

Understanding Research Paradigms: An Ontological Perspective to Business Research

Toritseju Rita Pessu

Birmingham City Business School, Birmingham City University, United Kingdom
Corresponding Author: Toritseju Rita Pessu

Abstract: *Research is a systematic investigation that finds answers to problems or questions. However, one of the biggest challenges faced by researchers when undertaking a study is the inability to determine a suitable research paradigm that aligns with their methodological choice for the study. In addressing this challenge, this paper discusses various paradigms of research and the two dominant epistemological assumptions; positivism, constructivism or interpretivism often debated in business and management research from an ontological perspective. The target audience for this paper are early career researchers and business students.*

Keywords: *Research paradigms, Ontology, Epistemology, Realism, Relativism*

Date of Submission: 26-07-2019

Date of Acceptance: 12-08-2019

I. Introduction

Conducting business research could be a very daunting and challenging experience for most early career researchers and business students undertaking research at Undergraduate, Masters and PhD stages. When reflecting on what is often discussed in most research method textbooks and literature, it is evident that there are three major questions that require significant consideration by researchers: How to research? What to research? and Why research? (Holden and Lynch, 2004). Holden and Lynch (2004) explain that while some researchers have an idea of what to research and how to go about the research and in most cases, they may have decided the methodological choice based on their chosen topic (Remenyi, 1998; Holden and Lynch, 2004), others struggle with grasping the philosophical stance of their research in terms of understanding the nature of reality or truth. As a result, novice researchers often confuse the conceptual relationship between the research paradigm and research method. In bridging this gap, this paper briefly discusses the various philosophies of research and the two dominant assumptions often debated in business research from an ontological perspective. In contributing to the body of knowledge, this paper may be beneficial to all researchers, however, the target audiences are business students and early career researchers. It will assist them in understanding how properly structured and clearly articulated research methodology chapter can be more convincing than one written based on a random approach or common sense.

II. Research Paradigms

Research is guided by a set of beliefs known as paradigms. Paradigms are set of basic beliefs a researcher holds when examining a social phenomenon from which he or she gains an understanding of these phenomena (Guba and Lincoln, 1994; Saunders et al., 2012). This set of beliefs is based on ontological, epistemological and methodological assumptions. Guba and Lincoln (1994) assert that ontological, epistemological and methodological assumptions are inter-related in a way that answering one question limits how the others are answered. The ontological assumption is the starting point for most debates among researchers (Easterby-Smith et al., 2008). It is based on the notion that our views (either claims or assumptions) can be defined based on the nature of reality, and if it is an objective reality that really exists, or only a subjective reality, created in our minds (Bryman and Bell, 2007; 2015; Flowers, 2009; Saunders et al., 2012). Objectivism explains that social entities exist in reality external to social actors. While subjectivism emphasises that social phenomena originate from the perceptions and consequent actions of social actors (Guba and Lincoln, 1998; Kumar, 2008; Saunders et al., 2012). Thus, ontology refers to the study of our existence and the beliefs about the nature of reality, which determine what can be known about it. Questions related to ontology include; What exist? What is true and how can we sort existing things? (Guba and Lincoln, 1994; Gill and Johnson, 2010).

Epistemology and methodology are driven by ontological beliefs. According to Collis and Hussey (2014: 47) epistemology “is concerned with what we accept as valid knowledge. It examines the relationship between the researcher and the researched”. In other words, epistemology examines the relationship between the research and what can be known and how we come to know what we know (Guba and Lincoln, 1998). There are

two dominant epistemological assumptions; positivism and constructivism or interpretivism often debated in business research (Kumar, 2011; Collis and Hussey, 2014). However, for greater clarity, these assumptions will be discussed later in details alongside methodologies from an ontological perspective. Methodology is a way of acquiring knowledge systematically (Kumar, 2008), where methodological approach is driven by the researcher's ontological and epistemological beliefs. Though it is evidence-based that there are two extreme epistemological paradigms in business and management research as mentioned above (Guba and Lincoln, 1994; Kumar, 2011; Saunders et al., 2012; Collis and Hussey, 2014). Easterby-Smith et al (2008) attempt to soften the position of these extremes by discussing the interrelationship between the epistemological assumptions from an ontological perspective. They validate that there are two dominant perceptions of reality that are often debated: realism and relativism.

