

MEADIUM

DETECTING YOUR RESEARCH STRATEGY

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This article draws on fictional characters to illustrate four *dominant styles* identifiable in management research. The characters we draw on are Hercule Poirot, Sherlock Holmes, Maigret, Columbo and Dirty Harry. Both authors share a common interest in research and are looking for ways to help students consider alternative research strategies. Jean Moscarola uses the idea of detectives in his teaching in France and this analogy forms the basis of this article.

Students of management generally find issues relating to research styles and research strategies difficult to understand. To many the use of particular methods, for example, questionnaires, assumes considerable importance; they see research as following elaborate rules and procedures and see it as something that is both complex and difficult.

Our view is that research is in many ways simple and largely about being able to compromise, pose the right questions, and answer them in a way that satisfies the majority of the interested parties in the research. Further, the way in which the objective is achieved should be tailored to the unique circumstances of the situation or organisation under study and there are many different approaches available for gaining answers to questions.

One way to demystify some of the alternative approaches and styles possible in research, is to see what can be learnt from the great fictional detectives:

Hercule Poirot
Sherlock Holmes
Maigret
Columbo
Dirty Harry.

Each possesses both a style and a method of investigation that is characteristic and worthy of examination.

HERCULE POIROT – THE THEORETICAL, RATIONAL APPROACH

Hercule Poirot adopts a theoretical, rational approach; Poirot is the model armchair detective.

Behind closed doors in *Ten Little Nigger Boys*, or in the sleeping compartment of *The Orient Express*, he proceeds by logical deduction. His approach is to listen to witnesses of the crime and then to withdraw and reflect. Here he goes over their behaviour, their routines and habits and motives and in these he searches for contradictions. By reconstructing in theory the information of the day and by *deductive* reasoning he discovers by *logic* the guilty party.

Moreover, the reader is always invited, several chapters before the end, to play the detective. All the evidence is offered so that it can be logically reconstructed.

In terms of management research this means:

- collecting all sources of relevant information;
- having a thorough understanding of the models and theories in the field in which you wish to understand or interpret;
- applying your own knowledge and expertise;
- analysing what you find out and deducing answers.

This approach saves money and time as researchers are not trying to understand situations from first principles. The use of models for the estimation of market size, in marketing by simulations, is an example of this approach.

Working from data about populations and customer buying habits, for example, one could, from a knowledge of marketing systems, deduce a theoretical market by simple calculation. This can be further refined, by an individual's experience and knowledge about the potential market, and by formulating hypotheses about the competition. Other examples would include the prediction of movement in financial markets in accounting and finance, and use of models of the economy to predict the effect of changes in fiscal policy in economics.

SHERLOCK HOLMES: THE SCIENTIFIC INFORMATION APPROACH

Sherlock Holmes, in contrast, behaves like a scientist. Armed with a scalpel and a magnifying glass he uncovers the tiniest fragment of dried mud which he proceeds to examine. Knowing how to extract 'significant' information from the most insignificant detail, he fashions the overwhelming proof – the traces of clay prized from the soles of the suspect's shoes and presents this as irrefutable evidence that he was present at the scene of the crime.

Above everything, Sherlock Holmes is an observer of detail. He arrives at his understanding by elaborate, technical and often mysterious research. His evidence to begin with almost always escapes Dr Watson. In his quest for evidence the instruments of observation and analysis (test-tubes and chemicals) play a determining role – deprived of them Sherlock Holmes would be unable to help the clues emerge and the proofs would lie hidden in the general profusion of evidence.

In management research we can see an analogy with the use of sampling methods. Here a sample is selected in order that features about the whole population can be determined. This method requires:

- minute and systematic observation made either by questionnaires or by closed interviews, these are repeated a great many times so that statistical accuracy can be derived;
- the indispensable recourse to the procedures of data-processing and elaborate statistical analysis.

The 'Sherlock Holmes method' can be the beginning of new knowledge and real discoveries when it produces information about unknown phenomena. But it also has advantages because it bases its conclusions on a seemingly scientific procedure, with a highly visible rigour of observation, quantification and formalised procedures. The results look more objective than many other methods and are therefore considered sound by managers, funders, and a large section of the research community.

Even if the discovery doesn't surprise anyone, the fact that a proof can be produced with supporting figures can on its own justify the use of a magnifying glass, which in research terms can involve considerable expense and resource.

Thus, the company determined to improve its performance may not be surprised to learn that only 8% of the population have heard of it, or that 60% of its workers lack motivation, but it might persuade the bank to loan money for a publicity campaign with apparently scientific proofs of need, or justify the hire of a team of management consultants!

