Researching in Organisations - Philosophical Requirements

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Introduction

In many examples of management research, the philosophical dimensions within which the detailed research design is framed are epistemological and empirical. For the former, the correlation is largely between positivism—often characterised by objective hypothesis testing—and phenomenology—characterised by subjective constructed interpretation. The philosophical direction for any research is therefore important for a number of reasons as it helps to clarify the research design, it helps to recognise which designs will work and which will fail, and it helps the researcher identify and even create new designs that maybe outside of his experience (Easterby-Smith et al, 2002).

Discussion

Positivism is grounded in a research philosophy that asserts that the:

“Social world exists externally, and that its properties should be measured through objectives methods, rather than being inferred subjectively through sensations, reflection or intuition.” Easterby-Smith et al (2002: 28)

For this reason, a positivist philosophy has a number of key characteristics in that the

“Positivist epistemology limits its conception of valid or warranted knowledge to what is to be unproblematically observable ‘sense data’. If theory corresponds with a researchers’ observations of these facts its truthfulness is taken to be established. If it fails to correspond, it is discarded as fallacious” Gill and Johnson (1997: 139)

Positivism recognises two forms of knowledge: empirical (represented by natural sciences) and logical (represented by maths) that are viewed as objects or things independent of ideas (Hughes, 1980). For a detailed account of the features of positivism see for example Easterby-Smith et al (2002) and Robson (1993). Positivism is probably the most important attempt to generate knowledge about the social world (Smith, 1998). Also, a positivist philosophy is one of the more popular approaches to research conducted within fields such as information systems (Brooke, 2002). The reasons for such commitment are vast but are essentially due to: (1) the need to add to the existing body of knowledge in a structured manner; and (2) the lack of access of empirical data in such a focused area of social science (Remenyi and Williams, 1995).

From this basis, key theoretical contributions to the domain have been made (such as Galliers, 1987) that are generally positivistic in nature. However, Remenyi et al (1997) later argued that in fact the current approaches to Information Systems Technology (IST) research are not producing satisfactory socially reflective results. Further, he argued that attempts to solve this problem have not been fully understood.

Although the positivist school is a powerful tradition and has been a major contributor to knowledge in the social sciences, it does in fact have many limitations and constraints. Hughes (1980), provided a detailed critique of the positivist school along three aspects. Firstly, positivist approaches generally rely on the need to abstract data that can misconstrue the nature of social actions. Secondly, there is a lack of acknowledgement of the subjective status of meanings. Finally, positivism assumes that social reality can be discovered in each society independently (Hughes, 1980).

In fact:

“…the job of social scientists should not be to gather facts and measure how often certain patterns occur, but to appreciate the different constructions and meanings that people place upon their experience. The focus should be on what people, individually and collectively are thinking and feeling, and attention should be paid to the ways they communicate with each other, whether verbally or non-verbally.” Easterby-Smith et al (1991: 24)
By adopting a more phenomenological stance, a researcher can potentially dig deeper to explore the taken for granted assumptions of the social world. As Easterby-Smith et al (2002, discussing Husserl, 1946) argue, the world and reality are not objective and exterior but are socially constructed and given meaning by people. Phenomenology is therefore concerned with the meanings that research actors attach to social phenomena. Unlike positivism, phenomenology argues that the world is not objective and external but is in fact subjective and socially constructed; the observer is not independent; and that science is not value free (Easterby-Smith et al, 2002).

Furthermore, Fay (1996) concluded that social science aims to understand intentional phenomena by interpreting meaning. He listed twelve theses of the philosophy of social science. The key ones in respect of most organisational research include: (1) the need to think processually, not subjectively (time is a fundamental element in assessing evolution and change); (2) recognise that agents are agents only because they are situated within systems that empower and limit them; (3) expect more light from whatever human act or product you are trying to understand (meaning itself will change over time); and (4) to think dialectically.

Table 1 provides a summary of the main features of both positivism and phenomenology:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Area</th>
<th>Positivism</th>
<th>Phenomenology</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Perception of the World</td>
<td>The social world is separated from human beings. Social reality can be investigated by the use of objective measures.</td>
<td>Humans are part of the social world, which exists due to the interaction and actions of human beings.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Objectives</td>
<td>Empirical testing of theories by process of verification or falsification for reaching a general principle.</td>
<td>The understanding of how members of a social group by actions enact meanings, beliefs and realities of the social world.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Research Methods</td>
<td>Hypothetical deductive approach.</td>
<td>Process of understanding how practices and meanings are formed by humans as they work towards common goals.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Methods of Data Collection</td>
<td>Sample surveys and questionnaires.</td>
<td>Interviews, documents and observations.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Methods of Analysis</td>
<td>Statistical models.</td>
<td>Interpretation, description and analysis of the social world from the viewpoints of the participants.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Role of Respondents</td>
<td>Information based on frameworks prepared by researcher through questionnaires.</td>
<td>Allow respondents to use their own ways of explaining their experiences and concepts of the social world.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 1: Comparison of Positivism and Phenomenology (Adapted from Silverman, 1993)

It must be noted that the main characteristics presented above represent the extremes of both philosophies. In practice, it is difficult to undertake research at one end of the spectrum, as there is a tendency to adopt a mixed approach (Easterby-Smith et al, 2002).
References


