

# Doing a Literature Review

Releasing the Research Imagination

Chris Hart

2nd Edition



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Production editor: Tom Bedford  
Marketing manager: Ben Sherwood  
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# Preface

Undertaking research for a thesis or dissertation is an experience that most people never forget. Worries about what topic to investigate, how to go about doing the research and writing at length, are common concerns raised by research students. No one can do the research for you; the responsibility is yours and yours alone. This often leads to feelings of isolation and sometimes to a loss of confidence. But with a little planning, careful thought and the adoption of the right attitude, you will be able to set realistic objectives and find that the stress and anxiety of doing the research can be managed and even enjoyable! Few experiences match the sense of achievement and exhilaration that result from finishing your thesis or dissertation.

This book has been written for postgraduate research students and tutors as well as anyone with an interest in the use of research as evidence for an intervention or argument.

This book is not a manual nor is it prescriptive. It is an introduction, aimed at postgraduates, on what it means and what is involved in reviewing research literature. It looks at explaining as well as describing the ideas on which the methods and techniques for analysing a literature are based.

## **Skills and capabilities for research**

Various frameworks have been developed to guide researchers, from all disciplines, through the complexities of the skills and abilities they need to acquire and demonstrate. The proposition underpinning these frameworks is that the national economy will be partly dependent on producing competent world-class researchers. Research will, it is assumed, drive innovation, wealth creation and lead the way to a better world for all. Not all of this will be achieved with great leaps; the small incremental contributions will also have a role to play. In the UK, the Vitae Researcher Development Framework (RDF) is an example of a guide that has been developed to be used by all sectors – education, business, government and charities – for individual and teams of researchers, their supervisors and employers to adopt regardless of the subject discipline or purpose of the research.



The RDF is a framework specifying a range of skills, knowledge, capabilities and activities that are divided into four broad domains. From the standpoint of a researcher it shows what is expected from them and provides a guide to what you (as that researcher) should be doing to develop your competences. Figure 0.1 shows the four domains and how each has sub-divisions. Throughout this book indications are given as to which domain is being looked at and which core skills it relates to.

The RDF is downloadable from the Vitae website ([www.vitae.ac.uk/rdf](http://www.vitae.ac.uk/rdf)) as a professional development tool. You can use it to identify your training needs, create action plans and record evidence of your progress. The RDF is not for any one discipline; all disciplines and types of research activity are encompassed within the framework. These include the traditional higher degree as well as research done for professional practice. The four main domains are:

*Knowledge and intellectual abilities.* Acquiring the knowledge, cognitive abilities and capacity to do competent research.

*Personal effectiveness.* Developing the personal qualities and attitudes to be an effective researcher.

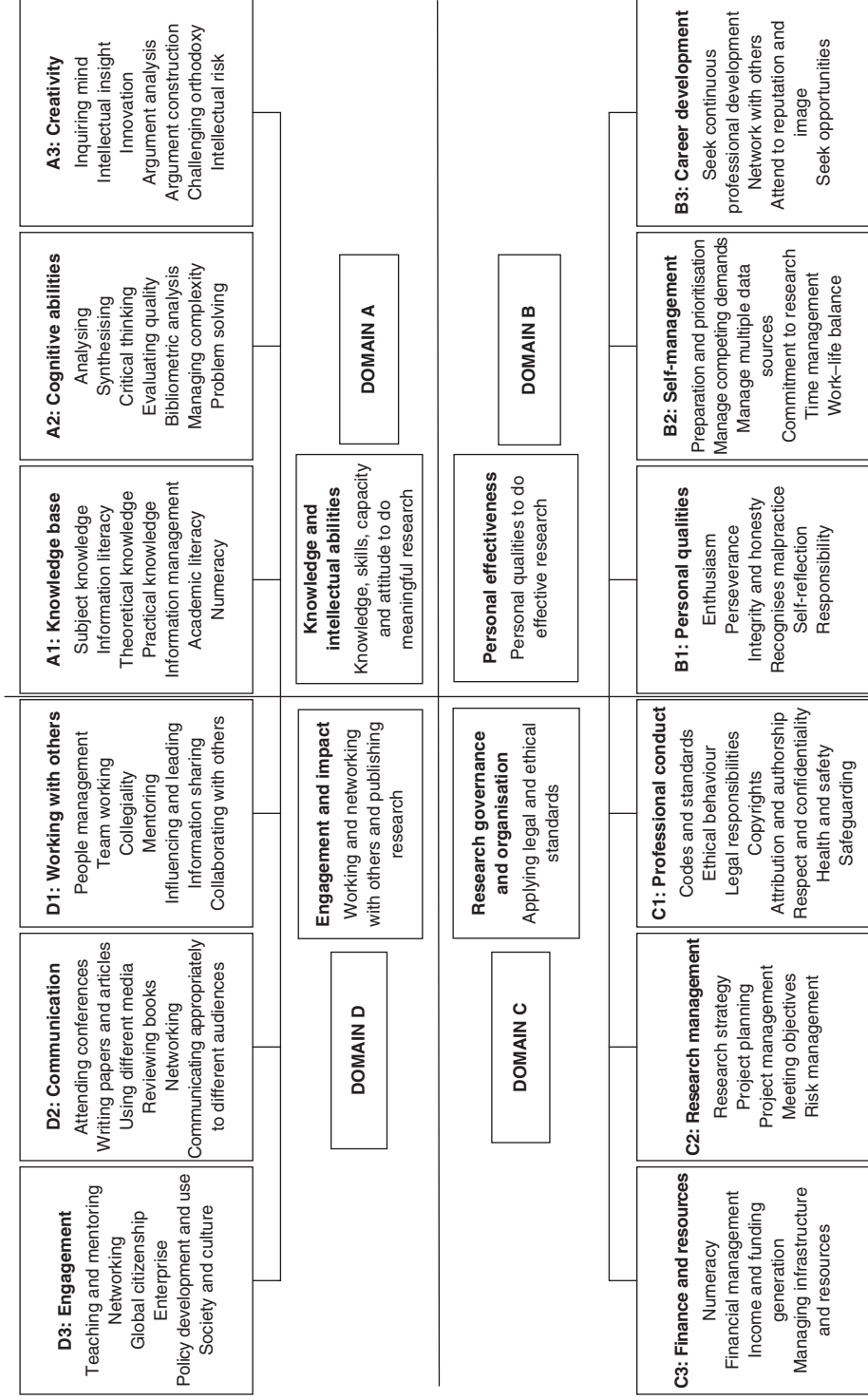
*Research governance and organisation.* Understanding the standards and requirements of professional, scholarly research.

*Engagement and impact.* Working and networking with others, sharing ideas and disseminating research.

Domain A, *Knowledge and intellectual abilities*, is relevant to searching and reviewing a literature and all that this involves. This domain is built on the SCONUL Seven Pillars of Information Literacy (SCONUL, 2011). This scheme places a primacy on citizens, including researchers, having a sound understanding of the ways in which information is generated, stored, categorised, disseminated and can be applied.

