

Research Methods

Lecture Title: – Introduction to Research Design

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Date: Friday 28th November 2025



**Masters in
Human Resources Management**

Lecture Outline

- Developing ideas for a research project
- Developing a research aim and research objectives or questions
- Critically assessing different ways to answer the research questions and reflecting on how to access the data needed
- Explaining and giving reasons for the chosen research design in a research proposal, research report or dissertation
- Designing and planning a research project



Choosing a Research Topic in HRM

- Some students find it easy; others find it difficult
- Two key criteria:
 - Must add value to HR in organisational practice
 - Must meet qualification assessment requirements
- Justify your topic clearly in your proposal and dissertation introduction
- **Generating Ideas**
- Brainstorm possible topics
- Evaluate each idea for relevance and feasibility
- Select the most appropriate topic
- Clarify focus and objectives early



Getting Research Ideas

Visit HR websites or journals (e.g. CIPD, People Management, SHRM)

- [CIPD | The Professional Body for HR & People Development](#)
- [Home | People Management](#)
- [Welcome to SHRM | The Voice of All Things Work](#) (Largest Hr Association)

- Read news, blogs and discussion threads
- Identify at least **12 issues** raised

Steps

- Summarise each issue in one sentence
- Use issues as 'triggers' for possible research topics
- For each topic, rate:
 - Your interest in it
 - Value for employability
 - Any ethical concerns
 - Data needed for analysis
 - Feasibility (time and budget)



Reviewing Past Assignments

Why Review Past Work?

- Past coursework may contain ideas worth exploring further
- Reflect on topics you found most interesting
- Look for areas that could be developed into a full research project

Other Sources of Inspiration

- Projects at work or during placements
- Issues that sparked curiosity or raised questions
- Topics that could benefit you or your organisation if studied in depth



Indicative Research Topics

Examples of Possible Topics

- Factors affecting the success of managerial coaching.
- Can HR metrics measure HR effectiveness?
- What factors influence employee wellbeing?
- Factors affecting learning culture in public sector organisations.
- How do employees rate virtual and hybrid learning experiences?

Why These Work

- Can be researched using literature, surveys or secondary data
- Do not require direct organisational access
- Still add value to HR practice and meet academic requirements



Deciding Between Topics

Key Considerations

- **Personal interest** → choose something you care about
- **Career plan** → pick a topic that supports your future goals
- **Time & resources** → make sure it is achievable within limits
- **Skills** → select a topic that matches your abilities



Study Centre's Perspective

- **Links to theory** → topic must connect to HR theories, concepts and frameworks
- **Regulations & expectations** → follow word count, marking scheme and course requirements
- **Critical enquiry** → avoid topics that only describe practice; aim to question and add value
- **Wider context** → conclusions should be useful beyond one organisation
- **Tutor expertise** → use supervisor/advisor knowledge to guide your choice



Selecting a Topic in Good Time

early choice = and steady progress

- Avoid losing time by mulling over topics for too long
- Select a topic early and talk to your supervisor
- Proceed in a timely manner to keep on track
- Subtle amendments to the focus can be made later, within regulations



Establishing the Focus of Your Project

- After choosing a broad area, define a clear **aim**
- State your **main research question/ hypothesis**
- Two starting points:
 - From what you know through **study** of the topic
 - From what you know through **experience** of a particular HR issue



Starting with the Literature Review

- Initial reading helps refine your idea into a researchable topic
- Identify important **concepts, issues and contexts**
- Explore existing **theories and frameworks** in your area
- Check what research has already been done
- Look for **gaps** in knowledge that your project could address



A step-by-step process (Biggam, 2021).

- Use this process to move from a broad idea to a focused research topic
- Your final sentence should express either:
- a clear **research aim**
 - a **principal research question**/or a **research hypothesis**
- All this helps define the purpose and direction of your project

Figure 2.2 Achieving focus for your research project



Starting from the Research Situation

Step-by-Step Process

- Write one word or phrase to define your topic (e.g. *artificial intelligence*)
- Add other related words (e.g. *HR policy, ethics, technology, future of work*)
- Separate **must-have words** from **nice-to-have words**
- Keep only the must-have words
- Combine them into a clear research question or aim
- **Examples**
- *How does AI technology affect employment in healthcare settings?*
- *The contribution of AI to learning and development*



Establishing the Research Focus

- Academic research should offer **new understanding** about HR
- Aim to explore **how and why** HR practices are influenced by different contexts and stakeholders
- Avoid trying to 'prove' the success of an existing HR initiative
- Focus on **critical enquiry**, not confirmation
- Valuable research contributes to both **HR practice and academic knowledge**



