

YOUR GUIDE TO THE RESEARCH PROCESS

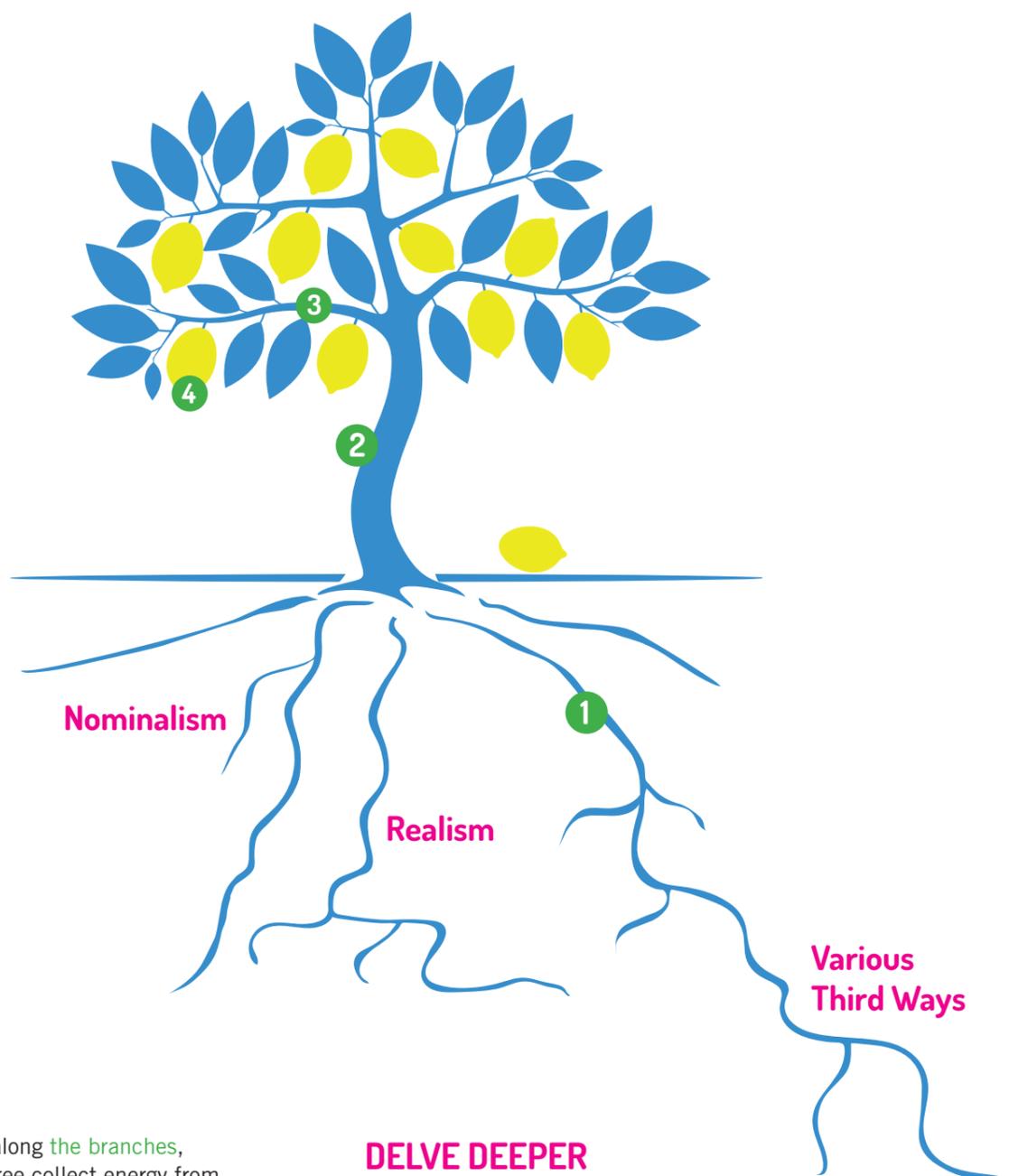
Understanding the philosophy underlying research designs and methods is a crucial part of any research project.

Chapter 3 of this book, 'The Philosophy of Management and Business Research', outlines how a tree can be used as a metaphor to represent the research process. The tree metaphor is designed to help you understand the importance of research traditions and key concepts.

THE TREE AS A METAPHOR FOR THE RESEARCH PROCESS

The key elements of the tree are the roots, the trunk and branches, the leaves, and the fruit. Each of these plays a vital role in the growth of the tree and parallels important aspects of conducting research.

- 1 The roots of the tree symbolize the research traditions within particular disciplines. The soil in which the roots are anchored is made up from the experience of previous research projects all designed to answer the problematics that exist within particular management disciplines or fields. Your research is rooted in these traditions and builds on existing theory and knowledge.
- 2 The trunk transports the nutrients from the roots through the branches to the leaves and fruit; it also provides strength and shape to the tree. The colour-coded cross-section of the tree symbolizes the four main features of a research design: ontology, epistemology, methodology, and methods and techniques.
- 3 Moving up and along the branches, the leaves of a tree collect energy from sunlight, and so represent the collection and analysis of research data. It is the collection of what is already known about the subject (drawn up from the soil), together with new empirical research data collected from the leaves, from your original research study, which enables the evolution of theory.
- 4 The fruits of the tree represent research outputs. The form of outputs depends on underlying assumptions and the purpose of the research.



DELVE DEEPER

In the same way that roots draw nutrition from the soil, research traditions are drawn up and form the basis of the research design, methods and forms of analysis. There are three different possible ontological research traditions (inner ring in the trunk cross-section) explained in Chapter 3 – a realist perspective, a nominalist perspective and what we term various other third ways (a mixture of the realist and nominalist traditions).

The leaves represent the collection and analysis of data.

We distinguish between three main kinds of data based on the underlying epistemology (second ring in the trunk cross-section), according to whether they are essentially positivist, constructionist or hybrid (mixed methods) approaches.



CROSS-SECTION OF TREE TRUNK

- 1 The inner ring of the trunk is the densest part of the trunk, and represents the ontology, your basic assumptions about the nature of reality.
- 2 The second ring of the trunk represents the epistemology, the assumptions about the best ways of inquiring into the nature of the world.
- 3 The third ring from the centre represents the methodology or how methods and techniques are combined to form a coherent research strategy.
- 4 The outer fourth ring of the trunk (bark) represents the individual methods and techniques that are used for data collection

and analysis, such as interviews and questionnaires. The bark is the only aspect of the research that is visible to others but behind it lie many assumptions and decisions about methodology, epistemology and ontology.

If the trunk is rotten from the inside, the tree cannot withstand the weather in the long run. A research project where ontology, epistemology and methodology do not align cannot withstand evaluation or critical review.



Watch book author Richard Thorpe explaining the tree metaphor in this video:

<https://study.sagepub.com/easterbysmith7e>