2.1 Realism

Realism is built on the assumption that reality independent of human thoughts and beliefs exists (Saunders et al., 2003; Bryman and Bell, 2007; Saunders et al., 2012). It is an ontological perspective within the quantitative or objectivism paradigm of research. Easterby-Smith et al (2008) note that realist believes that the reality in the social world exists externally and that its properties such as knowledge can be acquired through observable objects and events. That is, only through objective interpretation can information be fully processed and understood (Livesey, 2006). The epistemological stance within this paradigm is therefore positivist in nature, meaning the researcher maintains a distance from the researched in order to avoid bias (Saunders et al., 2016). The methodology in this paradigm requires a quantitative mode of inquiry (Saunders et al., 2003). Robson (1993: 18 – 19) notes that positivist research undergoes five sequential stages: (1) it deduces an hypothesis from a tested theory by observation; (2) It explains the statistical relationship among variables (Saunders et al., 1997); (3) It relies on quantitative data; (4) It examines the major outcomes of inquiries by testing hypothesis; and (5) It uses structured methodology to facilitate replication (Gill and Johnson, 1991). Within the quantitative or the positivist paradigm of research, numerical data are used to quantify or measure phenomena and produce findings (Saunders et al, 2012; Bryman and Bell, 2015). In other words, quantitative research enables the researcher to identify patterns within his or her observations with the aim of finding answers and making future recommendation to these problems. There are two types of realism, which share similar features of positivism: empirical realism and critical realism (Bryman and Bell, 2015). Empirical realists argue that reality can be understood better by using the right methods. From this perspective reality exist, but only as events and appearances (Bryman and Bell, 2007; 2015; Easterby-Smith et al., 2008). Bryman and Bell (2015) emphasise that empirical realism is often referred to as “realism” by most researchers and they mean one and the same thing. Critical realism on the other hand is an ontological perspective within the post-positivist paradigm of research. Critical realists believe that what we experience as humans are sensations of images and things going on in the real world and not the things directly (Scott, 2005; Jefferies, 2011). Critical realists do not believe it is possible to maintain absolute distance from the researched. They recognise and attempt to control the potential influences that the researcher's background knowledge could have on observations. The methodology in this post-positivist paradigm is the combination of both quantitative and qualitative methods. Saunders et al (2016) pose that the strongest contrasting ontological perspective to realism is relativism.

2.2 Relativism

Relativism is a belief that reality cannot exist without perspective. Relativist belief that there are multiple constructs of realities (Easterby-Smith et al., 2012). These realities are influenced by experiences and social interactions (Saunders et al., 2016). The relativist position asserts that each person has their different view of reality that is considered right (Easterby-Smith et al., 2012). Relativism is the ontological perspective within a qualitative or subjectivist paradigm of research. Subjectivist rejects the notion that an objective reality exists. They hold that social interaction is based on consciousness, action, and unpredictability (Ponterotto, 2005; Livesey, 2006). In other words, the principle of subjectivist paradigm is built on the foundation that only through interaction and dialogue between the researcher and participant or object under study can clearer understanding and answers be achieved. The epistemology is therefore constructivist in nature, and a consensus is sort within the findings (Guba and Lincoln, 1994; 1998). Qualitative methods like in-depth interviews are used and the context is well-described (Guba and Lincoln, 1994; Easterby-Smith et al., 2012). Furthermore, Moen (2006:61) states, “qualitative approach to the field of investigation means that researchers study things in their natural settings, attempting to make sense of and interpret phenomenon in terms of the meaning people bring to them”. It consists of a set of interpretive, material practices that make the world visible (Davies, 2007). Meaning, qualitative research focuses on examining the findings generated from field notes, interviews, conversations, photographs, recordings amongst others. Unlike quantitative researchers who tend to work with fewer variables and many cases, qualitative researchers on the other hand, depend on few cases and many variables (Creswell, 1998).

III. Conclusion

In summary, this paper shed some light into understanding the various paradigms of research and the relevance in business research. Furthermore, the two extreme epistemological paradigms in business and management research were critically analysed and discussed from an ontological perspective. Table 1 below shows a summary of the various paradigms of research discussed. The target audience for this paper are early career researchers and business students. The paper was aimed at assisting the target audience in understanding how properly structured and clearly articulated research methodology chapter can be more convincing than one written based on a random approach or common sense.

Table 1 Comparison of Various Research Paradigms

	Realism (Positivism and Post-Positivism)	Relativism (Constructivism or Interpretivism)
Ontology: the researcher's view of the nature of reality of being	External, objective exists independently of human thoughts and beliefs or knowledge of their existence (realist) but is interpreted through social conditioning (critical realist)	Socially constructed, subjective, may change, multiple views or perspectives used in answering the research question.
Epistemology: the researcher's view regarding what constitutes acceptable knowledge	Observable phenomena provide credible data, facts, and insufficient data mean inaccuracies in sensations (empirical realism). Alternatively, phenomena create sensations, which are open to misinterpretation (critical realism). Focus on explaining within a context or contexts	Subjective meanings and social phenomena. Focus upon the details of the situation, a reality behind these details, subjective meanings motivating actions (it requires a consensus between different viewpoints).
Data collection techniques most often used	Methods chosen must fit the subject matter, quantitative (highly structured, large samples, measurement) or qualitative	Small samples, in-depth investigations, qualitative.