Research Aim

A clear statement of **what you want to achieve**

- Defines the **purpose and scope** of the study
- Focuses on the **outcome**, not the method

Key Features

- **Specific** → avoids vague or overly broad wording
- **Achievable** → realistic within time, word count and resources
- **Relevant** → linked to HR theory, practice and stakeholder interests
- **Valuable** → contributes new understanding to HRM
- **Why It Matters**
 - Provides **direction** for the project
 - Helps you stay **focused** and avoid drifting into unrelated areas
 - Forms the basis for your **research objectives** and questions



Research Questions

Show in simple terms **what you want to do**

Different types of focus:

- **Find out** → explore something you are curious about
 - *Example:* What are the effects of AI on HR practice?
- **Evaluate** → judge how useful or effective something is
 - *Example:* How effective is a chatbot system for answering HR enquiries?
- **Improve practice** → look at skills or development needs
 - *Example:* What HR skills are needed for people analytics?

Test if it works → compare results in different situations

Example: Are employees more skilful after online training compared with in-person training?



Principal Research Question

- Some researchers prefer to use a **principal research question** (a “big question”)
- It expresses the **main focus** of the study in one clear sentence
- Helps to guide the research and keep it **centred**
- Should be **specific, achievable and relevant** to HR practice and theory

Examples

- *What is the role of AI in Human Resource Management in the healthcare sector?*
- *What are the advantages and disadvantages of the chatbot system in HR service-centre provision?*



Formulating Research Questions or Objectives

- Once you know your focus, the next step is to write **research questions or objectives**
- These break down your **aim** or **principal research question** into smaller parts
- They guide what you need to ask and answer in your study
- Some tutors prefer **objectives** others prefer **questions** — many accept both
- Most studies need **two to four** meaningful questions or objectives
- More than four may mean your project is too broad or your questions too superficial



Writing Research Questions or Objectives

Think About the Purpose of Your Project

- **Descriptive** → asks *what, where, when, who*
 - *Example:* What factors led to the expanded role of data analytics in HR strategic thinking?
- **Explanatory** → asks *why* and *how* things happen
 - *Example:* Why are women under-represented in senior HR roles?
- **Exploratory** → examines new or uncharted challenges, more open questions
 - *Example:* How are organisations in XYZ sector coping with post-Brexit labour supply challenges in the UK?



From Research Aims to Research Questions Example

Staff Training

- **Research Aim:** To find out how staff feel about online training
- **Research Questions**
 - What do staff think about online training?
 - How do staff compare online training with face-to-face training?
 - What are the benefits and problems of online training for staff?



From Research Aims to Research Questions Example

Employee Motivation

- **Research Aim:** To explore what motivates employees at work

Research Questions

- What motivates employees to do their best at work?
- How do rewards and recognition affect motivation?
- What role does team support play in employee motivation?

From Research Aims to Research Questions Example

Flexible Working

- **Research Aim:** To examine how flexible working affects staff performance

Research Questions

- How does flexible working affect staff performance?
- What do employees think about flexible working?
- Does flexible working help staff manage stress?



From Research Aims to Research Questions Example

Communication in Teams

- **Research Aim:** To look at how communication affects teamwork

Research Questions

- How does good communication help teams work better?
- What problems do teams face when communication is poor?
- What tools or methods improve team communication?

From Research Aims to Research Questions Example

Job Satisfaction

- **Research Aim:** To understand what makes employees feel satisfied at work

Research Questions

- What factors make employees feel satisfied in their jobs?
- How does management style affect job satisfaction?
- What role does work-life balance play in job satisfaction?



From Research Aims to Research Questions Example

Recruitment Methods

- **Research Aim:** To compare different ways of recruiting staff

Research Questions

- What are the most common recruitment methods used in organisations?
- How do online and face-to-face recruitment methods compare?
- Which recruitment methods do HR professionals prefer?



Writing Good Research Questions

- Write your **aim and research questions** as early as possible
- Keep them **clear and consistent** throughout your study
- Markers will check if you have **answered your questions fully** in your conclusions
- Avoid writing questions where you already know the answer
- Think about possible answers and **alternative explanations**
- Be **open minded** – curiosity and learning make your work credible
- Choose a topic where data is **available and accessible**
- Make sure you have or can develop the **skills to analyse the data**



Clarifying Your Topic and Focus

What You Need to Do

- Say clearly **what you want to find out**
- Point out the **unknowns** in your topic
- Write your **main aim** and **principal research question**
- Develop **two to four research questions** linked to your aim
- Think about what the **answers might be**
- Consider other **possible answers** too
- Note which **authors or studies** will be important for your work
- Explain **your role** in the situation you are studying
- Be ready for any **challenges or difficulties** you may face



