

# **Selected Topics in Business Administration:**

## **Research Philosophy**

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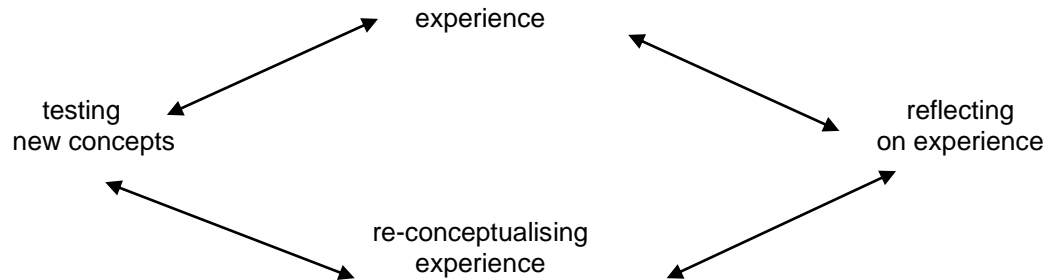
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## **A UNDERSTANDING RESEARCH AS A TOTAL EXPERIENTIAL APPROACH**

### **Principles**

The principle underlying what I would call the *Total Experiential Approach* is that theory cannot be divorced from practice. Indeed, there is constant interaction between them as described by Kolb (in Gill & Johnson, 1997: 25). The result of this interaction is on-going learning because theory is used to analyse and enhance experience, which can be represented in 'the experiential learning cycle' developed by Kolb (in Gill & Johnson, 1997: 24). This is represented as follows:



Kolb suggests that learning happens when we put into question our experience and attempt to re-conceptualise it with the help of theory to then put it to the test.

### **What is research then?**

*Research is simply the use of theory and other logical means especially data management to delve into management experience and practice.*

There are two methods for achieving this that evolve around objective truths and subjective meanings.

First, the 'deductive method' whose philosophical base is positivism and the 'inductive method' whose philosophical base is logical positivism (Smith, 1998: 99-100; Easterby-Smith, 1997: 22-32) so far as objective truth is concerned. With subjective meanings the inductive method is equally applicable but, in this case, the philosophical base is phenomenology.

Let us now look each in turn and we start with positivism.

## **B POSITIVISM**

### **Principles**

As an heir of Locke's 'empiricism' (in Smith, 1998: 59) stating that knowledge should emerge largely or wholly from empirical knowledge, positivism is one of the most enduring approaches for generating authoritative knowledge about the social world. Its basic tenet is that social phenomena can be studied as hard facts and the relationship between these facts can be considered to be immutable laws (Smith, 1998: 77).

### **Which are the positivist assumptions?**

As described by Smith (1998: 76), we can highlight the following:

- Naturalism: that it is possible to transfer the assumptions and methods of natural sciences to the study of social objects.
- Phenomenalism: that only knowledge gained through observed experience can be valid – otherwise it is considered to be metaphysical.

- Nominalism: that concepts must on the one hand represent experience and on the other be based on experience. Any concepts that are not directly experienced are then meaningless.
- Atomism: that objects of scientific study are discrete and that the study of social phenomena entails breaking these to their smallest components.
- Scientific laws: that since the purpose of science is to develop laws, the aim of research is to uncover empirical regularity that occurs in different places and at different times.
- Facts: that facts, contrary to values, are the only that have scientific value as they can be empirically verified, observed, and measured.

## **C DEDUCTIVE TECHNOLOGIES**

### **Principles**

Deduction refers to the mental process through which valid conclusions can be logically deduced from valid premises, that is, a generalisation or universal law. It involves developing a conceptual and theoretical framework prior to its testing through empirical observation (left-hand side of Kolb's experiential learning cycle). The key idea of 'nomothetic methodologies' to use Burrell & Morgan (1979: 6-7) is that the social world exists externally and that its properties should be measured through objective methods rather than being inferred subjectively through sensation, reflection, and intuition.

Example:

- 1 John is a heavy person
- 2 heavy persons like cats
- 3 John likes cats

This example shows that deduction is used to establish a series of logical steps to arrive at a conclusion that does not go beyond what is contained within the premises.

