Such power need not be solely restrictive on research, however. For example it may be used to help the researcher with the expenses of their study (although this may be considered to compromise their independence) or mean that the organization has access to data that it may be beyond the resources of a researcher to gather.

Many large organizations also have their own research capacity. Sometimes this is directed solely at scientific development of their products, but in others it may also be directed at organizational improvement. This capacity can help researchers by making organizations informed consumers of research who appreciate its importance and understand what is involved. Their internal research activities may be seen as a benchmark, however, against which external research may be measured (and found wanting, for example where qualitative social research is proposed to an organization with a strong culture of scientific research, such as in medical settings). Organizations may also show an active interest in research they consider relevant to their situation. Researchers may therefore encounter what Giddens (1993) terms the 'double hermeneutic', whereby organizational members frame their understanding of their own activities in terms of concepts that are the product of prior research.

We will return to consider whether the effects of these characteristics are actually sufficient to designate organizations as a distinct domain of social research in Chapter 10, but we will now turn our attention to whether, as a consequence of these characteristics, research on organizations may involve distinctive forms of research.

Forms of organizational research

An examination of the literature reporting research in organizations reveals a wide diversity of different forms of practice being included within this designation and also a diversity of terminology to describe these. Thus, as Buchanan

and Bryman (2009: xxviii) note, 'many commentators use the terms methodology, design, strategy and methods synonymously, inclusively … and often without precise definition'. For their part, Buchanan and Bryman (2009: xxvii) make the case for restricting the term method to 'a tool or technique or approach for collecting data', but this would only apply to a subset of the forms of practice undertaken by organizational researchers and be inconsistent, as they acknowledge, with much writing on research methods. Rather than enter these debates, therefore, this book will refer to 'forms of organizational research' to describe the types of research practice that may be employed in researching organizations. This will be taken to be more than just the 'framework for the collection and analysis of data' that Bryman and Bell refer to as 'research design', and includes the philosophical assumptions influencing these practices.

Many of these forms of research that are used to study organizations have been adopted, and often adapted, from practices in other disciplines and are not therefore specific to the study of organizations. These include studies emulating the practices of the natural sciences, such as experiments and population analyses, studies drawing on the ethnographic tradition from anthropology and sociologically informed ethnomethodological and symbolic-interactionist studies. There are also a number of forms of research practice, however, that may be argued to be more distinctive to research in organizations, such as action research and consultancy, that capitalize on the particular characteristics of organizations such as their economic power and research capacity, or that specifically question those characteristics, such as critical research.

Given the concern of this book with the practice of organizational fieldwork, discussion will be focused on those forms of research that involve the researcher getting 'out of the office and into the "field"', as Scott and Marshall (2009: 256) put it. A number of significant forms of organizational research practice in which the researcher does not have direct contact with any organization, will therefore only receive passing mention. These include: studies reviewing or undertaking meta-analyses of existing studies or re-analysing their data (Hakim, 2000); studies making use of secondary data provided by third parties such as national statistical bureaux and commercial database companies; and studies analysing documentation relating to organizations that is available in the public domain, such as company reports; laboratory experiments with student subjects (Colquitt, 2008); and simulations (Harrison et al., 2007).

It should be noted, however, that despite not involving any fieldwork, analysis of published statistics, such as those produced by national statistical bureaux or by commercial data services, do not entirely avoid the issues discussed in this book. Rather the significance, or otherwise, of these issues is likely to be inaccessible to the researcher who needs to take it on faith that they were appropriately addressed in the original data-gathering exercise. Even

where data are apparently objective outputs from highly regulated and even automated reporting systems, such as stock price indices or company accounts, it cannot be assumed that they are necessarily a valid and reliable measure of the phenomenon of interest, as financial scandals and changing reporting standards may reveal.

Excluding organizational research that does not involve fieldwork does not significantly reduce the variety of forms of research to be considered though, as variants of most of the non-fieldwork forms of research may be carried out in field settings or drawing on primary data. There is a significant tradition of field experiments in organizational research, for example, such as the classic Hawthorne experiments (Roethlisberger and Dickson, 1939), and of the use of surveys in place of, or as a supplement to, secondary data. It would therefore seem necessary to consider other ways of categorizing organizational research to distinguish different approaches.