In the 21st century, information literacy is a key attribute for everyone, irrespective of age or experience ... it is evidenced through understanding the ways in which information and data is created and handled, developing skills in its management and use and modifying attitudes, habits and behaviours to appreciate the role of information literacy in learning and research. (SCONUL, 2011:13)

The Seven Pillars of Information Literacy is not only about skills but includes – and this is important – statements relating to the need for developing ways of evaluating and understanding information and data. This is not a linear scheme but one that reflects real world researcher experience by being iterative.



**FIGURE 0.1** The Vitae Researcher Development Framework

The seven pillars are:

- identifying information needs
- scoping information available
- planning a logical search for information
- gathering relevant information
- evaluating information sources
- managing the process
- presenting findings.

There are examples you will find in each chapter that can be used as a guide to the literature review, but the main purpose is to help you, as the reader, to understand what it means to be a research student and engaged in using evidence. On a practical level, a number of references are provided that may be useful sources to more information on a particular topic or issue. The examples are chosen to illustrate particular methods and techniques, rather than for their content, and hence the citations in the examples and quotations have not been given, for these refer to the original source. This assumes that if you can work out how the ideas, techniques and methods found in the literature can be adapted and used in your own research, then you will have taught yourself some very useful skills that no manual can provide. One of these skills is to learn *how* to learn. In reading this book you will be forced, in some places, to think seriously about the meaning of literature reviewing, the implications of methodology and the role of argument in research. You will, therefore, be encouraged to avoid copying what others have done and, instead, teach yourself how to analyse, evaluate and synthesise ideas and so produce work that is distinctively yours.

This edition differs from the first in many ways. The key point to note is that since the publication of the first edition there have been many books published on literature reviewing. Some are good and others not so good. It is heartening to note just how important literature reviewing, across all disciplines, has become since the late 1990s. Many of the developments, in using the literature as evidence, have been incorporated into this new edition. Chapter 4 is new. It looks at different kinds of review from across the social sciences and evidence-based professions. Chapter 6, another new chapter, looks at synthesising different kinds of review using a realist approach. This edition also takes into account changes in postgraduate education, paying attention to the quality standards that have been introduced in the past five to eight years, which have meant institutions are assessed and ranked. Part of this assessment is on the quality of teaching and supervision and this includes evidencing the intellectual and technical skills sets of all postgraduate students.

This second edition takes into account the quality assessment of postgraduate teaching by incorporating the Vitae Researcher Development Framework

(RDF) to show which intellectual capabilities are required and the reasons for this and how these relate to the competency of a researcher (this is also linked to employability – a major measure of postgraduate courses). You may also note that the language (parole) used in this book is based on ideas from design-based research (see Design-based Research Collective, 2003), in which complex information, ideas and theories are discussed in different ways using different methods of communication. This is done to encourage Sophistic ways of critically evaluating and thinking about the place of theory and evidence in understanding the world around us and making recommendations for interventions.

If you are looking at this book for a ‘how to do your literature review in so many easy steps’ then look elsewhere. This book will not be for you. This is because the skills sets used here go beyond the mere technical level to encourage, through examples and further inquiry, the acquisition and use of an existential andragogical attitude to epistemological matters – this shows researchers from all disciplines that they are capable of developing a cognate capacity to engage at the highest levels of intellectual life.

# 1

## The Research Imagination

### Key questions

- What is a literature review and what does a literature review look like?
- What is the place of the literature review in a research project?
- What kinds of skills and capabilities will undertaking a review give you?
- What do we mean by the 'research imagination'? Why is this important?
- What are the essential skills and attitudes for doing a literature review?
- What is a core text and how do you locate them?
- Why are argument and debate important for the development of research?

### Core skills

- Seek information, data and ideas on your topic
- Identify trends, research traditions and interesting ideas
- Develop ways to question orthodoxy in order to create research opportunities
- Acquire and apply an attitude that develops your creative, imaginative and interpretative capacity.





## Introduction

It has become an annual ritual for graduate researchers embarking on their projects to ask about the literature review. They usually want to know what a review of the literature *looks like* and *how* to do one. The main problem is that neither I nor anyone else can tell you what *your* review of the literature for your research should look like. Your review will be unique. This is because no research project is ever the same as another and the literature on any given topic is an evolving resource.

### The aims of this book

This book is not a step-by-step manual to producing a literature review. It is much more than this. It aims to help you develop your critical thinking skills and capabilities, so that you can apply them to all kinds of debates, interpretations and issues beyond the academic realm.

This book looks at a range of techniques that can be used to analyse ideas, find relationships between different ideas and understand the nature and use of argument in research. You can expect to look at and be asked to think about what it means to provide an explanation, participate in scholarly discussion and to analyse the worth of other people's ideas and research; it is other people's work that constitutes the body of knowledge on the topic. Your work will either make a contribution to the existing body of knowledge or attempt to challenge some aspect of it.

Undertaking a review of a body of literature is often seen as something obvious and as a task easily done. In practice, although research students do produce what are called reviews of the literature, the quality of these varies considerably. Many reviews, in fact, are only thinly disguised annotated bibliographies. Quality means appropriate breadth and depth, rigour and consistency, clarity and brevity, and effective analysis and synthesis. In other words, the literature is a key resource. It will provide the materials to justify a particular approach to the topic, the selection of methods, and demonstrate that this research contributes something new to our understanding of the world.

## What is a literature review?

Initially, before saying what a review is, we can say that a review of the literature is important because without it you will not acquire an understanding of

your topic, know what has already been done on it, understand how it has been researched or grasp what the key issues are that need addressing.

In your written project, you are expected to show that you understand previous research on your topic. You need to demonstrate that you understand the main theories used in your subject area, as well as how they have been applied and developed, and know what the main criticisms are of the research and methods used in your field.

The review is a part of your academic and professional development of becoming a capable researcher and critical user of research knowledge. However, the importance of the literature review is not matched by a common understanding of how a review of related literature can be done, how it can be used in the research, or why it needs to be done in the first place.

