RESEARCHING AND WRITING A DISSERTATION

AN ESSENTIAL GUIDE FOR BUSINESS STUDENTS

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Researching and Writing a Dissertation

bration. What it does seem to produce is complex and difficult language and a tendency to agonised introspection. (For an attempt to reconcile these forms of critical thinking by direct application to management, see Alvesson and Wilmott, 1996.) Other social theorists try to steer something of a middle way. Some of these, such as Giddens (lots of work, but see 1990 for a short introduction) and Castells (2000), have important things to say about the nature of the world of work, even if sometimes their detail fails to convince. Finally, the tradition known as Critical Realism (more appropriation! see p. 21) claims to be clearing the way for a more transparent use of concepts – Reed (1997) and Savage *et al*. (1992) provide some applications in the management field, although these are 'works in progress'.

What does all this mean for management researchers? It means that there is a rich body of resources upon which to draw. A little-recognised aspect of management history is the way in which ideas that are now mainstream (in change management, for example) had their origins on the left (Cooke, 1999). Alternatively, the challenging of basic assumptions can help, even if it ends up by confirming your belief in the soundness of those assumptions. Some of these areas, notably feminism, have had more direct impact on the management field. It is helpful to be aware of the nuances that lie behind the use of this little word 'critical', as you will come across it all the time in the academic literature. This simply reinforces the need for you to be sceptical and challenging in your use of such literature – in a word, to be critical!

Developing a radical critique

To summarise the above discussion: a radical critique is one that challenges assumptions and conventional ways of doing things. It normally does so from a moral stance based on perceptions of injustice; so, for instance, a radical critique could be Marxist (justice to the workers) or feminist (justice to women) or green (justice to Gaia) or based on an anti-globalisation position that would incorporate all of the preceeding. This section looks at how a radical critique of a managerial theme might be constructed using a loose Marxist perspective. Remember, radical critiques are not a necessary part of a literature review.

A (rather caricatured) view of the stages of argumentation followed in the laying out of a radical critique is presented here. This is one of the occasions in this book (discussed on p. 27) where a complex mode of thought is presented as if it could be reduced to a recipe and a simple set of instructions. It cannot: but it is hoped that the following example helps you to develop an understanding of critical analysis. The case of computerisation of administrative and clerical work is used as an example to illustrate the process.

Stage 1 – identify a conventional position

Take a conventional and standard argument that is used in the literature and in public debate. Waddington (1977: 16) created the acronym COW-DUNG, which stands for 'the conventional wisdom of the dominant group' – OK, it does not quite work as an acronym but it defines the concept well. A few years ago, for example, it was widely held that the increasing use of computers in the fields of clerical and administrative work would make employees' lives more interesting by removing the drudgery from their work.

Stage 2 – problematise it

Problematising the issue means revealing that the issue is more difficult than commonly thought and probably raises questions of values or ethics. Computerisation may make work more interesting, but management does not want information technology for this reason alone. Management also wants to improve efficiency and profits and this means making staff redundant as computers do more and more of the work. This process causes that which was straightforward to appear morally ambiguous.

Stage 3 – identify contradictions and negations

Look for contradictions and negations within the process or issue being studied. A negation is a self-destructive feature of a process. Computers are meant to make life more interesting for staff by taking away the boring chores from their work. But computer software not only does sums and clerical chores – it can also make decisions by comparing particular situations against decision-making guidelines. Computers can remove decision making from people and so make their work less interesting and less responsible. Computerisation also disempowers staff by removing their discretion to amend procedures. Staff have to work in the ways required by the software. By enabling management to monitor their work rates, staff are put under an intense scrutiny that prevents them from being flexible in their work methods and rates (i.e. if staff are working on computers, then it is easy for management to see how many transactions they have processed in a shift). So, in summary, computerisation was meant to make employees' lives more interesting and ends up making them less so. This is a form of dialectical analysis that is discussed further on p. 301.

Stage 4 – spot the effects of false consciousness (this is an optional stage)

False consciousness may be out of fashion (see p. 120) but it is often a useful element in a radical critique. False consciousness arises when the opposite of what people want is happening but they do not realise it. It is a Marxist concept to describe the tendency of the proletariat to fail to recognise the nature of its interest. More generally it is any form of ideology or self-imagery that is held to be inappropriate to the real or objective situation of an actor. So,

for example, imagine you have interviewed a number of clerical staff whose work has been computerised. To your surprise they tell you that they feel the process has made their work more interesting because they have learnt new skills. They have learnt how to use the new software, but they remain oblivious to the fact that the software is insidiously removing responsibility, self-control and higher-level skills from their jobs.