One common categorization is between quantitative and qualitative strategies/designs/methods (see, for example, Bryman and Bell, 2011; Cooper and Schindler, 2011; or Easterby-Smith et al. 2008). This would seem misleading, however, as it implies that the type of data used in a study is the key determinant of the research approach and that using numbers is fundamentally different from, and perhaps even incompatible with, research using 'people's own written or spoken words and observable behaviour' (Taylor and Bogdan, 1998: 7). This is not to deny that research using numbers often tends to adopt a rather different approach and to make different assumptions about the nature of reality (ontology) and our knowledge of it (epistemology), than that found in many, but certainly not all, studies that employ qualitative data, but to argue that the association is not a necessary one and that data type is not therefore a robust basis on which to categorize research. Rather, it would seem more helpful to categorize research in terms of the epistemological assumptions on which it is based (Johnson and Duberley, 2000).

At the risk of over-simplification, two main epistemological positions may be identified. On the one hand, there is what is often termed positivism (Bryman and Bell, 2011; Easterby-Smith et al., 2008; Gill and Johnson, 2010). This proposes that the methods of organizational research should be modelled on those of the natural sciences (methodological monism), following a hypothetico-deductive approach (using theory to develop hypotheses that are tested against specifically gathered data) and seeking to establish law-like generalizations about organizational phenomena. On the other, following the hermeneutic and phenomenological traditions in the humanities and social sciences, there is what is often termed interpretivism, which argues that the methods of the natural sciences are inappropriate for the understanding of social (and organizational) phenomena and that alternative, inductive research methods (developing understanding from data gathered without necessarily having a predefined

theory) are required that seek to engage with the way that social actors interpret their world.[1]

Thus, while positivist organizational researchers tend to gather quantitative data (because these are amenable to statistical analysis which can enable their hypotheses to be definitively tested) their assumptions do not preclude the gathering of qualitative data. Indeed there is a significant tradition in positivist research in organizations, such as the case methods of Eisenhardt (1989) or Yin (2003) or the descriptive inference of King et al. (1994), that relies predominantly on qualitative data. Nor, conversely, does the rejection of the methods of the natural sciences as a model for social research mean that interpretive researchers cannot use quantitative data, even if they might tend to argue that such data tend to obscure the interpretations involved in their gathering and analysis and that qualitative data provide more insight on the interpretations of social actors that they seek to understand.

Another dimension of differentiation of research in organizations was proposed by Burrell and Morgan (1979), who categorized social theories along two dimensions: subjectivism/objectivism and the sociology of regulation/sociology of radical change. The resulting 2×2 matrix identified four 'paradigms' that they called interpretivist, functionalist, radical humanist and radical structuralist. Although controversial in its attempt to fit all social theory into its categories and in its argument that the paradigms are incommensurable (i.e. no synthesis between them is possible), their regulation/radical change dimension enables the differentiation of critical organizational research (subjectivist/radical

Table 2.2 Forms of relationship between researchers and organizations

Relationship	Guiding principles
Research in organizations	Researcher independence Research aims to meet the researcher's objectives
Research with organizations	Partnership between researcher and organization members Research aims to meet mutually beneficial objectives
Research for organizations	Research instigated by the organization Research aims to meet the organization's objectives

[1]Just to complicate matters, some interpretive researchers propose that even if the natural science methods are not applicable to social research, the principles that the natural sciences are seen to aspire to, such as objectivity, rigour, and reliability, should nevertheless guide social research (in order that it can be more scientific). It may therefore be helpful to distinguish between such a 'weak' interpretivist position, e.g. Lofland (1995), Flick (2009), and that of other, 'strong' interpretivists, e.g. Law (2004), who would reject both the methods and the principles of the natural sciences (because they would argue that the two are inseparable).

change), from traditional interpretivism (subjectivist/regulation – according to Burrell and Morgan [1979]).

A third way in which organizational research may be categorized concerns the relationship between the researcher and the organization, that is, whether the research is conducted in, with or for an organization as shown in Table 2.2. The latter two forms of research may, broadly speaking, be considered to correspond to action research and consultancy.

These three dimensions (epistemology, regulation/radical change and relationship between researcher and organization) are orthogonal to one another so there is no necessary relationship between particular forms of research and any one position on any dimension, although certain forms may tend to adopt a particular epistemological position and some combinations (critical consultancy?) may be highly unlikely. Table 2.3 maps the association between a number of forms of organizational research and these dimensions. The forms of research listed are not intended to be comprehensive, but cover most of the 'key methods' (Gill and Johnson, 2010) or 'types of study' (Hakim, 2000) that may involve the carrying out of fieldwork. Rather than attempt to review the technicalities of carrying out these approaches in practice, the discussion below will focus on their implications for organizational fieldwork. References to sources that are able to offer the depth of specialist guidance that is needed to undertake these forms of research, however, are given in the further reading list at the end of this chapter.