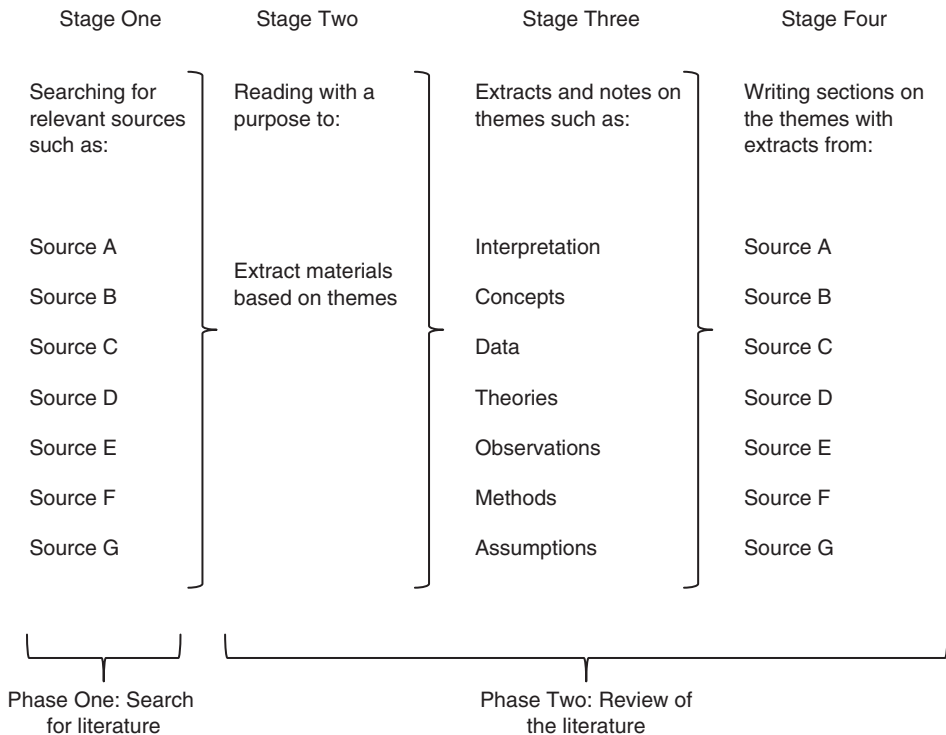
The product of most research is some form of written account. This can take various forms including an article, report, dissertation or conference paper. The dissemination of findings is important. This is because the purpose of research is to contribute in some way to our understanding of the world. This cannot be done if research findings are not shared. The public availability of research ensures that accounts of research are reconstructed ‘stories’. That is, the serendipitous, often chaotic, fragmented and contingent nature of most research (the very things that make research challenging!) is not described in the formal account. We, therefore, need to get an initial understanding of what a literature review is and where it fits in the research project. Figure 1.1 shows the four main stages involved in searching and reviewing a body of literature.

Figure 1.1 shows a two-phase, four-stage process. These are not always linear, with one neatly following the other. The process is iterative. Within the *searching stage* (Phase One) you will move from trying to find everything to focusing on what is relevant to your own work. This could be prior findings, arguments, interpretations, methodological assumptions and the methods used to collect data. In short, you will move from a review *of* the literature to a review *for* your research.

### Some working definitions

A *literature search* (Phase One in Figure 1.1) is a systematic search of the accredited sources and resources. It involves identifying paper and electronic sources relevant to *your* topic and method(s) by preparing a clear plan for the search that includes a justifiable vocabulary that defines what will and will not be included in the search. The search will include establishing a robust scheme for the management of what will be a massive amount of information and paper.

A *literature review* (Phase Two in Figure 1.1) is the analysis, critical evaluation and synthesis of existing knowledge relevant to your research problem,



**FIGURE 1.1** The basic four stages in producing a review of the literature

thesis or the issue you are aiming to say something about. In your analysis, you are selecting from different texts, concepts, theories, arguments and interpretations that seem relevant to the development of *your* particular theoretical frame of reference and/or use of a particular methodology. It involves classifying these parts into schemes that enable you to critically evaluate those concepts, arguments and different interpretations. In critically evaluating, you interrogate the work of others (regardless of their standing in the academic community). You are scrutinising the chain of reasoning another has used and the evidence they have offered to support their argument. You are aiming to follow the use of a seminal work by successive authors; to evaluate their assessments and use of that work; to evaluate the synthesis that has been developed with other keynote scholars. Your reason for doing this is to identify fallacies in arguments, methodological assumptions and theories or to show how an issue and problem could benefit from the application of an existing theory and/or methodology and/or practice. This is ‘finding the gap’ for your research or finding in the literature what could be proposed as best practice.

## What a search and review of the literature is not

A search and review of the literature is not a copy and paste job. It is not a search of the Internet, Amazon or the local bookshop. It is not something that can be done in an afternoon or a week. The following, for example, is not a review of the literature. It is part of a bibliography.

- Beck, U. (1999). 'Introduction: The cosmopolitan manifesto', in U. Beck, *World Risk Society*. Cambridge: Polity Press.
- Beck, U. (2000). *What is Globalization?* Cambridge: Polity Press.
- Beck, U. (2000). 'The cosmopolitan perspective: Sociology in the second age of modernity', *British Journal of Sociology*, 151: 79–106.
- Beck, U. (2002). 'The cosmopolitan society and its enemies', *Theory, Culture and Society*, 19(2): 17–44.
- Beck, U. (2004). 'The truth of others: A cosmopolitan approach', *Common Knowledge*, 10: 430–49.
- Boehm, M.H. (1931). 'Cosmopolitanism', *Encyclopedia of the Social Sciences* 4. New York: MacMillan.
- Cohen, R. and Fine, R. (2002). 'Four cosmopolitan moments', in S. Vertovec and R. Cohen (eds), *Conceiving Cosmopolitanism: Theory, Context, and Practice*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Featherstone, M. (2002). 'Cosmopolis: An introduction', *Theory, Culture, and Society*, 19(1-2): 1–16.
- Beck, U. and Sznaider, N. (2006). 'A literature on cosmopolitanism: An overview', *British Journal of Sociology*, 57(1): 154.

A bibliography is essentially a list of sources that share a common theme. This may be a topic, method, language or some other criteria. You will need to construct lists of sources that look useful for your research. Bibliographies, even with annotations, are not a substitute for a proper review of the contents of the sources on your lists. Nonetheless, bibliographies are useful starting points for identifying useful sources.

## What a review of a literature looks like

Throughout this book you will find extracts from a range of different reviews. To get us started we are now going to look at extracts from two literature reviews. The first will give you an idea of what a review can look like. The second is longer and shows how a review can be developed using themes.

### Extract 1: Political participation

The following is a section taken from a review of the literature into a decline in voting behaviour among young adults. In this short extract, we see how the

author, Helena Catt displays her utter familiarity with the literature. The extract shows she has worked her way through the different phases of the review – from searching for relevant sources, reading with a purpose and extracting materials based around themes, to writing up her review.

**Questions a review can help answer**

What have other researchers found on my topic?

What are the core concepts?

Are there findings from different countries?

What are some of the variables?

A strong finding from Franklin's (2004) study was the persistence of early behaviour: those who voted when they first could were more likely to repeat the behaviour and those who did not vote were likely to not vote again. Surveys of non-voters consistently find that many are repeat non-voters. In the New Zealand 2002 post-election survey a third of Mori and a fifth of non-Mori non-voters said that they had not voted in the past either (Vowles et al., 2004). Some writers suggest that political participation leaves a psychological imprint on those who act (Green & Shachar, 2000). More pragmatically, those who have voted are familiar with the process whilst for some who have not, there may be apprehension at what it entails (Horwitt, 1999) and embarrassment at admitting this lack of knowledge. Like internal efficacy, this orientation concerns one's self-confidence in a political environment (Green & Shachar, 2000). In contrast, participation by providing familiarity with the process increases confidence and thus internal efficacy (Finkel, 1985). The idea that repetition creates familiarity and confidence is commonplace. There is also evidence that the practice of voting or not is passed across generations. Surveys in the UK and USA (Nestle, 2003; Horwitt, 1999) have found that non-voters are more likely to come from families of non-voters and that those who vote at their first election have memories of their parents voting.

