

Caught in the Research: The Research Process Behind Caught in the Middle

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My passion is understanding ways to help managers succeed. When I began to brainstorm about my topic, I originally wanted to study factors that motivate managers in the workplace and use the research to provide tools for that purpose. However, as I began searching through Google and the K-State Libraries website (with simple terms such as “research on management” and “theories in management”), I found that little research has been done on middle managers specifically. There was a need for research that was applicable to my field of communication studies, as well as a vast array of theoretical lenses from which to view the study. The following sections detail two stages which my project underwent from initiation to completion.

Stage 1: Initial Process

To begin my research, I made a list of terms I felt would provide me with articles, books, etc. about middle management, help me gain an overall view of the previous research done on the topic, and select a theoretical lens for the study. I kept a paper document (my “idea sheet”) readily available for this purpose. The idea sheet tracked common key phrases, ideas, and theories I came across. The sheet is beneficial because it helps reveal research gaps, and helps me determine the specific direction of my research. I used database searches through the K-State Libraries search engine (e.g., Communication & Mass Media Complete, Academic Search Premier, and Business Source Premier), as well as Google Scholar and the general K-State libraries website to explore my list of terms. These databases were the most beneficial because of their collection of topics in communication studies, business management, and theory-based research—all of which are core elements of my academic discipline and this research project. The online search results became my background reading to find main ideas in others’ research and spark my own ideas—these were added to my multiple-page idea sheet. I found that most

research done on middle management focused on the medical field, and decided that my study would focus on finding ways to provide tools for middle managers in any field.

Stage 2: Organization & Evaluation of Sources

Once my idea sheet had been narrowed to the topic of middle management, I began researching theoretical lenses and digging deeper into research from stage one. Those initial main ideas were power, resources, motivation, role expectations, and emotion regulation as factors that influenced middle managers. While many theories were applicable, the most relevant was Kanter's theory of structural empowerment, as it encompassed two of the main ideas I had found, as well as four additional ideas that followed the previous research on my idea sheet. In my searches for content related to the theory and management in general, I applied a new concept gained from Laura Bonella of K-State Libraries (a guest lecturer in our senior colloquium class). She taught us the value of never clicking the checkbox for "full text only" in the advanced database searches, as that filter would leave out many articles that could be interlibrary loaned or found in other ways. I was pleasantly surprised how many new resources came up after I stopped clicking that box.

To keep track of my research, I created a digital folder where I downloaded and stored electronic journal articles that had promise for my topic. Originally, the articles were also categorized in subfolders with "necessary articles" and "maybe articles." Once specific literature sections began to come together, I went back and deleted unnecessary articles. I also kept a physical folder to keep track of my idea sheets, highlighted copies of printed documents, assignment sheets, and general notes. In my research, I evaluated the credibility of sources by selecting those that were scholarly, peer reviewed, and/or published in academic journals. As I found measures for my survey, I evaluated each measure by researching its prevalence,

Cronbach's alpha (for reliability), and in what industry it had been used (for correlation to my study). For example, the Conditions for Work Effectiveness Questionnaire (used to measure empowerment) was primarily used in the nursing industry, but was applicable because it focused on management. I was also able to use two physical books by Kanter, found in Hale's vast collection, to fully grasp her theory of structural empowerment, which was the lens for my study.

One struggle I had to overcome was remembering which source held which piece of information. To help combat this, I created notecards with quotes, paraphrases, or summaries from specific sources that benefitted my project. This process helped me to grasp concepts by rewriting them in my own words and keep track of whose ideas I was citing so that I did not accidentally plagiarize. The articles which used Kanter's theory, or explicitly discussed middle managers were those I read in full, since they offered the most valuable information. The notecards were sorted into groups, which revealed continuity in the research and evidence for my main areas of discussion. I also found several new articles that defined or explained the factors I was researching through the reference lists of my sources. This extra step of using notecards focused my research on the factors of empowerment, role conflict & ambiguity, job satisfaction, and organizational commitment. I was then able to prepare a literature review based on scholarly sources and create a questionnaire with valid and reliable measures to collect data. Analyzing my data helped me to answer my research question and offer practical tools for empowering middle managers.

In short, I have detailed my two-step process of creating a research project: summarizing background research on my idea sheets, and digging deeper with notecards to craft a detailed literature review and effective measures for my questionnaire. In those stages, I described how

this process helped me to take advantage of many of the library's tools and fine-tune my research—one that I am proud to present as my final undergraduate project.