Approaches to Research Methodology

- All research reports must explain and justify the **methods used**
- Describe:
 - The **data** (primary/secondary; qualitative/quantitative)
 - The **sample** (where data came from)
 - The **analysis** (how you studied the data)
- These are the **tactical steps** of research
- Most projects also need a discussion of **methodology** (research philosophy)
- **Methodology** = the **assumptions about the real world** that shape how research is carried out
- Success in dissertations requires showing awareness of **key debates in methodology**



Methodology – Key Terms

Philosophy

- About how we make sense of the world
- Concerned with the **nature of knowledge**

Research Philosophy

- Focuses on knowledge in relation to research
- Asks big questions:
 - *How can we know the world?*
 - *How do theories, concepts and experiences lead to knowledge?*

Why It Matters

- Philosophy connects the **observed world** (what we see) with the **world of ideas** (how we explain it)
- Both are important for thoughtful and curious HR practice and research

Methodology is not just about methods — it is about the **assumptions and ideas** behind how we do research



Why Think About Philosophy in Research?

- Philosophy asks:
 - *How can ideas help us understand the real world?*
 - *How can what we observe lead to new ideas and theories?*
- Research connects:
 - The **observed world** (what we see and measure)
 - The **world of ideas** (how we explain and understand it)
- These questions have **no single right answer**
- Over time, different answers have led to **different research traditions**

Thinking about philosophy helps us understand how research works and why we choose certain methods



What Are Research Traditions?

- A **research tradition** is a way of thinking about how to study the world
- Different traditions use different methods and ask different types of questions
- These traditions are shaped by how researchers answer big questions about knowledge and reality
- In HR research, two main traditions are often used (explained in the next slides)

Why It Matters

- Your choice of tradition affects:
 - The **methods** you use
 - The **type of data** you collect
 - The **way you analyse** your findings
 - The **kind of knowledge** your project creates

Understanding research traditions helps you choose the right approach for your project



What Is the Scientific Research Tradition?

- Focuses on **facts, observations and testing theories**
- Aims to explain **why and how things happen**
- Used in both **natural and social sciences**
- Helps researchers build **reliable knowledge**

Scientific research is about using evidence to understand the world clearly and logically



Two Main Approaches

Empiricism

- Trust what we can **see, hear and measure**
- “We know something is true if we can observe it”

Rationalism

- Trust **reasoning and ideas**
- “Our senses can be wrong — we need logic to understand complex experiences”

Both approaches help us make sense of the world in different ways



What Do These Approaches Share?

Common Features

- Use of **theories and concepts**
- Need for **strong evidence**
- Belief in **objective observation and measurement**
- Acceptance that **invisible things may still exist**

Scientific researchers combine ideas with evidence to build trustworthy knowledge



What Is the Interpretive Research Tradition?

- Focuses on **understanding** human experience
- Assumes that people's experiences are shaped by **social context**
- Believes that reality is **not the same for everyone**
- Accepts that knowledge is **socially constructed** and always changing

This tradition aims to **understand** rather than to **measure or predict**



Why Not Always Use the Scientific Approach?

- Scientific research breaks things into **small, measurable parts**
- Critics say this may not work well for **social or organisational topics**
- Human behaviour is often **complex, emotional and shaped by relationships**
- A more **holistic and natural approach** may be better for studying people and communities

The Interpretive Tradition looks at the whole picture, not just the numbers



What Do Interpretive Researchers Believe?

Core Beliefs

- We cannot fully understand people using **objective facts alone**
- Human experience depends on **time, place and relationships**
- Reality is **shared and shaped** by people together
- Research should **interpret meaning** not just find causes

This tradition fits with the **constructivist world view**: reality is built through experience



Examples of Interpretive Approaches

Common Approaches

- **Phenomenology** – explores how people experience things
- **Ethnography** – studies cultures and communities
- **Critical research** – looks at power, fairness and change

These approaches help us understand **feelings, beliefs and social life**



Methodological Implications for HR Researchers

- Your **research approach** affects how you collect data, what kind of data you use and how you understand HR issues

Two main approaches: **Scientific (Positivist)** and **Interpretivist**

Choose the approach that best fits your topic, your data and your way of thinking about the world



What Is a Positivist Approach?