Discussion of politics at home also had an impact: "half of those who often talk to their parents about politics said they voted in 1998, compared to one quarter of those who talk to their parents about politics infrequently or never" (Horwitt, 1999). This study concludes that voting is developed as a habit. Some young people may start voting primarily out of the idealistic sense that their vote makes a difference; after an election or two, they begin to view voting as a duty and are much more likely to turn out to vote primarily because they feel it is something they *should do*. In this way, "young people come to voting as a personal norm."

(Helena Catt (2005). *Now or Never - Electoral Participation Literature Review*.)

Catt's (2005) review is not perfect. For example, where possible attribution should include page numbers in the citation.

## Extract 2: Stereotyping

The following extracts are from Oakes et al. (1994), who in their study of stereotyping dedicate two chapters of their book (based on their research) to

outlining the nature and scope of the literature on stereotyping. Oakes et al. (1994) provide a detailed description of the origins of academic interest in the topic and explicate the main points from the *landmark* studies – they take a whole chapter to do this. In a second chapter, they critically analyse previous approaches on stereotyping to show how their work differs from previous work. At the same time, they aim to show how their work is a development in our understanding of stereotyping. In the following series of extracts, we can see many of the things that we have just been discussing. See if you can identify the ways in which the authors achieve the following:

- place the topic into an historical perspective
- identify key landmark studies
- select what they consider to be the key sources and authors
- establish a context for their own interest and research
- distinguish what has been done in order to identify a space for their own work.

#### Extract from Oakes et al., 1994: 2–3

#### Observations

Lippman (1922) initiated formal enquiry into stereotyping with the publication of his book *Public Opinion*. The attraction of this work has been enduring, primarily because it identifies a number of features of stereotypes and stereotyping that were to form the basis of subsequent understanding.

*Key landmark study.  
Indication of Lippman's  
influence on stereotyping  
research.*

In *Public Opinion* stereotypes were characterised as being selective, self-fulfilling and ethnocentric, ideas summed up in the claim that they 'constitute a very partial and inadequate way of representing the world', the word 'partial' here conveying the double sense of incomplete and biased (p. 72). Other apparent shortcomings were noted. Stereotypes were understood as defences, which justify individuals' own positions and blind spots, which preclude objective, balanced reasoning. They were seen to be rigid in the sense of being both 'obdurate to education or criticism' and insensitive to changes in reality (p. 65). They presented over generalised, exaggerated images, which overlooked variability and denied individuality.

*Summary of Public Opinion.  
Some key concepts and  
phrases.  
Quote to show core  
propositions.  
Page number verification.  
Summary of Lippman's view  
of the stereotype.*

In any study of stereotyping reference to Lippman (1922) is essential. This is because it was his initial work that set a foundation for the study of the topic. Oakes et al. (1994) show the relevance of Lippman by describing some of the main points he made. In later sections of their review they pick up many of these points and show how they were used by different authors to develop a broader understanding of the topic. In this next extract it can be seen how Oakes et al. (1994) bring their reader to a watershed in the research on stereotyping.

**Extract from Oakes et al., 1994: 2–3**

In the 1950s two distinct trends are discernible in stereotyping research, each elaborating one aspect of the Kernel of Truth Debate [already mentioned by the authors in a section preceding this extract]. The majority of researchers continued to concentrate on the deficiencies of stereotyping (e.g. Bogardus, 1950; Hayakawa, 1950; Klineberg, 1950, 1951) while others began to question the assumptions which underpinned this traditional position (e.g. Laviolette and Silvert, 1951).

Related ideas were presented by Fishman (1956) and Vinacke (1956, 1957). Fishman argued that stereotypes were valid to the extent that they served to reflect the nature of interaction between stereotyped and stereotyping groups (1956: 60), while Vinacke suggested that stereotypes were representations of authentic high-level conceptual relationships between individuals (i.e. social groupings; 1957: 329). The radical implication of all of this work was that stereotypes were by nature neither irrational nor 'bad'.

**Observations**

*Chronological development of research shown with a framework for making distinctions between perspectives. Reference to a major debate among social psychologists.*

*Key references to be followed up indicate a critical position is to be developed towards traditional assumptions.*

*Shows a shift in understanding of the rationality of stereotypes. Inversion of Lippman's original view of stereotypes points out implications of the inversion.*

What the reader is given here are some directions for categorising the literature on stereotyping. Two trends are identified with indicative but key references that could be followed up. Added to this, works on ideas related to these two trends are indicated, for example in the work of Fishman (1956) that Oakes et al. (1994) cite. Again, what can be seen here is a setting of the context of the topic through a chronological presentation of landmark and related studies into stereotyping. One may also observe in this extract related works as an example of the convention to cite relevant references. This is in the last sentence that identifies the implications of Vinacke's work. Later in the review, exceptions to conventional approaches to stereotyping are discussed. These are mentioned not merely to provide a full coverage of the literature, but to introduce key developments and research insights that can be picked up and developed at a later stage of their review, especially in justifying their own study (i.e., Oakes et al.'s work).

**Extract from Oakes et al., 1994: 5–6**

... not all research which approached stereotyping as an aspect of prejudice followed this line. Notably ... Allport (1954) discussed the extent to which the *categorisation process* (i.e. cognitive grouping of individual objects as identical, interchangeable) was involved in prejudice. Whilst he emphasised that categorisation was essential to 'orderly living' (in particular, its general flexibility and responsiveness to the

**Observations**

*Introduces exceptions to the norm and provides an initial claim to the psychological basis of stereotyping.*

*Establishes a continuity from previous work.*



changing definition of ingroups and outgroups), he continued to regard stereotypes as deficient because they exaggerated the properties of the categories with which they were associated and stood in the way of differentiated thinking. Moreover, in his discussion of these issues Allport maintained a clear distinction between the rational and irrational use of categories as associated with the behaviour of tolerant and prejudiced people respectively. Allport took a crucial theoretical step forward in suggesting that prejudice might be a product of *normal* processes, but his analysis contained an inherent contradiction. It suggested that the processes of categorisation implicated in stereotyping were essentially rational (cf. Asch, 1952; Vinacke, 1957) but that their rationality was nonetheless contingent upon the character of the individual stereotype (cf. Adorno et al., 1950; see Billing, 1985).

