Researching in Organisations - Intellectual Framework

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**Introduction**

This paper concentrates on the production of an intellectual framework that can be applied to empirical research. Essentially, the intellectual framework supports and directs the research so that the research objectives are met and rich results are obtained.

**Discussion**

Any research will comprise a framework of ideas (e.g. strategic and processual theory) and an area of concern for which the research is investigating (e.g. formal strategic procedures and strategic initiatives). These elements can be combined within an intellectual framework which enables the research to be enacted within the case organisations. The concept of this intellectual framework is illustrated in Figure 1.

The conceptualization of research in a real world situation is clearly articulated by Checkland’s model. Importantly, this model illustrates the cyclical nature of conducting research in organizations. The model firmly positions itself as one that brings together the key aspects of the ‘framework of ideas’, via a ‘methodology’ to a real world ‘area of concern’. This process yields cyclical learning for a research inquiry across all the elements of the intellectual model.

At the detailed level, the application of the framework of ideas to the area of concern can occur in many forms. An example of strategic Information Systems Technology (IST) research which investigates how organisations actually conduct strategic activity through a processual and IST theory base is illustrated in Figure 2.
In this example, this Figure 2 illustrates four key areas of concentration (1, 2, 3 and 4) which would be completed within each case organisation. The IST strategy theory is effectively used to determine whether what this literature says should happen in organisations is actually occurring in their formal strategic procedures – (1) and the actual strategic initiatives – (2). Having established these comparisons, the IST strategy framework is then used (via the documentation of the formal procedures) to determine whether, what actually happens in the strategic initiatives is what is documented in the formal procedures – (3). In conjunction to this, the processual frameworks will be used to make sense of what is actually happening during the strategic initiatives – (4).

In the example presented above, it is clear that the research would need to capture the strategic processes unfolding in the organisations. Van de Ven (1988) identified four main requirements necessary to undertake research of process of change. These were:

- A clear set of concepts about the object being studied
- Systematic methods for observing change in the object over time
- Methods for tabulating raw data to identify processual patterns
- Motors or theories of change.

In essence, Van de Ven argued that processual research needs to describe WHAT we have observed but also HOW and WHY.

Van de Ven’s first requirement for processual analysis refers to the existence of a clear set of concepts about the object being studied. In the strategic example above, this is based on a conceptual framework comprising IST strategic theory and processual theory.

The second requirement for ‘observing change over time’ is the use of systematic methods for observing change. Again, the key methods used in the example are a combination of IST strategy tools and techniques and processual models. However, an important aspect of any processual research is its cyclical nature, as the empirical research needs to unfold cyclically to allow for a dynamic empirical research approach to develop. In fact, a broad research approach also assists in the engagement of the case organisations as it allows for a flexible approach to be taken within the specifics of each case organisation.

The third requirement for processual research is the ability to record the data used to identify processual patterns. In the above example, four main methods of recording the data were used. Every case engagement commenced with an understanding and appreciation of the organisations’ history and present situation. The first main strategic intervention was the mapping of the formal strategy procedures. The aim here was to understand the key formal activities undertaken in the organisation to develop and implement their IST strategy. As a processual perspective of IST strategic development and implementation was the primary aim of the research, the focus of the case engagement had to capture the realities of such situations. Therefore, following the mapping of formal procedures, a selection of strategic initiatives in each of the organisations were mapped and analysed. Finally, the fourth method for recording data was the tabular analysis of the events. This comprised the intellectual structure of the research and the actual findings obtained within the case organisation. This comparison involved the formal procedures, case narratives and the framework of ideas.

The final requirement for a processual perspective is the use of motors/theories of change to make sense of the process patterns. As Van de Ven (1988) argued, social scientists have historically relied upon three main theories of change: evolutionary (continuous and gradual change from directly within the unit that is undergoing change as the forces of change lie within the system itself); accumulation of epigenesis (change is externally and discontinuously produced by the addition of totally new events); and punctuation equilibrium (the use of time to combine both the evolutionary
and accumulations of epigenesis theories). Accumulation best describes the process of occasional discontinuous re-orientations, whilst evolution characterises periods of relative stability. For the above example, the use of processual model, combined with the IST strategy knowledge base would fit with punctuated equilibrium models of change.

From a more practical and semantic perspective, there exists a problem of differing use of language and terminology within any case organisations. Actors in the same organisation or from different organisations can refer to the same activity/process but use different terminology. At the micro-level, this does not cause a problem for research but at a more abstract level – such as determining the key formal processes – the use of differing language could make the interpretation and presentation of the data extremely complicated. Additionally, a further issue exists with the definition of formal procedures in the case organisations. One would expect that the formal strategic procedures would be clearly documented in organisations. However, in many cases, the formal strategic procedures of any organisation comprised three main elements:

- Formally documented strategic procedures.
- The routinised actions and activities of strategic practitioners in the organisations that are validated by senior executives.
- The expectations of senior executives of what is supposed to happen in terms of strategic executives.

This means that the collection of formal strategic procedures could be more problematic than first anticipated. To overcome these potential problem, the Soft Systems Methodology (SSM) technique of Primary Task Models (PTM) can be used to provide a high-level language and structure to the organisation of inquiry. Although in many cases, SSM is used to help structure problematic human situations using issue-based models, in some cases, SSM can be used to provide the logical activity models as a means of structuring the interpretation and providing a mechanism for overcoming potential language differences. An extensive review and critique of SSM is beyond the scope of this paper. For a detailed account of SSM see Checkland (1999) and Wilson (2001). As Checkland (1999) argued, the purpose of modelling in the SSM context is to provide intellectual devices to help structure exploration within the situation being addressed. The social nature of SSM focusing on ‘human activity systems’ and ‘purposeful activity’ within organisations ensures that this technique fits within the phenomenological philosophy adopted for organisational based research.

In order to structure an inquiry, the PTM can be used to illustrate the high-level language and abstract representation of the formal procedures undertaken in the case organisations. As Wilson (2001) argues, the PTM provides a:

“…defensible mechanism…the use of a single representative model as the basis of analysis, has become a powerful and efficient means of tackling a wide range of problem situations.” Wilson (2001: 73)

By utilising the key SSM activities of CATWOE, root definitions and modelling, the PTM can be developed to illustrate the high-level strategic procedures unfolding within case organisations. It is expected that each organisation would undertake various activities in order to deliver their strategic objectives. However, it is also expected that across organisations some similarities will be present within the key strategic activities and can thus be illustrated within the PTM.

The approach described within this paper has the potential to enable the collection of rich and detailed data about the area of concern there are potential problems that do exist. Firstly, the sheer size of some research projects means that extensive time and resources are required to successfully complete the empirical research. Secondly, in terms of case organisation engagement a number of major decisions has to be made to ensure sufficient access to the data being obtained. This not only covers issues
such as case involvement but also more fundamental issues such as data contribution, multiplicity of organisations and the depth of access across each case organisation.

As research unfolds the ability to complete data collection in a logical linear fashion (enabling learning to be carried from each organisation) cannot always be adhered to as case organisation access can change depending on the diary constraints of the actors involved. This means that at times more than one case organisation can be engaged with, leading to a more sporadic enactment of the empirical research process.
References