Positivist Researchers

- Work within an **objectivist world view**
- Believe in using a **scientific method**
- Collect **objective facts**
- Use **quantitative data** (numbers, statistics)
- Aim to find **patterns and general rules**
- Try to make research **measurable and repeatable**

In HR Research

- Often used to study things like turnover rates, training outcomes or survey results

Positivists want to explain HR issues using **facts, numbers, and clear patterns**



What Is an Interpretivist Approach?

Interpretivist Researchers

- Work within a **socially constructed world view**
- Believe that knowledge is shaped by **context and experience**
- Use **qualitative data** (words, meanings, stories)
- Focus on **understanding people's views and feelings**
- Accept that facts are **not always fixed or predictable**
- Value **subjective interpretation** and **rich descriptions**

In HR Research

- Often used to explore things like employee motivation, workplace culture or leadership styles

Interpretivists want to understand HR issues through **people's experiences and meanings**



Feature	Positivist Approach	Interpretivist Approach
World View	Objectivist	Socially Constructed
Type of Data	Quantitative (numbers)	Qualitative (words, meanings)
Research Focus	Measuring and testing	Understanding and interpreting
Role of Researcher	Detached and objective	Involved and reflective
Typical Methods	Surveys, experiments, statistical tests	Interviews, focus groups, observations
Goal	Generalisable conclusions	Context-based understanding

Case Study – Antonia's Research

- **Who is Antonia?**

HR student (online and part-time)

Works in a large private company in Malta

- **What is her topic?**

Workplace wellbeing and intention to stay or quit

- **Why is it important?**

Her company is worried about wellbeing after Covid-19

They want to understand how wellbeing affects staff retention

Antonia chose a real issue in her workplace and linked it to her research project



Antonia's Research Approach

What did she do?

- Reviewed literature on wellbeing
- Found three key areas:
 - Social wellbeing
 - Physical wellbeing
 - Psychological wellbeing

Her approach

- **Positivist** (scientific)
- Formulated a research question:
 - How are employees' perceptions of workplace wellbeing linked to their intention to remain in their current employment?

Antonia used a structured, evidence-based approach to test her idea



What Variables Could Be Measured?

Helpful Variables

- **Social:** relationships at work, support from colleagues
- **Physical:** working conditions, safety, comfort
- **Psychological:** stress levels, job satisfaction, mental health

These variables help build a full picture of employee wellbeing



What Data Would Antonia Need?

To answer her research question, she needs:

How are employees' perceptions of workplace wellbeing linked to their intention to remain in their current employment?

- Employee ratings of wellbeing (e.g. survey scores)
- Employee intention to stay or leave (e.g. Likert scale responses)
- Possibly demographic data (age, role, department)

She needs **quantitative data** that can be measured and compared



How Could She Collect the Data?

Possible Methods

- Online surveys
- HR records (e.g. exit interviews, turnover data)
- Questionnaires with rating scales

Positivist research often uses **structured tools** to collect data from many people

Pros and Cons of Antonia's Approach

Advantages	Disadvantages
Clear and structured	May miss deeper feelings or meanings
Can measure and compare results	May not explain <i>why</i> people feel that way
Easier to analyse statistically	Less flexible or personal

Positivist research gives strong evidence but may not capture full human experience

What Does “Operationalise” Mean?

In scientific research, you must **turn abstract ideas into measurable variables**

- This is called **operationalising your concepts**
- **Example for Wellbeing**
- Abstract concept: *Workplace wellbeing*
- Measurable variables:
 - Satisfaction with working conditions
 - Job/career satisfaction
 - Work environment
 - Mental health or stress levels

Operationalising helps you collect **clear, useful data** for analysis



How to Collect Data in Large Organisations

Antonia's Approach

- Used an **electronic survey**
- Sent to **employees and/or managers**
- Chose this method because:
 - It's **efficient** for large groups
 - It gives **quantitative data**
 - It allows for **statistical analysis**

Surveys are a good tool for collecting **objective and measurable data**



Why Sample Size Matters

- **Larger Sample = Better Results**
 - More responses = more **reliable findings**
 - Results are more likely to be **generalised** to the whole organisation
 - Helps make the research more **worthwhile and credible**
-
- A large sample helps you draw **stronger conclusions** from your data



What Happens After Data Collection?

Next Steps

- Analyse the data using **statistical methods**
- Compare results to your **hypothesis/research question/s**
- If the data supports your idea → hypothesis is confirmed
- If not → explore **alternative explanations or variables**

Scientific research helps you test ideas and **learn from the results** even if they're unexpected



What If the Hypothesis Is Not Supported?