*Shows how even the exception maintained the distinction between rational and irrational – a major claim that is the basis of Oakes et al.'s study.*

*Shows how this major claim has not hitherto been explored.*

*Traditional focus on the individual and character in traditional work.*

In this final extract it can be seen how Oakes et al., having established the context and history of the topic from the perspective of *social psychology*, provide a summary of the main points of their initial review of the literature. This is usefully done in a table that is reproduced in a later chapter. But their reason for doing this is to make their claim for the relevance of their study and claim this approach is distinctive from what has been done before.

#### Extract from Oakes et al., 1994: 9

Table 1.1 [not included here] summarises what we see as the major milestones in the study of social stereotyping up to Tajfel (1981). While personality theories of the type advanced by Adorno et al. have now more or less disappeared from the stereotyping scene, research into both intergroup relations (following Sherif and Tajfel) and individual cognition (following Allport and Tajfel) is still active and crucial. In the 1981 paper Tajfel tried to begin a process of rapprochement between the hitherto rather disparate cognitive (individual) and intergroup (social) traditions in the area, having himself been closely involved in both. In some ways this book can be seen as a continuation of that effort.

Broadly speaking, we aim to elaborate the argument that in order to understand the psychology of group phenomena (like stereotyping) it is necessary to examine the ways in which cognition both mediates and *is mediated* by individuals' group memberships and social relations (see Tajfel, 1979, 1981; Turner and Oakes, 1986). In these terms, processes of perception and cognition are *social*/psychological, not merely because they involve the processing of information about people, but because they are the psychological products of an interaction

#### Observations

*The scope of the study is narrowed down by the exclusion of early personality theories (e.g. Adorno, etc.). Table 1.1 that Oakes et al. refer to can be seen in their book.*

*Re-emphasis of what they consider relevant to the topic. Mentions previous attempts at what they are attempting to do.*

*Emphasises the focus they intend to take and claim it is different from but related to what others have looked at, i.e. justification is provided.*

*Focus on cognition between social groups based in information processing.*

(Continued)



**Extract from Oakes et al., 1994: 9**

between mind and society. In this ... we focus these ideas on the issue of stereotyping, and in so doing aim to achieve a better understanding of the role of this fascinating process in the individual's adaptation to the social environment.

**Observations**

*Initial warrant for their claim to have a different research focus than previous studies based on 'individuals'; i.e. the social psychological in the context of the broader social environment.*

Different subject disciplines tend to have differing ways of framing their approach to a given problem. Some disciplines have specific issues and debates that are particular to them alone. In the examples given above, we can see the social psychological approach and explication of a key area that is of concern to social psychologists.

A researcher can only become sufficiently familiar with disciplinary debates and perspectives through an investigative search and analytical reading of the literature. Knowledge of the perspectives distinct to the discipline or topic will be required in order to establish the significance of the topic. This needs to be done in order to be able to justify a research topic from within the conventions and intellectual tradition of the most relevant discipline.

As a consequence, familiarity with subject knowledge will enable gaps to be identified and anomalies in previous research. Questions can then be asked that have significance, and which can be turned into a viable research topic. The literature is, therefore, an essential resource – it can help to find an appropriate and valid topic. The same materials are nearly always useful in defining the parameters, dimensions and scope of what is to be investigated.

Looking at the extracts from the two reviews, we can now see the processes described in Figure 1.1. Once the search and selection of sources has been done, ideas, concepts, arguments and findings will have been extracted and categorised. These are the materials that the authors have used to construct their reviews. Citations show the sources and the grouping of those citations shows the use of categories to do that grouping. Stages One and Two in Figure 1.1 are largely technical while Stages Three and Four are interpretive.

## The literature review in the research project

The formal report of most research relies for its recognisability on standardised arrangements. Many of the sections found in a report are also found in a proposal for research. Parts that are normally common to both are shown below. Within this arrangement the author of the account usually employs a range of stylistic

conventions to demonstrate the ‘authority’ and ‘legitimacy’ of their research. They also try to show that they, as researchers, have undertaken their project in a way that is rigorous and competent.

**TABLE 1.1** Some sections in a research proposal

Sections	Intent of the section
Introduction	To show the aims, objectives, scope, rationale and design features of the research. The rationale is usually supported by references to other works, which have already identified the broad nature of the problem
Literature review	To demonstrate skills in library searching, show command of the subject area and understanding of the problem; to justify the research topic, design and methodology
Methodology	To show the appropriateness of the techniques used to gather data and the methodological approaches employed. Relevant references from the literature are often used to show an understanding of data collection techniques, the methodological implication, and to justify their use over other, alternative techniques
And in the research dissertation or report, you will have the following:	
Findings	To show the place (and contribution) of your findings, within the general and specific literature – the very literature you sourced and evaluated at the beginning of your research.

The review of related literature is, therefore, an essential part of the *research process* and the *research report*. It is more than a stage to be undertaken or a hurdle to get over.

What the literature review amounts to is a factor in the success of academic and applied research. The benefits of a comprehensive review are also *purposes* that the review can fulfil. The main one is the need to ensure the researchability of the topic before research commences. All too often the scholar new to research equates the breadth of their research with its value. Initial enthusiasm, combined with this common misconception, often result in broad, generalised and ambitious proposals from a student. It is the progressive narrowing of the topic, through the literature review, that makes most research a practical consideration.

Narrowing down a topic can be difficult and can take several weeks or even months. But it is a part of the process that makes the research more likely to be successfully completed. It also contributes to the development of your intellectual capacity and practical skills. This is because it engenders a *research*

*attitude* and will encourage you to think rigorously about your topic and what research you can do on it, in the time you have available. Time and effort carefully expanded at this stage can save a great deal of effort and vague searching later in the research. Therefore, we have two tasks. One is to search for relevant sources and the second is to critically evaluate the sources identified.

### **Effort and thought are needed**

If all of this looks like a lot of work, well it is. But it is also, say many researchers, one of the most enjoyable parts of doing research. The main thing is to see the search and review as a series of stages. Each stage successively builds on the previous ones to construct the review for the thesis.

### **Reading advice: A guide to literature searching**

For a guide on how to conduct a literature search, see Hart (2001) *Doing a Literature Search*, which works well as a companion to this book.

There are two main kinds of search and review for most research; the initial (or indicative) search and review and the comprehensive search and review. The initial search is like a reconnaissance of the landscape of the literature. You are looking to get an idea of what literature is ‘out there’ and readily obtainable, what databases exist and where and how they can be accessed. Your academic librarian can be an indispensable source of information and guidance at this stage. It is worth making an appointment to discuss your research with them. From what literature is readily available a short review can be constructed that ‘indicates’ the key ideas, concepts, authors, works and arguments of the broader literature. At this stage the Internet, library catalogues and online book suppliers can be helpful – but only as indications of the themes. The indicative review is often used for research proposals. If the indicative review has been done competently then the skills and knowledge acquired can be rapidly developed. A more comprehensive search can be planned on the basis of the databases selected, articles and books ordered which are not in the library, and more time given to ‘mining’ the literature.