Stage 5 – end with an aporia

Aporia means being in a state where everything is so complex and ambiguous that you are at a loss about what to do. The critique is ended with a view that something is wrong but that it is difficult to see what can be done about it, short of changing human nature and sensibility. Things, you argue, are so complicated that anyone who believes there can be a quick fix for the issue must be deluded. Here is a typical example taken from a paper that gives a critique of the idea of business ethics:

> The problem I find it impossible to address in the rest of the paper will be what options are left for a project like 'Business Ethics' if all the above are accepted. It would simply be inappropriate for me to tie up a paper like this at the end as if I really did have a magical solution to these problems.

> (Parker, 1998: 35)

However, there is often a final claim that our increasing understanding of the complexity of things will enable humanity to become better. Parker ends his paper in such a way:

> Recognising the paradoxes within 'Ethics' and 'Business Ethics' is one way to stop these words from having so much hold on us. Perhaps we can begin to develop ways of expressing our dreams and nightmares that do not fall back into the *agon* so easily.

> (Parker, 1998: 35)

It may not be easy to see quite what this means (the use of the word 'agon' makes it difficult – it means the endless arguments between different and incomparable ways of viewing a topic), but as an ending it sounds upbeat – in an ambiguous sort of a way.

Stage 6 – appropriate references and citations

Try to make references to Michel Foucault and/or Jürgen Habermas in the text. Surprisingly, references to Jeremy Bentham, the eighteenth-century utilitarian philosopher, and his notion of the panoptican, published in 1791 but more accessible in Božovič (1995), are also well received. The panopticon was a design for a circular prison. The cells were to be set around the circumference of the building and at the centre there was to be a watchtower. This design would allow a warder to observe all the prisoners with ease. An

Exhibit 2.6

Bentham's panopticon
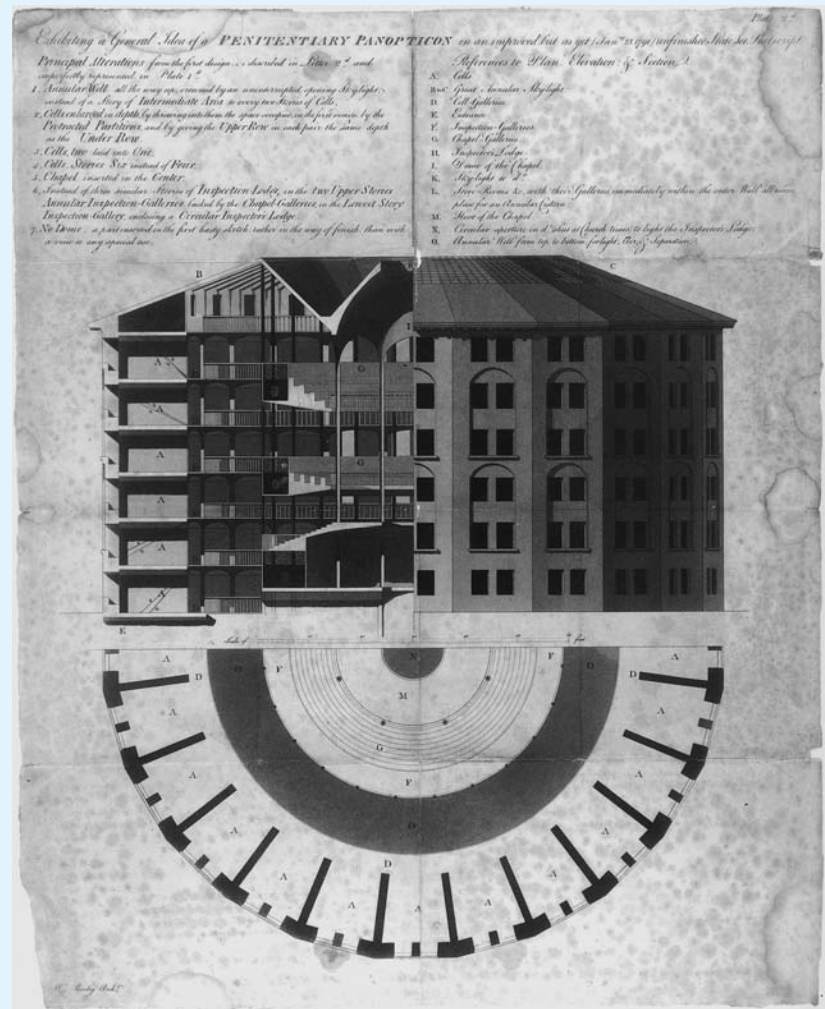
Source: Bentham Papers 115/44, University College London, UCL Library Services.

additional element in the design was a series of baffles and blinds. These meant that the warder could see the prisoners but the prisoners could not be sure whether they were being observed. The effect of the panopticon is that inmates would behave as if they were being observed even though they did not know whether they were. The risk that they could be under observation was sufficient, Bentham argued, to modify their behaviour.