Options for Researchers

- Look at **other factors** that may affect the outcome
- Suggest **new areas** for the organisation to focus on
- Reflect on what the data tells you about the **real situation**

Research is about **learning**, not just proving — even unexpected results are valuable



Positivist vs Interpretivist – Two Valid Approaches

- Antonia used a **positivist approach** and completed a successful HR research project
- An **interpretivist approach** could also work well, but offers different strengths
- Both are valid and useful, depending on your topic and goals

Choose the approach that fits your research question, data and context



Causality and Association

Positivist Approach

- Can show **association** between variables (e.g. wellbeing and intention to stay)
- Cannot prove **which variable causes** the other
- Useful for identifying **important factors**

Interpretivist Approach

- Explores **personal experiences** and **context**
- Can uncover **why** people feel a certain way
- Helps suggest **HR actions** based on people's views

Positivist = patterns and links; Interpretivist = meaning and insight



Themes and Variables

Positivist Approach

- Focuses on **pre-selected variables**
- May miss out **unexpected themes**
- Limited by **survey length**

Interpretivist Approach

- Uses **open questions**
- Lets themes **emerge from the data**
- Learns what people find **important and meaningful**

Positivist = fixed structure; Interpretivist = flexible and open



Forms of Data and Analysis

Positivist Approach

- Uses **quantitative data**
- Requires **statistical skills and software**
- Easier to collect in large organisations

Interpretivist Approach

- Uses **qualitative data** (interviews, focus groups)
- Time-consuming to arrange and analyse
- Richer but more complex

Positivist = numbers and tools; Interpretivist = words and meaning



Flexibility and Focus

Positivist Approach

- Clear focus once variables are chosen
- Results may be **generalised** to other settings

Interpretivist Approach

- More flexible and responsive to current issues
- Results are **context-specific**, not generalisable

Positivist = broad and structured;
Interpretivist = deep and specific



Relevance for HR Practice

Positivist Approach

- Helps share **clear results** with organisations
- Useful for identifying **patterns and trends**

Interpretivist Approach

- Helps explore **how to improve wellbeing**
- Useful for designing **HR interventions**

Positivist = what's happening; Interpretivist = what could help



What Is a Mixed-Method Approach?

- Combines **positivist** and **interpretivist** methods
- Uses both **quantitative** and **qualitative** data
- Can be done **together** or **step-by-step**
- Helps answer **different types of research questions**

Mixed-methods offer a fuller picture by using different ways to study a topic



Why Use Mixed Methods?

Benefits

- Reflects the **complexity of real workplaces**
- Allows for **triangulation** – checking if findings agree
- One method can **support or explain** the other
- Helps explore both **what happened** and **why it happened**

Mixed methods help researchers understand both facts and feelings



What Are the Challenges?

Challenges

- Requires knowledge of **two research traditions**
- Needs skill in both **quantitative and qualitative analysis**
- Takes more **time and effort**
- May not suit projects with **tight deadlines or word limits**

Mixed-methods are demanding — not always the best choice for short student projects



Should You Use Mixed Methods?

Think About:

- Do you understand both **positivist and interpretivist** approaches?
- Do you have time to collect and analyse **two types of data**?
- Will your project benefit from **different perspectives**?
- Can you manage the **extra workload**?

Only choose mixed methods if you can do both parts **well and on time**



Understanding Research Design

What is Research Design?

- It's the **overall plan** for your research project
- Like an **architect's blueprint** — it shows how everything will fit together
- Helps you decide:
 - What you will study
 - How you will collect and analyse data
 - How you will answer your research questions

Your design must be **fit for purpose** — it should match your research aim and questions



What Is a Research Strategy?

- **Research Strategy**
- The **general approach** you will take to carry out your design
- Helps you plan:
 - What **data** you need
 - Where and how to **get it**
 - How to **combine everything** to answer your questions

Strategy is about **planning the journey** from design to final results



What Are Research Methods?

- The **specific tools** you use to collect and analyse data
- Examples include:
 - Surveys
 - Interviews
 - Focus groups
 - Statistical tests
 - Thematic analysis

Methods are the **hands-on techniques** that help you gather and understand your data



Research Design Choice – Insider or Outsider?

Why It Matters

- Your position as a researcher affects how you collect data and understand the situation



Insider Researcher

- You are **part of the organisation or setting** being studied
- You may have **direct experience** or **existing relationships**
- Can offer **deep insight** and **practical understanding**
- Must be aware of **bias** and **role conflict**



Outsider Researcher

- You study the situation from **outside the organisation**
- You have **no direct involvement** with participants
- Can offer a more **neutral and objective view**
- May need more time to **build trust** and **access information**

Be clear about your position — it shapes your access, perspective and ethical responsibility



Research Design Choice – Insider or Outsider?