Experimental research

Experimental research involving direct interaction with organizations may be of three types: true, field and natural experiments. All are based on a positivist epistemology that draws on the natural sciences. In *true experiments* the researcher is able to: control which of the (randomly selected) subjects receives the treatment or not; identify and measure the effects of the treatment; and control any other possible influences on the effects being measured. Achieving such conditions will require the establishment of a 'laboratory' in which all relevant variables can be controlled and measured. While this will typically be located away from the the organization being studied, usually in a university or research institute, in principle it could be located 'on site' in the organization.

The strength of a true experiment will be in the replicability of findings and in their internal validity (as the researcher is able to control all potentially confounding factors). Where it is not possible to set up fully controlled conditions in an organization it may nevertheless be possible to conduct *quasi-experiments* that follow the principles of experimental design, but in which the assignment of subjects to the treatment and comparison groups is not random, for example by taking a series of measurements of a single group before and after the

Table 2.3 Association between forms of organizational research and dimensions of differentiation

	Positivist	Interpretivist	Regulation	Radical change	In organization	With organization	For organization
Experiments	4		4		2	1	1
Surveys	3	1	4		2	1	1
Ethnographic		4	3	1	2	1	1
Ethnomethodological		4	4		2	1	1
Case study	2	2	2	2	3	1	
Critical research		4		4	3	1	
Action research	2	2	2	2	1	3	
Consultancy	2	2	4				4

Key: 1 = possible association, 2 = probable association, 3 = highly likely association, 4 = (almost) certain association.

administration of a treatment. This has the advantage of being less disruptive to the organization. Such intervention may take place in the workplace setting without establishing control of the conditions (*field experiments*), or the researcher may seek to find *natural experiments* in which different groups, not necessarily within the same organization, happen to experience some treatment (or not) and their respective outcomes are compared. While sacrificing internal validity (the researcher has no control over the conditions), the external validity of such studies is improved (as the effects occur in a 'natural' setting or are naturally occurring).

As the talk of variables and measurement implies, experimental studies tend to favour quantitative data, and their pursuit of control implies an a priori theory about the phenomenon of interest that the experiment seeks to test. It is possible, however, for experimental researchers to collect qualitative observational data and verbal reports, although such data are likely to be highly structured and may be converted to numerical indices for ease of data analysis.

Setting up a laboratory to undertake experimental studies 'in the field' would seem impossible without the active support of the host and the resources involved would seem likely to be beyond the reach of all but the largest of organizations. Even the conduct of field experiments or the collection of data on natural experiments, however, may be expected to require extensive cooperation. Researchers seeking to pursue field-based experimental studies would therefore seem likely to be working with or for the organization they are studying, either in a collaborative action research mode or as consultancy, and will need to be able to demonstrate clear benefits of the study that significantly outweigh the potentially high costs. Recruiting potential partner organizations and maintaining good relationships with them over the duration of the study is thus likely to be no less important for such research than for extensive observational fieldwork, although the researcher may seek to adopt a more distant role, especially with experimental subjects, so as not to compromise their objectivity.

Survey research

Survey studies involve researchers eliciting information from a relatively large number of individuals, either in a personal capacity or as representatives of an organization or a subgroup within an organization, through the administration of a structured questionnaire. Analytic (or explanatory) surveys that seek to test a theory will require careful design of questions to ensure that relevant variables are appropriately measured and the selection of a suitable sample to enable inferences to be drawn about the population being investigated. Descriptive (or exploratory) surveys are more concerned with characterizing a particular phenomenon (perhaps as a prelude to developing theory for subsequent testing),

and may include more open questions seeking qualitative responses, but still need to pay attention to sampling to enable generalization of their findings. Analytical surveys are likely to be associated with a positivist epistemology, but a descriptive survey could be conducted as part of an interpretivist study.

Surveys may be administered face-to-face, by post, telephone, email or, increasingly, online. In all cases the researcher will need to gain access (directly or indirectly) to potential respondents, but only face-to-face and telephone surveys involve some direct interaction between the researcher and respondents. While the researcher may need the cooperation of the organization to be able to contact respondents and to get into the organizational setting to conduct a face-to-face survey, the amount of interaction between the researcher and respondent will generally be limited to completion of the questionnaire. Indeed the researcher may seek to restrict and standardize their interaction so as not to bias the responses.