### **What are the features of deductive technologies?**

Under positivism, nomothetic or deductive technologies share the following features:

- Researchers are independent of and external to what is being observed (etic approach)
- The topic of research can be determined by objective criteria
- Research methods are highly structured to ensure replicability of findings
- Research aims at identifying covering laws that explain regularities in human behaviour
- Research aims at giving causal explanations on regularities
- Research methodology proceeds through hypothesising and then deducing the observations that demonstrate the truth or falsity of hypotheses (hypothetico-deductive approach)
- Use of mathematical controls to allow the testing of hypotheses
- Generation and use of quantitative data
- Operationalisation of concepts – set within rules - in a way that enables observed facts to be measured
- Reduction of problems to their simplest form so as to analyse the systemic elements in isolation
- Samples are selected in a way to enable generalisations to be made
- Comparisons across samples are made to confirm generalisations

### **What are the problems with the deductive method?**

I would like to suggest the following:

- it is not possible that the researcher becomes detached from the thing observed
- there is not always a causal explanation let alone a causal relationship

- it is not correct to first establish a theory and then attempt to prove or disprove it, since to construct a conjecture, we use insight of what has already been generally observed
- reducing phenomena to their simplest forms involves make assumptions which once lifted, the findings of the study become irrelevant
- qualitative data are dry and unreliable

## **D      ATTACKING DEDUCTIVE TECHNOLOGIES: LOGICAL POSITIVISM**

### **Principles**

Unlike positivist positions, local positivism places an emphasis on perception and the role of observation in research, while attempting to wipe out any metaphysical concerns or issues from the production of scientific knowledge (Smith, 1998: 97). It is therefore against any form of speculative thinking, as it is not tied in a direct way to experience.

Under this approach, especially following the earlier Wittgenstein (Smith, 1998: 98), statements and any representational system correspond to a specific object of the world. Hence the distinction between 'analytic statements' which are true by definition and 'synthetic statements' which are speculative. Thus, the aim of logical positivists is to eliminate all synthetic statements and solely rely on analytic versions.

To achieve this, logical positivists use the method of induction.

## **E      INDUCTIVE TECHNOLOGIES**

### **Principles**

Inductive methodologies involve constructing theories a posteriori of observations (Gill & Johnson, 1997: 33). They are the obverse of deductive methodologies (right-hand side of Kolb's cycle). Such methodologies hold that reality is socially constructed and given meaning by people as it is assumed that we experience our perceptions and impressions without any prior sets of theories to organise them. In the case when there are repeated aspects of an experience that can be associated with particular phenomena, general laws may be inferred and confirmed by research.

### **What are the features of inductive technologies under logical positivism?**

Inductive or ideographic technologies have the following features:

- The researcher is placed outside the phenomenon he or she observes.
- The construction of a close system for observation
- Research should seek the replicability of findings
- Research should eliminate the subjective and speculative elements qualifying the researcher
- Generation and use of quantitative and qualitative data based on a probability model
- Use mathematical controls to allow the generation of hypotheses

### **What are the problems with the inductive method under logical positivism?**

Following Smith (1998: 101-102), I would suggest the following:

- one can say that sensations are not a reliable basis for arriving at theoretical
- observers are more likely to play an active role in the phenomena that are observed than logical positivists would like us to believe
- phenomena cannot be considered to belong to a closed system, which is immune to external influences

## **F      ATTACKING INDUCTIVE TECHNOLOGIES: FALSIFICATIONISM**

Falsificationism places positivism and the search for truth in question especially with Popper (in Smith, 1998: 105-106) who attacked inductive technologies on two grounds:

- The 'psychological problem', that is understanding why reasonable people expect (or should expect) new situations to operate in the same way as ones they know from experience
- The 'logical problem', that is understanding whether it is justified to leap from statements about situations we have experienced to statements about situations we have not experienced

The problem therefore with induction is that it is a theoretical principle *prior to* experience; it is logically flawed. And considering the psychological problem, Popper (in *ibid.*) does not seek to replicate knowledge nor expects that research and observation can confirm knowledge. Truth then is for Popper (in *ibid.*) not an absolute concept as with positivists, but rather a question of degree, a 'verisimilitude'.

What Popper (in *ibid.*) shares with positivists is the use of deductive technologies with a fundamental difference though: it is 'falsification' rather than verification that becomes the criterion of science, and it involves finding ways of disproving working hypotheses rather than seeking to verify them.

## **G      ATTACKING EMPIRICISM AND RATIONALISM: KANTIAN IDEALISM**

### **Principles**

Kant (in Smith, 1998: 133) established a compromise between 'rationalism', claiming that reason reveals truth and 'empiricism', that experimentation reveals truth as he considered that both approaches to science are flawed since the former tends to neglect the role of observational evidence to test the validity of theory and the latter tends to oversimplify the relationship between theory and observation

Specifically, Kant (in *ibid.*) shifts our attention from asking direct questions about what is observed to that of inquiring about the conditions of possibility of the phenomena observed – a transcendental question. For instance, instead of asking 'What did I experience yesterday?' Kant asks, 'What prior concepts do I need to make sense of what I experienced yesterday?'

In other words, for Kant (in Smith, 1998: 135-1356) perceptions and impressions can only operate if placed within mental frameworks which implies that objects – noumena – exist beyond our cognitive faculties and more importantly, that the mind is a creative agent in the production of knowledge whereas empiricism and positivism tends to treat it as a blank box.

### **Consequences**

Consequently, Kant (in Smith, 1998: 138) introduces the notion of 'synthetic a priori statement' to attack the distinction made between 'analytic' and 'synthetic' statements as the former tend to be categorical with little relevance to social complexity and latter tend to overlook the personal assumptions we use in making judgements.