- **Why It Matters**
- Your position as a researcher affects how you collect data and understand the situation
- You must decide if you are researching **from inside** the organisation or **from outside**



Insider Researcher

What It Means

- You are **part of the organisation or setting** being studied
- You may have **direct experience** or **existing relationships**

Advantages

- Easier access to data and people
- Deeper understanding of the context

Challenges

- Risk of bias or role conflict
- May find it hard to stay objective

Outsider Researcher

What It Means

- You study the situation from **outside the organisation**
- You have **no direct involvement** with participants
- **Advantages**
- More neutral and objective
- Can offer a fresh perspective

Challenges

- May need more time to build trust
- Harder to access detailed information



Primary vs Secondary Data – What's the Difference?

Primary Data

- Collected **directly by you** for your specific project
- Comes from **original sources**
- Designed to answer **your research questions**

Secondary Data

- Collected by **someone else** for a different purpose
- Already exists in **published or organisational sources**
- You use it to support or compare with your own findings

Choose the type of data that best fits your research aim and resources



Examples of Primary Data

- Survey responses from participants
- Interview transcripts
- Focus group recordings
- Observations made during your own fieldwork

Primary data is fresh and specific to your project



Examples of Secondary Data

- Government statistics and reports
- Company documents (e.g. policies, HR metrics)
- Academic articles and previous research
- Public content (e.g. websites, blogs, social media, videos, photos)

Secondary data is already available and can save time



Choosing Between Primary and Secondary Data

Primary Data ✓ Tailored to your research ✓ Gives direct insight ✗
Time-consuming to collect ✗ Needs ethical approval ✓

Secondary Data ✓ Quick to access ✓ Useful for background or comparison ✗
May not fully match your research needs ✗ Limited control over quality ✓

Think about your **time, access and research goals** when choosing your data type

What Is Empirical Data?

Definition

- Empirical data means **real-world evidence** used to answer research questions.
- As Bell et al. (2022) explain, this can be **primary data** (collected directly by the researcher) or **secondary data** (collected by others but reused for a new purpose).

Examples

- Survey responses
- Interview transcripts
- Government statistics
- Company records

Empirical data is the **evidence base** for research projects.



What Is a Systematic Review?

Definition

- A systematic review is a research design that uses **existing published studies** as the main data.
- Creswell and Creswell (2018) describe it as a **structured process** for searching, selecting and analysing studies to answer specific research questions.
- Bhatt and Muduli (2023) show how this can be applied in HRD by reviewing studies on the use of AI.
- Uses a clear **protocol**
- Focuses on **quality and relevance**
- Often applied in **evidence-based practice**



Systematic Review vs Traditional Literature Review

Comparison

- Easterby-Smith et al. (2021) highlight that a **systematic review** is very different from a traditional literature review.
- A systematic review is **structured and protocol-driven**, while a traditional review is **narrative and flexible**.
- Systematic reviews aim to **answer research questions using study findings**, whereas traditional reviews provide **background and context**.



When to Use a Systematic Review

Suitable For

- Topics with **many existing studies**
- Questions about **what is already known**
- Projects with **limited access to primary data**

• Not Suitable For

- Questions needing **new data collection**
- Projects exploring **personal experiences or context**

As Bhatt and Muduli (2023) remind us, systematic reviews are powerful but only for the **right type of question**.



Inductive vs Deductive Research

- **Why It Matters**
- Your choice depends on your **research philosophy**
- Positivist studies usually use **deductive designs**
- Interpretivist studies usually use **inductive designs**



Deductive Research Design

What It Means

- **Theory-driven** approach
- Start with a theory or hypothesis
- Collect and analyse data to **test if the theory works**
- Useful for checking if existing theory explains the situation

Deductive = **test theory with data**



Inductive Research Design

What It Means

- **Data-driven** approach
- No pre-set theory at the start
- Collect data to explore what is happening
- Develop a **provisional explanation** based on findings

Inductive = **build theory from data**



Common Research Strategies in HR Projects

- **What Are Research Strategies?**
- A research strategy is the **overall approach** you choose to organise your research process
- It helps guide how you collect, manage and analyse your data
- Different strategies suit different types of research questions and settings



Five Common Strategies used in HR (Easterby-Smith et al., 2021)

- **Cross-sectional** – studies a group at one point in time
- **Case study** – explores one organisation or situation in depth
- **Quasi-experiment** – tests cause and effect without full control
- **Action research** – involves working with participants to solve a problem
- **Comparative** – compares two or more cases or groups



Cross-Sectional Research Strategy

What Is It?