Source: Pessu (2017)

References

- [1]. Bryman, A. and Bell, E (2007) *Business Research Methods*. 2nd Edition. Oxford University Press.
- [2]. Bryman, A. and Bell, E (2015) *Business Research Methods*. 4th Edition. Oxford University Press.
- [3]. Collis, J. and Hussey, R. (2014) *Business research: a practical guide for undergraduate students*. 4th edition. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillian.
- [4]. Creswell, J. W. (1998) *Qualitative inquiry and research design: Choosing among five traditions*. CA: Sage, Thousand Oaks.
- [5]. Davies, M.B. (2007) *Doing a successful research project using qualitative or quantitative methods*. England: Palgrave Macmillian.
- [6]. Easterby-Smith, M. Thorpe, R. and Jackson, P.R. (2008) *Management research*. 3rd edition. CA: Sage, Thousand Oaks.
- [7]. Easterby-Smith, M. Thorpe, R. and Jackson, P.R. (2012) *Management & business research*. 4th Edition. CA: Sage, Thousand Oaks.
- [8]. Flowers, P. (2009) *Research Philosophies – Importance and Relevance*. MSc. Cranfield University.
- [9]. Gill, J. and Johnson, P. (1991) *Research Methods*. London: Paul Chapman.
- [10]. Gill, J. and Johnson, P. (2010) *Research Methods for Managers*. 4th edition, London: Sage.
- [11]. Guba, E. and Lincoln, Y. (1994) Competing paradigms in qualitative research. In Denzin, N.K. and Lincoln, Y.S. (Eds), *Handbook of qualitative research*. CA: Sage, Thousand Oaks.
- [12]. Guba, E.G., and Lincoln, Y.S. (1998) *Competing Paradigms in Qualitative research*. In Denzin, N.K. and Lincoln, Y.S. (Eds). *The landscape of Qualitative Research*. CA: Sage, Thousand Oaks.
- [13]. Holden, M.T. and Lynch, P. (2004) Choosing the appropriate methodology: understanding research philosophy. *The Marketing Review*,4,pp.3-16.
- [14]. Jefferies, B. (2011) Critical realism: an empirical realist critique. Manchester Metropolitan University Business School.
- [15]. Kumar, R. (2008) *Research Methodology: A Step-By-Step Guide for Beginners*. 2nd edition. Sage Publication.
- [16]. Kumar, R. (2011) *Research Methodology: A Step-By-Step Guide for Beginners*. 3rd edition. Sage Publication.
- [17]. Robson, C. (1993) *Real world research: a resource for social scientists and practitioner researchers*. Cambridge, USA: Blakewell.
- [18]. Livesey, C. (2006) The relationship between positivism, interpretivism and sociological research methods [Online]. Available from: <www.sociology.org.uk>[Accessed 4 July 2019].
- [19]. Moen, T. (2006) Reflections on the narrative research approach. *International Journal of Qualitative Methodology*, 5(4), pp.1-11.
- [20]. Pessu, T.R. (2017) *Impact of trade policies on SMEs' business relationships in the Nigerian textile industry: A shared value approach*. PhD. University of Bolton.
- [21]. Ponterotto, J. G. (2005) Qualitative research in counselling psychology: a primer on research paradigms and philosophy of science. *Journal of Counseling Psychology*, 52, pp.126 –136.
- [22]. Remenyi, D. Williams, B. Money, A. and Swartz, E. (1998) *Doing Research in Business and Management. An Introduction to Process and Method*. London: Sage.
- [23]. Saunders, M. Lewis, P. and Thornhill, A. (1997) *Research methods for business students*. London: Pitman Publishing.
- [24]. Saunders, M. Lewis, P. and Thornhill, A. (2003) *Research Methods for Business Students*. 3rd Edition. Harlow: Pearson Educational Limited.
- [25]. Saunders, Lewis, P. and Thornhill, A. (2012) *Research methods for business students*. 6th Edition. Harlow: Pearson Educational Limited.
- [26]. Saunders, M. Lewis, P. and Thornhill, A. (2016) *Research methods for business students*. 7th Edition. Harlow: Pearson Educational Limited.
- [27]. Scott, D. (2005) Critical realism and empirical research methods in education. *Journal of Philosophy of Education*, 39(4), pp.633–646.