Ethnographic research[2]

A very different approach is adopted by ethnographic researchers, reflecting their interpretive epistemology. They typically assume that understanding of organizational phenomena requires close engagement with the research site, usually over an extended period of perhaps one year or more, involving the gathering[3] of data through unobtrusive observation and informal conversation. While it is acknowledged that individuals in the research setting may change their behaviour as a result of being studied, it is believed that they will find it difficult to sustain this for very long and that any effect is likely to diminish over time as they get used to the presence of the researcher. Because ethnographic data rely on what the researcher sees and hears and how they interpret and record it, they are considered to be inevitably subjective, however hard the researcher may try to be objective. As Clifford Geertz puts it, 'what we call our data are really our own constructions of other people's constructions of what they and their compatriots are up to' (Geertz, 1973: 9).

While claiming to eschew generalization in favour of 'thick description' of the detail of specific settings, ethnographic researchers often make statements

---

[2]Watson (2011: 205) argues that it is helpful to view ethnography not as a research method, but as the output from a particular type of research practice (involving 'close observation of and involvement with people in a particular setting'). Ethnographic research would therefore include studies that exhibit such characteristics, whether or not they identify themselves as ethnographies.

[3]Some researchers would question whether data are 'out there' to be gathered or are created in the process of research.

from their findings that go beyond the immediate setting (Hammersley, 2008; Payne and Williams, 2005; Williams, 2000).

Ethnomethodological research

In contrast to ethnographers' efforts to describe the richness and complexity of a setting as a whole, ethnomethodologists typically focus on how it is that people 'get on in the world' in everyday life, seeking to surface the taken-for-granted assumptions that produce and sustain a shared sense of social order. One way in which they may do this is through the detailed study of organizational practices. Rather than attempting to produce a description that can express the totality of a year's observation, therefore, ethnomethodologists might seek to analyse every nuance of two minutes of video of everyday practice in an organizational setting to explore how work is accomplished. In their insistence on the essentially situated character of all organizational practice, ethnomethodologists generally reject generalization of their findings (at least in the form conventionally understood in social research, as Sharrock and Randall [2004] discuss).

Case study research

A common form of organizational research is that of the case study of one or a small number of organizations. In such research, topics are defined broadly, not narrowly, contextual conditions are considered, not just the phenomenon of study, and multiple sources of evidence, both quantitative and qualitative, are used (Yin, 2003). Multiple case studies generally follow a replication, rather than sampling, logic with cases being selected on grounds of criticality, topicality or feasibility and access. Although Yin (1993) proposes that case studies may be descriptive, exploratory or explanatory, he is clear that case studies that emulate the scientific method are to be preferred. This positivist view of case studies has been taken up by other authors such as Eisenhardt (Eisenhardt, 1989; Eisenhardt and Graebner, 2007), as has been noted, who propose them as a valuable tool in the exploration of new topic areas that can lead to the development of a novel, testable and empirically valid theory.

Interpretive organizational researchers also use case studies, however, placing more emphasis on the rich theoretical insights that may be obtained from the in-depth study of particular settings (Dyer and Wilkins, 1991). Such research often bears some similarity to more traditional ethnographic research, indeed such studies may describe themselves in such terms, although it often involves fieldwork of a shorter duration and the use of interviews, rather than observation, as the primary data-gathering method.

Critical research

The structured character of organizations, with their positional power relationships and alignment to particular principles, provides the impetus for another form of research in organizations that seeks to provide resources that can enable these relationships and principles to be challenged. Such research is distinguished more by its emancipatory objectives than by methodology, but generally adopts an interpretivist epistemology (Alvesson and Deetz, 2000). Critical organizational researchers therefore do not have a distinctive methodological approach, but employ other methods such as surveys or case studies as appropriate. In its questioning of existing organizational practice, however, critical research may have an effect on how fieldwork is conducted (Alvesson and Deetz, 2000), for example by eschewing cooperation with senior figures in the organizational hierarchy. If, as was suggested, it would seem unlikely that critical research would be adopted as a form of consultancy, critical researchers could potentially engage in action research, perhaps with groups in a subordinate position in the organization.

Action research

Most organizational research, however, does not necessarily contest the motivating principles of the organizations it studies, and indeed in action research intervention by the researcher may be directed towards improving their achievement. Compared to the objectivity and detachment sought in scientific research, or ethnographers' attempts to avoid their presence altering the behaviour of organizational participants, action researchers deliberately initiate change in the organization. Their research therefore depends on the organization's agreement to the intervention and the collaboration of members of the organization in carrying out the study. The cooperative character of such research is particularly emphasized in some approaches to action research, such as participative inquiry (Reason and Bradbury-Huang, 2007).