- You collect data from a group of people **at one point in time**
- Often used to **compare groups** or explore **patterns** (e.g. younger vs older workers)
- Commonly done using **questionnaires** or **structured interviews**

Why It's Useful

- Helps you understand **what is happening now**
- Suitable for both **quantitative** and **qualitative** studies
- Works well for student projects with **limited time**

Make sure your sample size is big enough to represent the wider group



Case Study Research Strategy

What Is It?

- A case study is a **detailed investigation** of one organisation or a small number of related cases
- It explores a **phenomenon in context and in depth** (Yin, 2018)
- Often chosen by students doing **insider research**, especially when access to one organisation is available

What It Involves

- Asking questions about how **different factors interact**
- Using **multiple data types**: interviews, surveys, documents, observations
- May include **historical research** to understand development over time (Tight, 2017)

Be ready for a **step-by-step analysis** that develops gradually — this is called an **incremental and iterative process**



Action Research Strategy

What Is It?

- First introduced by **Kurt Lewin (1946)**, action research is a **continuous cycle** of planning, acting, observing and reflecting
- It's an **insider strategy** — the researcher is actively involved in the organisation and its change process

How It Works

- Investigate an HR issue
- Use evidence to suggest changes
- Take action to improve the situation
- Evaluate the results to understand the issue more deeply

Core Principles

- Researchers **should be involved** in the situation they study



Quasi-Experimental Research Strategy

What Is It?

- A **scientific tradition** strategy, seen as robust and desirable
- Compares **two pre-existing groups** (e.g. those who did vs did not join a programme)
- Used to explore **cause-and-effect relationships**

Example

- Measuring employee engagement in one department
- Compare results for staff who joined a career development programme vs those who did not

Why It Matters

- Opportunities are growing with **HR data analytics and AI systems**
- Allows researchers to isolate variables and examine differences in outcomes

Challenges

- **Difficult to set up** and requires strong statistical skills
- Risk of **confounding factors** influencing results
- Findings may not be **generalised** beyond the studied group



Access to Primary Data

You need **permission** to collect data from organisations or individuals.

What To Do

- Start early — access takes longer than expected
- Be clear about your project aims and type of data (surveys, interviews, observation)
- Use your **networks and connections** — trusted contacts are more successful than untargeted calls
- Negotiate on sample size, interview structure and documents available
- Communicate professionally and **sell the benefits** of your research



Insider Access

If you research in your own organisation, you still need **permission**.

What To Do

- Separate your role as researcher from your work role
- Be sensitive when interviewing colleagues who know you
- Treat confidential disclosures carefully to protect relationships
- Gain approval from the right **gatekeepers** (managers, union reps, heads of department)
- Be honest about your purpose and data needs
- Follow **ethics requirements** and ensure confidentiality and anonymity



Access to Secondary Data

Secondary data = information already collected by others.

Examples

- Employee engagement survey data
- Government statistics (e.g. Office for National Statistics)
- Policy documents or organisational metrics available publicly

Why Useful

- Called **desk research**
- Saves time and avoids access problems
- Enables you to answer questions that might not be possible with primary data



Secondary Data Sources in HR Research

- **What Is Secondary Data?**
- Data that has already been collected by others
- Used in **desk research** to answer your questions without gathering new data
- **Types of Secondary Data** (Easterby-Smith et al., 2021, Figure 2.7)
- **Personal** – diaries, blogs, autobiographies
- **Public** – government reports, statistics, white papers
- **Organisational** – annual reports, internal documents, policies
- **Media Outputs** – newspapers, TV/radio, social media posts
- **Visual Materials** – photos, drawings, video footage



Alignment in Research Design

- Your research design must be **logically connected** from start to finish
- Each choice — from worldview to strategy — should **fit together**
- Good alignment makes your project more **credible and convincing**
- **Key Alignment Points** (taken from Easterby-Smith et al., 2021, Figure 2.8)
- **Worldview** (Objectivist or Constructivist)
- **Purpose** (Explain, Describe, Explore)
- **Methodology** (Positivist or Interpretivist)
- **Research Questions/Objectives**
- **Design Choice** (Deductive or Inductive)
- **Data Type** (Primary or Secondary)
- **Strategy** (e.g. Case Study, Cross-Sectional, Action Research)