### **The research apprenticeship**

Frameworks such as the RDF and The Seven Pillars of Information Literacy invoke two images for researchers at different stages in their professional development. The first, for the new or early career researcher, is that of the research apprentice.

### **The responsibility to read widely**

As a student researcher, it is your responsibility to read as much as you can across a range of subject disciplines to acquire a broad general knowledge. This should include making yourself familiar with issues in the natural sciences as well as the social sciences, humanities and arts.

The second, for the experienced researcher, is that of a set of reference points for their own continuing professional development and for the training and education of their supervisees. There is a third idea here and this is cross-disciplinarity.

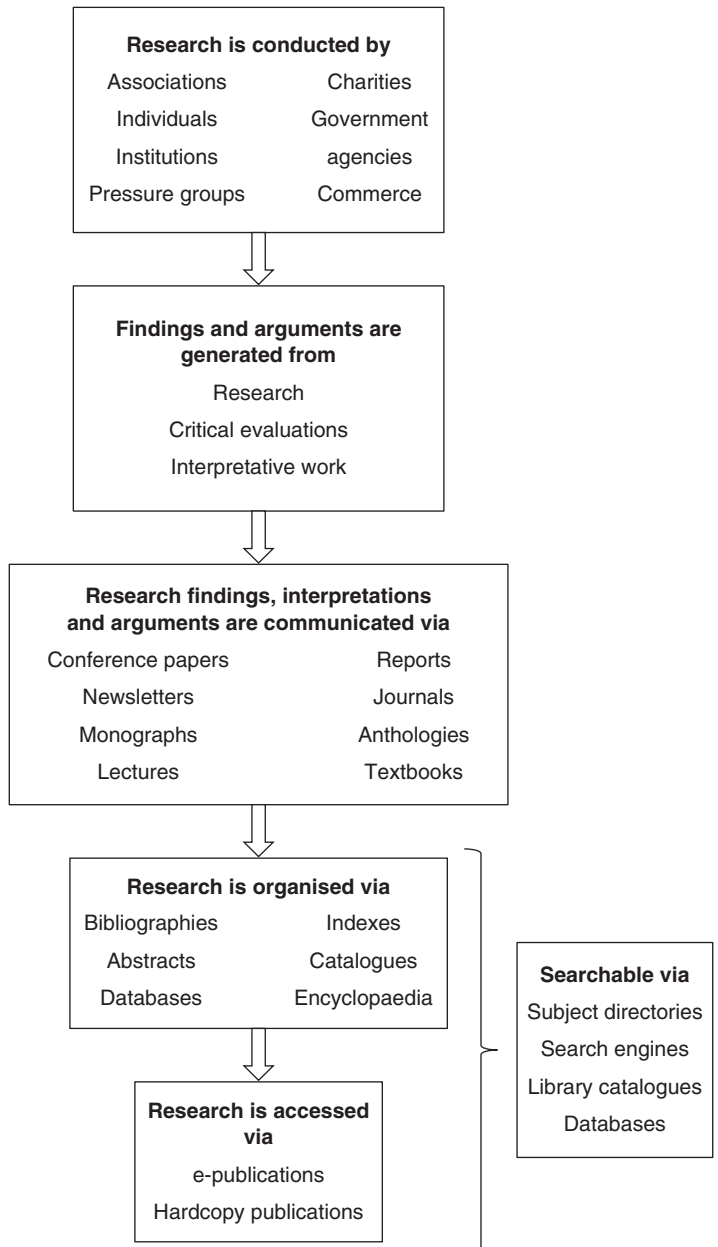
### **Cross-disciplinarity**

There has been a move in higher education and research to learn from other disciplines – to be cross-disciplinary. Many students now have the opportunity to study ideas from other disciplines. Added to this is the trend towards combined degrees. A consequence is that students and researchers need to be more flexible in their attitude to knowledge. To do this, they need a much broader range of skills and knowledge bases to take full advantage of the availability of sources and resources.

Understanding how research is done and how data are created and disseminated is an essential part of information literacy. Figure 1.2 provides an overview of these areas, showing the main sources of knowledge and tools by which data are organised for retrieval.

Undergraduate, postgraduate and practitioner research is an ideal opportunity for such personal transferable skills to be acquired and developed. Searching and reviewing a literature involves all of the Seven Pillars (mentioned above). The acquisition of core skills has to be for a purpose. It is not merely a formal matter to display the kinds of skills and abilities expected of a competent researcher in the report of the research.

Although these general skills are important they are not core components of the curriculum across the disciplines of human studies. It is not unusual to find that education, in the general nature and character of research, predominates over, and often displaces, formal skills acquisition. Most disciplines socialise their students into the theoretical and historical traditions that give shape and distinctiveness to the subject knowledge. But in so doing, the methodological bias, disciplinary boundaries and misunderstanding about other subjects are perpetuated. This often creates barriers to cross-disciplinary studies and a lack of appreciation of alternative ways of researching and understanding the world. This book aims to show ways in which these kinds of barriers can be overcome. This begins with a reminder of the practice that is scholarship.



**FIGURE 1.2** The generation and communication of research knowledge and information

**Intellectual craftship**

Technically speaking, most people are capable of doing a piece of research. That capability has, however, to be acquired; you cannot simply write a questionnaire,

as if writing a shopping list. A sound knowledge of the whole research process is required; you need to understand where data collection fits into the global picture of what you are doing.

### Scholarship is an activity

Scholarship is an activity; it is something most people can do. It does not require you to be of a certain social class, gender, ethnic origin or to have successfully jumped over formal educational hurdles.

This means knowing how to state the aims and objectives of the research, define your major concepts and methodological assumptions, operationalise those concepts and assumptions by choosing an appropriate technique to collect data, know how you are going to collate results and so on. Competent research, therefore, requires technical knowledge. There is, however, a difference between producing a piece of competent research and a piece of research that demonstrates *scholarship*.

### Intellectual craftship and scholarship

The main question is, what is scholarship? This is a very difficult question to answer because there are differences of opinion between academics, and between disciplines, as well as universities, as to what counts as scholarly activity. Without summarising this debate, there are a number of statements about scholarship that can be added to those just made. Firstly, it is not very useful to create simple dichotomies between teaching and research or between knowledge and information or between theory and practice. Scholarly activity encompasses all of these and more.

Secondly, scholarly activity is about knowing how to do competent research, read, interpret and analyse arguments, synthesise ideas and make connections across disciplines, write and present ideas clearly and systematically, and use your imagination. Underpinning these activities are a number of basic attitudes to research and doing research. These are discussed below in the next section. But what they amount to is an attitude of mind that is open to ideas, different styles and types of research, and is free of prejudices about what counts as useful research or what type of person should be allowed to do research.

### Scholarship and integration

A key element that makes for good scholarship is *integration*. Integration is about making connections between ideas, theories and experience. It is about

applying a method or methodology from one area to another new context. Integration is therefore about making connections; about placing some episode into a larger theoretical framework, thereby providing a new way of looking at that phenomenon. This may mean drawing elements from different theories to form a new synthesis or to provide a new insight. It may also mean re-examining an existing corpus of knowledge in the light of a new development.