Consultancy

There is some debate in the literature as to whether consultancy can be considered a valid form of research. Proponents, e.g. Klein (1976), Gummesson (2000), argue that consultancy offers a way to study aspects of an organization, such as strategic decision-making, that may be inaccessible to other forms of research. They also question whether there is any substantive difference between consultancy and action research, except that, capitalizing on the economic power of organizations, the consultant gets paid for their efforts and may have considerably greater resources at their disposal to carry out the research. Indeed it is argued that the payment can be seen as evidence of the importance and relevance of the research to the organization.

Others, however, question whether payment inevitably compromises the researcher's independence and point to the fact that the research problem and goals are generally set by the organization (although they may be open to subsequent negotiation), and that both the researcher and the organization may be committed to the successful outcome of any intervention, making any objective assessment difficult. Concerns are also raised about the ownership of results and the publication of findings being restricted by commercial confidentiality. Whether or not these concerns are seen to disqualify consultancy as a form of research, it is the case that some work reported as research in the organizational literature is the product of consultancy assignments (even if this is not always acknowledged).

This variety of forms of practice would seem enough to make it hard to generalize about research in organizations as a whole, but the situation is made considerably more complex by the enormous diversity in types of organization. While it is not possible to consider all possible ways in which organizations may vary from each other and how this may affect research, some discussion of a number of the possible dimensions of variation would seem necessary in order to appreciate the sorts of contexts in which organizational research is carried out.

Types of organization

Conventional typologies of organizations generally categorize them in terms of characteristics such as industry or size. While there is no universally agreed taxonomy of industries, most countries adopt a standardized classification of economic activity in their national statistics that can be used to define the industry in which a particular organization operates. These classifications can be highly specific, for example category C of the European Union Statistical Classification of Economic Activities in the European Community (NACE)[4] is designated as 'Manufacturing', within which category C.10 is 'Manufacturing of food products', C.10.7 is 'Manufacturing of bakery and farinaceous products' and C.10.7.1 is 'Manufacture of bread; manufacture of fresh pastry goods and cakes'.

Size may have a major influence on organizational structuring, with larger organizations tending to be more formalized and with more layers of hierarchy. A distinction is often made between small- and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) and large organizations, but there is no internationally agreed definition of the cut-off point between the two. While this is usually measured in terms

[4]http://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/ramon/nomenclatures/index.cfm?TargetUrl=LST_NOM_DTLandStrNom=NACE_REV2andStrLanguageCode=ENandIntPcKey=andStrLayoutCode=HIERARCHIC

of the number of employees, with organizations having less than somewhere between 100 and 250 employees being classed as SMEs, it is sometimes also measured in terms of financial turnover.

Other ways in which organizations may differ from each other include their location (single or multi-site) and whether multiple sites are distributed within a small geographical area, across a country, or internationally. Within this last group a distinction is also usually made between multinational organizations, with a head office in one country and more or less autonomous foreign subsidiaries and transnationals that seek to operate at a global level.

Where an organization has multiple sites or operating units it may be possible to distinguish between different ways in which these component elements are organized. Decision-making in decentralized organizations is likely to be distributed to the component sites or units. In divisionalized organizations components are grouped, perhaps around product or geographical markets, while in centralized organizations all components are subordinated to a single authority.

Another important distinction between organizations may be in their ownership. This may be split into private and public sector, but other categories include family firms and third-sector organizations such as voluntary and community organizations, charities, social enterprises, cooperatives and mutuals. This last category may sometimes be referred to as non-profit or not for profit organizations, although this designation, which brings tax advantages in many jurisdictions, may not be restricted to small voluntary or community organizations, but may include large foundations and regular business organizations that choose to operate on a non-profit basis.

Finally, organizations may be classified in terms of their age, with a distinction between start-ups and established organizations. While this may have some connection with size, not all established organizations are large and spin-offs and spin-outs may be large in size from an early stage. Table 2.4 summarizes these dimensions of variation among organizations.