Figure 2.8 From researcher world view to research strategy choices

World view

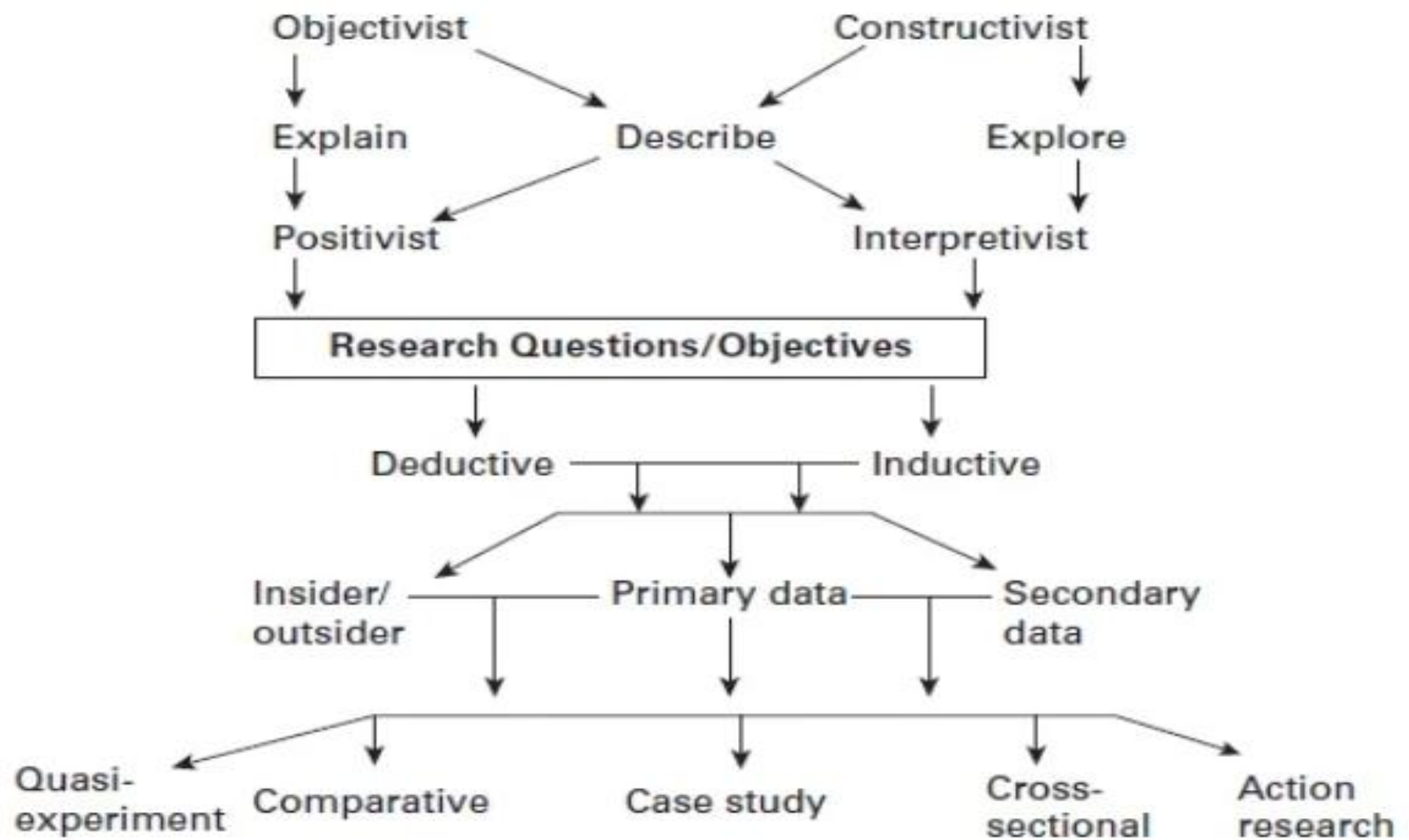
Consistent with Purpose

Consistent with Methodology

Informs

Informs Research design choices

Aligns with Research strategy choices



Planning Your Research Project – Using a Gantt Chart

- **Why Planning Matters**
- A research project is a **structured journey** with many tasks
- Good planning helps you stay **on track**, meet deadlines, and produce high-quality work
- A **Gantt chart** is a useful tool to map out your timeline and manage your progress



Tasks to Include in Your Gantt Chart

Masters in
Human Resources Management

Early & Data Tasks	Writing & Submission Tasks
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Define research topic & agree with tutor/organisation• Literature search, reading & note-taking• Evaluate what is already known• Draft literature review• Finalise ethics & data access issues• Design data-gathering instruments• Plan how to record & pilot data collection• Collect data & ensure quality	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Draft methodology section• Draft findings section• Analyse & interpret data• Draft analysis section• Draft introduction & conclusions/recommendations• Communicate results• Word process final draft• Finalise references & appendices• Copy, bind & submit on time

Thank you
for
your
attention!