The activity of scholarship is, therefore, about thinking systematically. It may mean forcing new typologies in the structure of knowledge or onto a perspective that is taken-for-granted. Either way, the scholar endeavours to interpret and understand. The intent is to make others think about and possibly re-evaluate what they have hitherto taken to be unquestionable knowledge. Therefore, systematic questioning, inquiring and a scrutinising attitude are features of scholarly activity.

### Integration and re-configuration

The aim of scholarship is to systematically examine what it is that others take as a body of knowledge. At Master's degree level this may mean looking at the application of a methodology; to look at applying a methodology in ways not tried before. At doctoral level it may mean attempting to *re-figure* or *re-specify* the way in which some puzzle or problem has traditionally been defined. The anthropologist Clifford Geertz (1980: 165–6) suggested that re-configuration was more than merely tampering with the details of how we go about understanding the world around us. He says re-configuration is not about redrawing the cultural map or changing some of the disputed borders, it is about altering the very principles by which we map the social world.

From the history of science Nicolaus Copernicus (1473–1543) re-examined theories about the cosmos and the place of the Earth within it. Traditional theory held the view that the Earth was motionless and stood at the centre of the universe; the Sun, other planets and stars were believed to revolve around the Earth. Copernicus asked himself if there was another way of interpreting this belief. What if, he asked, the Sun was motionless and the Earth, planets and stars revolved around it? In 1541, he outlined his ideas and there began a re-configuration of how the cosmos was mapped. In the recent history of social science, the work of Harold Garfinkel is a classic example of re-configuration. Garfinkel re-specified the phenomenon of the social sciences, especially sociology (see Button, 1991). He undertook a thorough-going scrutiny of traditional sociological theory and found that social science ignored what real people do in real situations. So radical was his re-specification that traditional social science took several decades to incorporate his ideas into their work.

## Centrality of argument

Scholarship and integration often involves analysing arguments and constructing an argument (rationale) for your own research. Argument over the meaning of data, how these were collected and what can be done with them, related to some of the most interesting philosophical questions. These include questions about how we know what we think we know, what we can take as real is and why we do what we do in the ways we do it. All subject fields in the social and human sciences are based on argument. Research is always done from some standpoint, often being influenced by paradigmatic beliefs and assumptions about what constitutes the best way to finding things out. Argument is about attempting to persuade others about something you think is important. For example, is the MMR vaccine really dangerous? Does social isolation lead to mental health problems? Is *Doctor Who* the best show on television? Are some computer games too violent? Was greed the cause of the 2008 recession? Is intelligence genetic? These are questions that lead to debate and argument in all disciplines.

As researchers, we need to appreciate that argument and argumentative analysis is a core activity in all research. A review of a literature is an ideal opportunity to develop advanced skills and knowledge of how different arguments are made and how they can be critiqued.

## The need for clarity

Most authors attempt to make their writing clear, consistent and coherent. But these are very difficult to achieve in any work, regardless of its length or topic. Nevertheless, clarity, consistency and coherence are essential because without them a text can be unintelligible. As a consequence, it may be misunderstood, dismissed or used in ways not intended by the author. More importantly, the main idea, no matter how interesting, may be lost.

Conversely, what seems clear and coherent to the writer can, as we all know, be utterly frustrating to the reader. Unfamiliarity with the style, the format, presentation or language use is nearly always a cause of frustration to the reader. The easy way out is to dismiss a text one finds difficult. To do so is not only to admit defeat but also to fail to invest the necessary effort required for intellectual research.

From both the writer and reader, effort is required. The basis of that effort is accepting that clarity, consistency and coherence are not mysterious qualities able to be practised only by the few. They can be achieved through explicit expression in writing and explicit commitment in reading. A problem for the academic author, however, is the time readers allocate to their reading and the level of effort they are willing to invest in order to grasp the ideas in a text. Similarly, some authors seem to neglect the needs of their potential readers and manage to make a relatively simple idea confusing.



In terms of reviewing a body of literature, made up of dozens of articles, conference papers and monographs, a problem is the diversity of materials needing to be read. Originating from several disciplines and writing in different styles engender the need for a flexible and charitable attitude from the reviewer. Added to this is the lack of explicitness often found in many accounts of research. That is, it is rare to find an account of a piece of research that systematically lays out what was done and why it was done, and discusses the various implications of those choices.

The reviewer needs to appreciate some of the reasons for the lack of explicitness. Firstly, it takes considerable effort and time to express ideas in writing. Secondly, limitations placed on space or word counts often result in editing not deemed ideal by the author. Also, being explicit exposes the research (and researcher) to critical inspection. Presumably, many able researchers do not publish widely so as to avoid criticism.

### **Charity in understanding**

Competence in reading research is not, as has already been indicated, something easily acquired. It is a part of the process of research training and education. As such it takes time and a willingness to face challenges, acquire new understandings and have sufficient openness of mind to appreciate that there are other views of the world.

This begins by recognising that the reviewer undertakes a review for a purpose and as such an author writes for a purpose. While an author may not always make their ideas clear, consistent and coherent the reviewer is required to exercise patience when reading. The reviewer needs to assume, no matter how difficult an article is to read, that the author has something to contribute. It is a matter of making the effort to tease out the main ideas from the text under consideration. It also means making the effort to understand why you are having difficulty in comprehending the text. This means not categorising the text using prejudicial perceptions of the subject discipline. It means therefore making the effort to place the research in the context of the norms of the discipline and not judging it by the practices of the discipline, with which you are most familiar.

The literature review, therefore, is not something to be 'gotten over'. It is not a chore or ritual in a research project. It is an integral part of a piece of research in that it enables the researcher to cross disciplinary boundaries, encounter new ideas and styles, and enhance the quality of their work. The review of the literature is, therefore, much more than a chapter in a thesis.

This means reading to review is about making connections between what are often diverse and contrasting ideas. In thesis-based research, this is a crucial criterion for assessment of its worthiness. In the next chapter, this activity is

outlined in the context of what it means to be original. This involves making the assumption that there are no prescriptions about what ideas can be related or how they can be analysed and synthesised. Techniques to analyse and synthesise are available but how they are used is a matter for the user to decide.

As a part of this attitude, all researchers need to exercise a willingness to understand philosophical (or methodological) traditions. The choice of a particular topic, the decision to research it using a specific strategy rather than others and to present it in a certain style, are design decisions often based on prior commitments to a view of research. An individual piece of research therefore can be placed, in general terms, into an intellectual tradition such as *positivism* or *phenomenology*. But the reviewer needs to take care not to criticise that research purely on general terms and especially from the standpoint of one approach to another. The different intellectual traditions need to be appreciated for what they are and not for what they are assumed to lack from the view of another standpoint.