Equally, Wittgenstein (in *ibid.*), in contrast to his earlier work, undermined the distinction between language and the world as experienced: the world as experienced exists *within* language and not outside of it.

## **H      ATTEMPTING TO BLEND OBJECTIVE TRUTH AND SUBJECTIVE VALUES: NEO-KANTIANISM**

### **Principles**

Neo-Kantianism attempts to do two things (Smith, 1998: 141):

- It attempts to resolve the dilemmas posed by accommodating both objective truth and subjective values in the same approach
- It attempts to find a way of addressing the question of cultural values and their relationship to the generation of cultural and historical knowledge

Such an attempt was made by Windelband (in Smith, 1998: 141) and most recently by Burrell and Morgan (1979: 6-7) who argued that scientific thought evolves around two forms namely

- 'Nomothetic', the construction of generalising models and identification of general laws
- 'Idiographic' (ideographic), the detailed description of particular circumstances

For neo-Kantians then the study of social phenomena involves adopting an idiographic methodology rather than nomothetic which is the premise of hard sciences.

### **Yet is this distinction tenable?**

I would argue that it is not, because the application of idiographic methodologies can accommodate the use of nomothetic methodologies and vice versa.

### **Accommodating objective truth and subjective values**

A way of accommodating objective truth as established through nomothetic methodologies and subjective values as established through ideographic methodologies is to construct 'ideal types', theoretical devices for generalising beyond the particular situation while accepting the complexity of social relations (Smith, 1998: 146). That is, a yardstick against which it is possible to compare and contrast empirical evidence. Ideal types have become a very popular device especially in sociology and economic sciences to describe the markets, firms, trade and moreover besides.

There are two ways of using ideal types that rest on two different assumptions (Smith, 1998: 149):

- 'Voluntarism', that locates the causes of phenomena inside the actions of individuals. Put differently causality is endogenous, an approach used by Weber.
- 'Determinism', that locates the causes of phenomena outside the actions of individuals. Put differently, causality is exogenous an approach used by Durkheim.

## **I TAKING IDEALISM A STEP FURTHER: RATIONAL CHOICE THEORY**

### **Principle**

Rational choice theory has become a popular approach especially in economics and sociology as it seeks to question the very assumptions positivists use to construct their theories thus placing phenomena in a closed system. Instead, rational choice theory claims that individuals are rational in all the decisions they are making because a universally valid knowledge exists prior to experience and which can be identified through reason.

With this rationale Mises (in Smith, 1998: 155) formulated his own method, 'praxeology', a nomothetic approach concerned with developing imaginary constructions through which all individuals can relate to, and a typical application of this approach is game theory developed by Morgenstern (in *ibid.*).

### **Are you convinced that individuals are rational for all their actions?**

I would argue that it is the case if one assumes causality. It does not explain however emergent phenomena and complexity. Thus individuals may not always be rational in their choice of action as Smith also notes (1998: 159).

## **J SUBJECTIVE MEANING & PRAGMATISM**

### **Subjectivity**

The one thing that positivism and idealism seem to neglect is the subjectivity of individuals, especially of researchers in the construction of theories, collection of evidence and formulation of findings. This takes us to considering approaches that emphasise subjectivity.

### **Hermeneutics**

Hermeneutics is an approach that seeks to identify all the processes and context of all scientific approaches by placing an emphasis on the 'subjective interpretation' of individuals and unpredictable relationships in everyday life (Smith, 1998: 161).

A strand of hermeneutic inquiry is 'pragmatism' concerned with the way in which meanings and interpretations are the product of the pragmatic concerns of practical problems and purposes of social life. It is a problem-solving approach that treats social actors and their daily interactions as the basis for all social life (Smith, 1998: 162).

### **Phenomenology**

Taking pragmatism a step further, phenomenology with Husserl (in Smith, 1998: 164) seeks to establish the assumptions that individuals use in their daily interaction by suspending our belief in the existence of the objective world (Smith, 1998: 164). Equally, Schütz (in *ibid.*) argued that it is through the condition of 'intersubjectivity' that individuals are able to grasp each other's consciousness and construct mappings of their world.

An application of this approach is 'ethnomethodology' developed by Garfinkel (in *ibid.*) to reconstruct the taken-for-granted assumptions, the tacit knowledge in everyday contexts.

## **K WHICH APPROACH THEN?**

Given the above I would like to argue that although the deductive and inductive methodologies rest on different assumptions about the world we live in, namely positivism for the former and logical positivism and phenomenology for the latter, they are complementary, even at times interdependent to the extent that it is quite difficult to differentiate them.

This argument has been taken on by Gill & Johnson (1997: 134-136) who introduce 'methodological pluralism' in research involving a combination of deductive and inductive methodologies.

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