Table 2.4 Dimensions of variation between types of organization

Dimension	Categories
Industry	Standard industrial classification codes
Size	SMEs/large
Location	Localized/national/multinational/transnational
Structure	Decentralized/divisional/centralized
Sector	Public/private/family/not for profit/third sector
Age	Start-up/established

While the dimensions listed in Table 2.4 are not necessarily the only ways in which to categorize organizational types, they may be significant when conducting research in organizations. Industry, for example, is likely to influence the type of personnel found and the range of practices carried out – a coal mine, a pharmaceutical company and a bank, say, will have a very different mix of manual and non-manual labour with different skills carrying out different tasks. It is also often a criterion used in selecting research sites, e.g. a study of innovation practices in the automotive industry. Industries vary too in terms of their stability, with some, such as the IT sector, characterized by high rates of turnover of organizations, while others, such as basic goods manufacturing, show lower levels of change. This will affect the ease with which it is possible to identify suitable organizations in which to undertake research, as the potential population of target organizations may be continually changing, and the likelihood of target organizations' survival over the course of a longitudinal study. Industry conditions may be another influence on the opportunities for research, with organizations generally being more receptive when their industry is experiencing rapid growth (as resources are less constrained, so the potential costs of participation are less of a concern, and the likelihood of findings being considered as evidence of success are greater) and more defensive and reluctant to allow access during an industry downturn. Defensiveness may not just be a product of economic conditions, though, and industries are likely to vary in terms of the confidentiality of their practices. A proposal to undertake a study in the retail sector may encounter fewer difficulties and restrictions than one studying a research laboratory where commercial secrecy may be a concern.

The formalization that is often associated with increasing size (and perhaps also, to some extent, longer history) may be significant in the ease with which access may be gained to an organization. Access to smaller (and younger) organizations may be possible on the informal permission of perhaps a single individual, especially if they are a key actor in the organization such as the founder, whereas in larger (and more established) organizations there may be formal procedures in place requiring the involvement of several different departments (maybe not just those likely to be involved in the research, but also human resource and legal departments) before approval can be granted. Practically speaking, too, larger organizations are more likely to have clearly defined boundaries and to have staff specifically employed to police them.

The stronger structuring of large organizations may also restrict the scope of research even after access has been achieved, as organizational subunits (divisions, departments, sites) may set internal boundaries on research that may be

absent in more informal, fluid and unitary SMEs, where staff are more likely to know each other and to accept a researcher on a colleague's recommendation. Further constraints on research may arise from the economic power of (generally larger) organizations, for example through the enforcement of non-disclosure agreements or contesting of what are perceived to be unfavourable findings.

The location of an organization may limit research access, as visiting more than a few sites of a large organization may be beyond the means of many researchers. If the research design requires study of more than the sites that are immediately accessible then other forms of contact with the organization, such as phone or email interviews, may be necessary to gather data, but may create problems of comparability with the findings from sites in which face-to-face interaction is possible. A further complication may be created in transnational companies where the phenomena of interest may be distributed across many locations, with perhaps even the staff involved having little or no face-to-face interaction, but carrying out their work through information and communication technology networks. If research sites or participants are located in different countries then there may be additional issues of cultural and linguistic differences.

The sector within which an organization operates need not necessarily influence its receptiveness to research; a private sector organization, for example, may be as welcoming or discouraging of a potential piece of research as one in the public or third sectors. Where it may have more influence, however, is on the principles around which an organization is coordinated, which may be important in shaping how it may be most effectively approached.

The most significant effect of organizational age on research in organizations is in organizations' persistence over time. Data on the survival rate of start-ups vary widely between countries, industry sectors and periods of time, but findings that about 20 per cent of start-ups fail within the first year and 50 per cent within five years are widely reported (Cook et al., 2012). From a research perspective this means that longitudinal studies face a high mortality rate and studies of individual start-ups have a high risk of premature termination. It is not that more established organizations are necessarily more stable, but that change is accommodated internally and the survival of the whole organization is not at stake. Nevertheless this changeability may create difficulties for research in established organizations where changes in personnel (sometimes through deliberate policies of job rotation) and internal reorganization may make it hard to maintain continuity. As a result research agreements may be subject to periodic renegotiation over the course of a longitudinal study.

EXERCISES

1 Which of the characteristics of organizations are exhibited by the following types of social group?

	Coordination	Common principle	Boundary	Relative persistence	Economic power	Research capability
The audience at a concert						
Guests at a wedding						
A fire crew						
Contributors to Wikipedia						
Contractors on a building site						
Members of a surgical team						
A government inquiry						

2 Identify the relationship between these combinations of categories/forms of research as

(a) fundamentally incompatible
(b) compatible, but infrequently found in practice
(c) compatible and typically found in practice
(d) necessarily related

Combination	a	b	c	d
Positivism + qualitative data				
Quantitative data + ethnography				
Experiments + positivism				
Surveys + critical research				
Case studies + qualitative data				
Action research + ethnomethodology				
Consultancy + ethnography				

In each case, explain the reasons for the relationship identified? Where the relationship is identified as (a) or (b), what categories/forms of research might be more typically associated with the first named category/form? Why?