These assumptions, although briefly stated, are the basis for the following chapters. Collectively what they amount to is an operationalisation (putting into practice) of scholarship and good manners in research. They also signpost the need for reviewers of research to be informed about and able to demonstrate their awareness of the different styles and traditions of research.

## The research imagination

At the end of his short book, *The Sociological Imagination* (1978[1959]), C. Wright-Mills provides the would-be-researcher with some guides on how to think, how to manage large amounts of information and how to generate an attitude conducive to a research imagination. In his definition of the sociological imagination, Wright-Mills provides us with a starting point for understanding the need for a research imagination.

The sociological imagination, I remind you, in considerable part consists of the capacity to shift from one perspective to another, and in the process to build up an adequate view of a total society and of its components. It is this imagination, of course, that sets off the social scientist from the mere technician. (Wright-Mills, 1978[1959]: 211)

A researcher, therefore, needs to have the basic skills to do competent research. Some of these have already been mentioned, such as being able to use a library. However, what Wright-Mills is saying is that the effective use of these skills involves the development of an *imaginative* approach to research. It is not something easily acquired. A research imagination takes time to develop; it is something that is part of the research apprenticeship. For Wright-Mills the

research imagination is about: having a broad view of a topic; being open to ideas regardless of how or where they originated; questioning and scrutinising ideas, methods and arguments regardless of who proposed them; playing with different ideas in order to see if links can be made; following ideas to see where they may lead; and being scholarly in your work. What better examples of the research imagination, claims Wright-Mills, than the work of some of the founding theorists. It is thinkers like Marx, Weber, Spencer, Mannheim and Durkheim, according to Wright-Mills, who can provide illustrations of what a research imagination can promise.

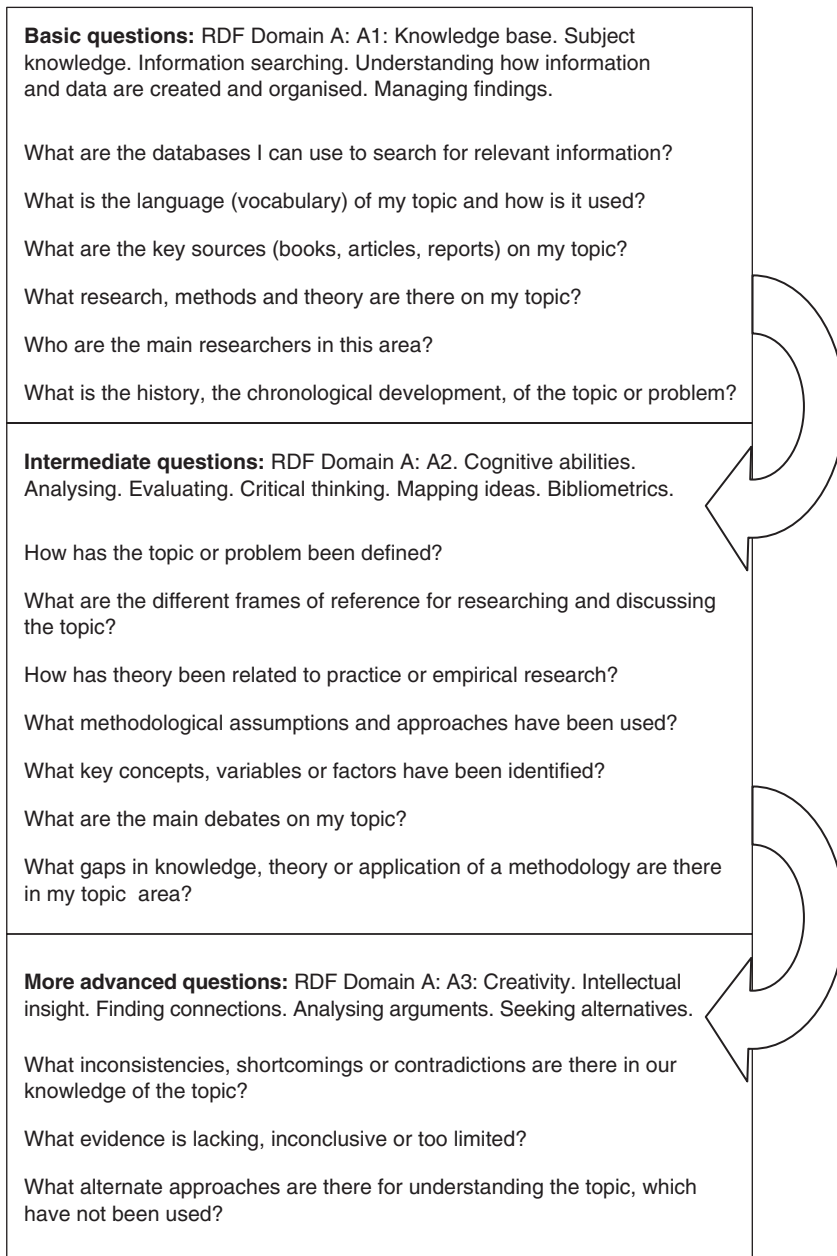
The sociological imagination enables us to grasp history and biography and the relations between the two within society. That is its task and its promise. To recognise the task and its promise is the mark of the classical social analyst. It is characteristic of Herbert Spencer – turgid, polysyllabic, comprehension of E.A. Ross – graceful, muckraking, upright; of August Comte and Emile Durkheim; of the intricate and subtle Karl Mannheim. It is the quality of all that is intellectually excellent in Karl Marx; it is the clue to Thorstein Veblen’s brilliant and ironic insight; to Joseph Schumpeter’s many-sided constructions of reality; it is the basis of the psychological sweep of W. E. Lecky no less than of the profundity and clarity of Max Weber. (Wright-Mills, 1978[1959]: 12)

These and other social theorists may be dead and some long forgotten but Wright-Mills emphasises the usefulness of reading their work. This is because contemporary society is dominated by information rather than knowledge. Many academic libraries have embraced the concept of *just in time* rather than *just in case*. They have become access points to information. It is for these reasons that the researcher faced with this force needs to acquire the searching skills to exploit the technology and develop an intellect that enables them to think their way through the information maze; to be able to construct summations of what is going on in the world (Wright-Mills, 1978[1959]: 11).

## Questions and the research imagination

Wright-Mills suggests that the researcher adapt a questioning and critical attitude. Figure 1.3 lists some of the questions that can be useful when beginning a journey into the literature of a topic; they can lead one back to those social theorists whose names and works are forgotten or have become vague, but who laid the foundations on which contemporary ideas, views and standpoints have been built.

But how does one use such a diverse and seemingly ambiguous set of questions? This is where an example may help. The following case study on advertising is intended to show some of the essential skills required to analyse and think through the methodological implications of different assumptions.



**FIGURE 1.3** The hierarchy of questions when reviewing

*Source:* Adapted from Wright-Mills, 1978[1959]: 13

It illustrates how it is possible to use a search of the literature to construct the parameters that make up the paradigm of a topic. It shows how the kinds of