The idea of the panopticon was adopted by Foucault as a metaphor for the way that organisations and institutions seek to control individuals. It works well as a trope for analysing information technology in offices. When an employee is working at a computer terminal that is networked to others in the organisation, it is technically possible for the management to monitor the employee's work. The employee knows that they may be being monitored, but they can never be sure whether they are. The metaphor works even better with roadside speed cameras, which reduce average speeds because drivers do not know whether the box really does contain a camera. So they proceed on the basis that it might. A panopticon therefore provides a very efficient method of social control.

The following citation of Foucault, citing Bentham, achieves a double whammy effect: 'The contemporary popularity of Foucault's version of the panopticon seems to illustrate something rather profound' (Parker 1998: 31). The panopticon is discussed in Foucault (1991).

The six stages of radical critique are simply a teaching aid. No one would follow such a mechanistic process in their writing. Nevertheless, these different aspects can be found in academic papers such as Parker (1998). If you have the time and inclination, you might want to locate the six stages in his article.

Radical critique has a jargon and a style of expression of its own. This can be difficult for the novice to penetrate, and it would take much practice to acquire it. Nevertheless, a lack of linguistic pretension should not prevent you from trying this type of analysis, especially as it often carries a ring of truth. You may test this out for yourself by doing Exercise 2.3.

If you find it too difficult to write a radical critique there is a website at www.csse.monash.edu.au/other/postmodern.html that produces randomly generated critical essays. Luckily it produces a new essay every time you click on the site, and the reader has no control over the topic of the essay, otherwise you might be tempted to use this facility.

Some people critique critical theory. The most recent cause célèbre was an article written by Alan Sokal (Sokal and Bricmont, 1999). In the paper he parodied the writing style of critical thinkers and deliberately introduced scientific misconceptions and mathematical blunders. This did not prevent the paper from being accepted and published in a well-respected academic journal. If you wish to know more about the debate that the publication of the article started, visit **www.physics.nyu.edu/faculty/sokal/**.

Exhibit 2.7

Michel Foucault (1926–1984) and genealogies

Michel Foucault (1926–1984) was a French philosopher. His work is here labelled as critical theory; but it cannot be easily categorised. His work developed over time and in this exhibit I will deal with that aspect of his work known as his genealogical phase, which is associated with his (1991) book *Discipline and Punish*. In this book he explored how people acquire power through the development and use of discourse within human institutions such as prisons. Genealogies are accounts of the intertwining of power and knowledge, which means that what we call knowledge cannot be seen as based on absolute truths. Genealogies spread across different forms of knowledge, which are all brought to conform to, and to reinforce, certain power relations through the general acceptance of key themes. Except that this process of conformance is never quite complete and there is always room for disputes over knowledge. Foucault's essay *Nietzsche, Genealogy, History*, originally published in 1971 (an English translation is available in Rabinow (1984; 76–100)), is used here to identify the key themes of genealogy. The use of these themes in an example of management research is then discussed.

Rejection of rational and linear progression in knowledge and morals

Foucault's notion of genealogy descends from Friederich Nietzsche's (1844–1900) *On the Genealogy of Morals*. Both Foucault and Nietzsche wanted to defeat the idea that the development of morality was a linear and progressive story. They also rejected the idea of an *Ursprung* – an original basis for morals, which pre-supposes an original essence of a thing that pre-existed the search for it. A belief in an origin also creates a false discipline dedicated to discovering it. The idea of an origin is a chimera.

> A genealogy of values [ ] and knowledge will never confuse itself with a search for 'origins'.
>
> (Foucault, 1984: 80)

Rather a genealogy explains how the idea of an origin is constructed and changed over time as a way of legitimising a particular set of power relationships.

Descent

A second term, taken from Nietzsche, which Foucault discusses, is *Herkunft*. This means descent and in nineteenth-century Germany it often referred to the descent of a racial group. Foucault disassociated it from race and saw it as the history of the complexity of a descent, a descent that had many origins and shows the self not to be a coherent whole but a network of fragmented pieces:

> genealogy does not pretend to go back in time to restore an unbroken continuity that operates beyond the dispersion of forgotten things; its duty is not to demonstrate that the past actively exists in the present, that it continues secretly to animate the present.
>
> (Foucault, 1984: 81)

Genealogy represents the fragmented and contradictory meanderings of our attempts, often mistaken, to make sense of things: 'Truth or being does not lie at the root of what we know or what we are, but the exteriority of accidents.'

'Descent attaches itself to the body'

The idea of the human body being the site of knowledge is very common in Foucault's work. He sees a link between the body, power and knowledge: 'Genealogy, as an analysis of descent, is thus situated within the articulation of the body and history.' What does this mean? Could it be something as simple as what you eat,