Further reading

Characteristics of organizations

For examples of other characterizations of organizations see:

Knights, D. and Willmott, H. (2012) *Introducing Organizational Behaviour and Management*, 2nd revised edn. Andover: Cengage Learning EMEA.

Forms of organizational research

There is a substantial literature on most of the forms of research referred to in this chapter. The following are among the more thorough and accessible discussions of particular forms.

Experiments

Although it is focused on research on 'sensitive topics', this article provides some useful guidance on the conduct of field experiments:

King, E.B., Hebl, M.R., Morgan, W.B. and Ahmad, A.S. (2012) 'Field experiments on sensitive organizational topics', *Organizational Research Methods*, 00(0): 1–21.

Similar advice for quasi-experiments is provided by:

Grant, A.M. and Wall, T.D. (2009) 'The neglected science and art of quasi-experimentation why-to, when-to, and how-to advice for organizational researchers', *Organizational Research Methods*, 12 (4): 653–86.

Surveys

Although it is now quite dated, a comprehensive discussion of most aspects of the design and conduct of surveys in social research is provided by:

Moser, S.C. and Kalton, G. (1985) *Survey Methods in Social Investigation*, 2nd edn. Aldershot: Dartmouth Publishing Co. Ltd.

For a more accessible overview, see:

Fowler, F.J. (2009) *Survey Research Methods*. London: SAGE.

For more information on online surveys see:

Dillman, D.A., Smyth, J.D. and Christian, L.M. (2009) *Internet, Mail, and Mixed-mode Surveys: The Tailored Design Method*, 3rd edn. Chichester: Wiley.
Sue, V.M. and Ritter, L.A. (2012) *Conducting On Line Surveys*. London: SAGE.

Ethnographic

Hammersley, M. and Atkinson, P. (2007) *Ethnography: Principles in Practice*, 3rd edn. London: Routledge.

Provides a general overview of the practice of ethnographic research.

Ybema, S., Yanow, D., Wels, H. and Kamsteeg, F. (2009) *Organizational Ethnography: Studying the Complexity of Everyday Life*. London: SAGE.

Includes chapters discussing a range of issues in the conduct of specifically organizational ethnography as well as an annotated bibliography of both classic and more contemporary organizational ethnographies.

Ethnomethodological

Rouncefield, M. and Tolmie, P. (2011) *Ethnomethodology at Work*. Farnham: Ashgate.

Includes a range of papers discussing the practice of workplace ethnomethodological research.

Randall, D., Rouncefield, M. and Harper, R. (2007) *Fieldwork for Design: Theory and Practice*. London: Springer.

Although focused on computer-supported cooperative work, this provides useful insight on the practice of ethnomethodological fieldwork.

Case study

Thomas, G. (2011) *How to Do Your Case Study: A Guide for Students and Researchers*. London: SAGE.

Provides a general introduction to the conduct of case study research.

Simons, H. (2009) *Case Study Research in Practice*. London: SAGE.

More geared to the practical issues of conducting case studies.

Critical research

Alvesson, M. and Deetz, S. (2000) *Doing Critical Management Research*. London: SAGE.

Quite theoretical, but also addresses some of the practical issues.

Action research

There is a wide variety of literature on action research, especially as it is applied in educational studies.

McNiff, J. and Whitehead, J. (2011) *All You Need to Know About Action Research*. London: SAGE.

Offers a general introduction to the topic (and the same authors have written a number of other introductory texts).

James, E.A., Slater, T. and Bucknam, A. (2012) *Action Research for Business, Nonprofit, and Public Administration: A Tool for Complex Times*. London: SAGE.

Adopts a slightly more organizational focus.

Consultancy

Gummesson, E. (2000) *Qualitative Methods in Management Research*. London: SAGE.

Makes the argument for consultancy as a form of organizational research.

Crowther, D. and Lancaster, G. (2008) *Research Methods: A Concise Introduction to Research in Management and Business Consultancy*. Oxford: Elsevier Butterworth-Heinemann.

Although primarily oriented towards student projects, addresses the overlap between management research and consultancy.

References

Alvesson, M. and Deetz, S. (2000) *Doing Critical Management Research*. London: SAGE.

