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Research, Research Gap and the Research Problem

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Abstract

Mainly, due to new scientific inquiries and technological advancements Knowledge becomes obsolete. So it creates a dilemma where the applicability of so called theories and models which we learnt in class can still be applied to solve problems? Thus, the scholars bring the notion of RESEARCH as a definite solution which enriches the existing understanding of a phenomenon. This can be either a theory testing or a theory extension (theory building) approach. In fact, gap identification and formulating a research problem are vital for a research project. The note details two approaches to identify research gap and thereby to formulate a research problem.

What is Research?

We as commerce and management students, we often talk about Law of Demand, Theory of venture growth, Theory of Resource Based View, Innovation Theory, Big Five Theory, so on and so forth. These models, theories and laws are created as a result of RESEARCH. As academics we disseminate knowledge utilizing those so called theories or models. But, those theories and models turn out to be outdated or obsolete. Therefore, the applicability can be problematic. Thus we need a solution. That is RESEARCH. Simply put, research attempts to create new knowledge. It can be either a theory testing approach or a theory extension approach (theory building approach). By means of a theory testing or a theory extension approaches new knowledge is created. Also, research is not all about collecting, classifying, and arranging mere data and information. It is about interpretation of data and information. In fact, theory defines parameters and possibilities of interpretation, (Uyangoda, 2011). Perhaps most notably, these interpretations can lead to either theory building or theory testing. This is termed as the validation of research based knowledge, (Uyangoda, 2011).

To be more concise, let's take an example. *Barney (1991) postulated the notion of Resource Based Theory, which is one of the seminal works in the contemporary strategic management. He stated that, '[f]our empirical indicators of the potential of firm resources to generate sustained competitive advantage – value, rareness, imitability, and sustainability – are discussed' (p.99). Thus a particular researcher may test this theory in a different context. He may add more variables or concepts to test the theory. Importantly, he may build rational relationships among variables. The se*

relationships are actually theorist's guesses about the reality. Such guesses are called as 'Research Hypothesis' or 'Propositions'. Finally, the researcher may test the research hypothesis and conclude the validity of the theory. Thus, this is an example of the theory testing approach.

In contrast to theory testing, theory building can be depicted as follows. Number of scholars extensively uses the Theory of Resource Based View in order to discuss venture growth. In fact, this growth variable is measured in terms of sales and employment growth of the venture. Recently, Gaylen et al., (2009) contributed another seminal paper adding Transaction Cost Economics Theory to predict when sales growth will be or will not be accompanied by employment growth. These two explanations (Resource Based View Theory and Transaction Cost Economics Theory) depict an original research gap which eventually leads to theory extension, (I.e. Theory Building). Simply put there is a research gap to amalgamate Resource Based View Theory and Transaction Cost Economics Theory together. Thus, this is an example of the theory building approach.

In these grounds a word about Action Research would be beneficial. This is because, commerce and management students, when they become graduated they opt to work in managerial positions. They turn out to be problem solvers in companies. Given that, Action research can be defined as an approach where a reflective process of progressive problem solving led by individuals working with others in teams or part of a community of practice to improve the way they address issues and solve problems. This is also called as participatory action research.

A person who builds new knowledge is known as a scholar. What they are doing is, they attempt to enrich or adjust the existing understanding of a phenomenon (i.e. they extend or test theory). Simply stated they update the knowledge. Thereby, above mentioned problem of applicability can be eliminated.

Research Gap and the Research Problem

A well defined and a structured research problem is the heart of the research project. Vague research problem is the weakest point in your research. When you submitting your research proposal for a proposal presentation or grant applications, the evaluators might ask, your what you trying to investigate? You should be in a position of convincing your research problem to examiners. Then how you build your research problem properly? Uyangoda (2011) propose puzzling is useful to build your research problem. Let's take the example of Safe Driving Habits in Sri Lanka. This is because, some drivers consume liquor before driving, they don't know how to park even though a separate parking slot has been given, they use to throw trash out of the car window, some do not obey driving rules, traffic lights etc. Eventually, unsafe driving habits increase auto-accidents. This is a very good example of a research puzzle. Having a puzzle you can simply convert the scenario into a research problem. Solving this kind of a puzzle will inevitably add value, and perhaps most notably it will provide a national importance as well.

Next, I will details my observations on how to formulate a research problem by forming a research gap. First, the researcher should have to have a “Practical Problem” and a “Contradiction in Literature”. Practical problem is more or less equal to the research puzzle which Uyangoda mentioned. In contrast, the contradiction in literature is a phenomenon which needs a scholarly inquiry. When you step in to draft your research proposal, it is indispensable to read literature. Then you will come to know, there are some areas that have been researched numerously and there are some areas that do lack in research. Further, you will come to know, some scholars in refereed journals they offer hunches for study further. Those hunches will provide an intention to the researcher to formulate his research gap and research problem. Following direct quote is such an example;

“Current global economic crisis seems to be especially hard for large companies. Therefore, SMEs are facing strong expectations for their role to be key players when economies will be recovering from the present global recession. Previous research has also widely investigated the firms’ characteristics creating profitability. However, the results obtained are inconclusive or even contradictory. Consequently, many researchers have concluded that more research is needed in that area” (Soinin et al., 2012, p. 614)

Above example states results obtained are **inconclusive** or even **contradictory** with regard to the characteristics creating profitability in SMEs. Simply stated, this is an implied gap to the researcher. That is because if there is a contradiction in literature, there is a prerequisite of further investigation. Reading more and more in this area would eventually reach to a research problem which also requires a scholarly inquiry. Another direct quote, which implies further investigation, can be depicted as follows;

*In recent years there has been an increased focus on the relationship between firm’s strategic orientation and firm performance (Madsen, 2007). Prior studies have generally found a **positive relationship between Entrepreneurial Orientation (EO) and firm performance** (Jantunen et al., 2005; Wiklund and Shepherd, 2005; Madsen, 2007). However, **there are also studies where such a relationship has not been found** (Smart and Conant, 1994). One reason might be that the measure that has been used to assess the firm performance has typically been a combination of both profitability and growth measures (Covinand Slevin, 1989; Wiklund, 1999; Avlonitis and Salavou, 2007).*

Above example once more confirms the prerequisite of further investigation because results are contradictory (i.e. positive relationships and no relationships). This is an implied gap stated differently. Likewise, having a complete set of literature the researcher can simply form a gap. Having contradiction in literature the researcher will also form a research problem where How Entrepreneurial Orientation (EO) affects firm performance? Whether EO affects positively or negatively? The researcher intends to investigate this because results between EO and firm performance are inconclusive in nature. When he concludes his study he may also state there is a positive, negative or no relationship between EO and firm

performance. Whatever the result he gets, it adds new knowledge to the existing literature. Likewise, within foreseeable future scholars may also confirm that there is a positive, negative or no relationship between EO and firm performance. In that state, the research gap fills. No scholarly inquiry is required. Having a positive, negative or no relationship a new theory can be built. Let's say, there is a positive relationship between Entrepreneurial Orientation and Firm Performance.

Above elaborations state two approaches to formulate your research gap and the problem. So once more I'm keen on stating that a good and a researchable research problem is the key to success in a research project.

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