Bryman, A. and Bell, E. (2011) *Business Research Methods*, 3rd edn. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Buchanan, D.A. and Bryman, A. (2009) *The SAGE Handbook of Organizational Research Methods*. London: SAGE.

Burrell, G. and Morgan, G. (1979) *Sociological Paradigms and Organizational Analysis: Elements of the Sociology of Corporate Life*. London: Heinemann Educational.

Colquitt, J.A. (2008) 'Publishing laboratory research in AMJ: a question of when, not if', *Academy of Management Journal*, 51 (4): 616–20.

Cook, R., Campbell, D. and Kelly, C. (2012) 'Survival rates of new firms: an exploratory study', *Small Business Institute Journal*, 8 (2): 35–42.

Cooper, D.R. and Schindler, P.S. (2011) *Business Research Methods*, 11th edn. Singapore: McGraw-Hill.

Dyer, W.G. and Wilkins, A.L. (1991) 'Better stories, not better constructs, to generate better theory: a rejoinder to Eisenhardt', *Academy of Management Review*, 16 (3): 613–19.

Easterby-Smith, M., Thorpe, R. and Jackson, P.R. (2008) *Management Research*, 3rd edn. London: SAGE.

Eisenhardt, K.M. (1989) 'Building theories from case study research', *Academy of Management Review*, 14 (4): 532–50.

Eisenhardt, K.M. and Graebner, M.E. (2007) 'Theory building from cases: opportunities and challenges', *Academy of Management Journal*, 50 (1): 25–32.

Flick, U. (2009) *An Introduction to Qualitative Research*, 4th edn. London: SAGE.

Geertz, C. (1973) *The Interpretation of Cultures*. New York: Basic Books.
Gill, J. and Johnson, P. (2010) *Research Methods for Managers*, 4th edn. London: SAGE.
Giddens, A. (1993) *New Rules of Sociological Method*, 2nd edn. Cambridge: Polity Press.
Gummesson, E. (2000) *Qualitative Methods in Management Research*. London: SAGE.
Hakim, C. (2000) *Research Design: Successful Designs for Social and Economic Research*, 2nd edn. London: Routledge.
Hammersley, M. (2008) *Questioning Qualitative Inquiry: Critical Essays*. London: SAGE.
Harrison, J.R., Carroll, G.R. and Carley, K.M. (2007) 'Simulation modelling in organizational and management research', *Academy of Management Review*, 32 (4): 1229–45.
Johnson, P. and Duberley, J. (2000) *Understanding Management Research: An Introduction to Epistemology*. London: SAGE.
King, G., Keohane, R.O. and Verba, S. (1994) *Designing Social Inquiry: Scientific Inference in Qualitative Research*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.
Klein, L. (1976) *A Social Scientist in Industry*. Epping: Gower Press.
Law, J. (2004) *After Method: Mess in Social Science Research*. London: Routledge.
Lofland, J. (1995) 'Analytic ethnography: features, failings, and futures', *Journal of Contemporary Ethnography*, 24 (1): 30–67.
Mullins, L.J. (2010) *Management and Organizational Behaviour*, 9th edn. London: Financial Times/Prentice Hall.
Payne, G. and Williams, M. (2005) 'Generalization in qualitative research', *Sociology*, 39 (2): 295–314.
Reason, P. and Bradbury-Huang, H.B.-H. (2007) *The SAGE Handbook of Action Research: Participative Inquiry and Practice*, 2nd edn. London: SAGE.
Roethlisberger, F.J. and Dickson, W.J. (1939) *Management and the Worker: An Account of a Research Program Conducted by the Western Electric Company, Hawthorne Works, Chicago*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
Scott, J. and Marshall, G. (2009) *A Dictionary of Sociology*, 3rd revised edn. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
Sharrock, W. and Randall, D. (2004) 'Ethnography, ethnomethodology and the problem of generalisation in design', *European Journal of Information Systems*, 13 (3): 186–94.
Taylor, S.J. and Bogdan, R. (1998) *Introduction to Qualitative Research Methods: A Guidebook and Resource*, 3rd edn. Chichester: Wiley.
Watson, T.J. (2011) 'Ethnography, reality, and truth: the vital need for studies of "how things work" in organizations and management', *Journal of Management Studies*, 48 (1): 202–17.
Williams, M. (2000) 'Interpretivism and generalisation', *Sociology*, 34 (2): 209–24.
Yin, R.K. (1993) *Applications of Case Study Research*. London: SAGE.
Yin, R.K. (2003) *Case Study Research: Design and Methods*, 3rd edn. London: SAGE.