MAIGRET: THE EMPIRICAL INTUITIVE APPROACH

Maigret has the curiosity of the ethnologist.

In *Lock No 1* Maigret's enquiries lead him into the unfamiliar world of seamen; to understand them, he needs to reconstruct *their* reality. In other stories he moves in the closed world of diamond merchants. He seems to wander about looking for impressions, contacts, apparently guided by chance. (Chance is a concept in research that relates to the attitude of mind researchers might adopt. It is dealt with by Easterby-Smith *et al.*, 1991.) Drifting around meeting people in hotels, holding conversations in cafes, he listens and tries to understand the world he has begun to habit. He understands the jobs people do, the way people live, their habits, fears and pleasures. He steepes himself in the *local* atmosphere – visits the scene of the crime, and tries to imagine why the victim might have gone there on that particular evening, at that particular time.

Following his intuition and feelings, he advances towards an answer comforted by a deeply felt understanding of the characters and their actions; the skills he requires for this approach are to be able to integrate himself into the surroundings with the minimum of fuss, to listen as much as talk, and, when he does ask questions, to watch for doors to open and spot the opportunities that a 'prepared mind' recognises.

Knowing how to be accepted and to acquire the ability to empathise with those they talk to are difficult tasks for researchers; but with experience they learn that they can become expert judges of the situations into which they find themselves thrown.

This approach and these qualities are of particular use in management research. The requirements are to:

- have physical contact with the field in question;
- accept the need to listen to others and see things from their perspective;
- understand things in depth, without stopping at a prior judgement;
- give way to one's sensitivity, intuition and instinct;
- know how to find the real experts in the field so as to be able to benefit by winning their confidence and gaining their experience.

Compared with the Sherlock Holmes approach, this one offers great savings in time. It is by cunning or empathy that facts are revealed which would otherwise have escaped logical reasoning or more scientific observation. It is needed when the field is unfamiliar to the researcher and where there is little prior direction for the researcher – the role is akin to that of an explorer, discovering new and interesting paths.

As management research is often about behaviour, this model is extremely attractive, particularly when used in conjunction with other approaches in order to identify the variables on which further research might focus.

Such 'softer' qualitative strategies, which mean a greater emphasis on interaction and collaboration, so as to understand just how individuals construct their worlds, have been part of a growing trend to better understanding of how organisational members really do attach meaning and purpose to their behaviour.

The use of such methods has given quite startling insights into such matters as: how budgets, far from being rational and objective as accountants would have us believe, are in fact often used as a means of controlling and manipulating subordinates (Otley, 1989); how incentive schemes designed to increase output can be subverted by employees to actually have the effect of reducing output (Bowey and Thorpe, 1986); and how the protocols consumers actually use when making a decision to buy are formulated (O'Shaughnessy, 1987).

The methods of observation and analysis that can be used in this approach are becoming much better known and are explained by Easterby-Smith *et al.* (1991).

COLUMBO – THE TOOL KIT OF THE PERFECT DETECTIVE

Each of the characters evoked above follows a certain style, but in order to handle his magnifying glass, Sherlock Holmes needs to know how to use his *reason* just as much as his *instinct*.

It is *intuition* that guides Hercule Poirot in his logical reconstructions and, in order to confound the guilty party, he also needs *facts* and needs to know how to collect them.

The words 'My God, but of course!' are often heard – as the detectives slap

their foreheads the moment that a blinding flash of *logic* or *observation* of a fact enables them to organise the profusion of impressions and evidence with which they have been working. Kostler in *The Act of Creation* (1964) recalls how a similar 'blinding flash' brought about the invention of the printing press.

The message to researchers is therefore clear: in order to be competent researchers we need to have the ability to reason logically, as well as to understand the tools and techniques that we might employ to collect and analyse data with scientific rigour, whilst at the same time never losing the quality of empirical intuition that might yield the crucial insights.

Columbo is the detective who best illustrates all these qualities at work at the same time. He pays meticulous attention to detail, but he also spots discrepancies in people's alibis and he takes these details and questions into the field and out to the suspects, continually questioning and probing, whilst at the same time gaining an intuitive feel for their world, motives and behaviour.

One style of research is best represented by a detective who is something of a maverick – Dirty Harry.

DIRTY HARRY – PUSH HARD AND PROVOKE A RESPONSE

Clint Eastwood portrays this caricature of the man of action and as such is in some respects the opposite of all the intellectual detectives.

But Dirty Harry also brings about solutions and resolves problems. His methods are appropriate when the reaction of the opponent cannot be simulated or otherwise predicted *a priori*. In order to find something out therefore, it is necessary to try something – provoke a reaction and thus, through action, remove the uncertainty and understand or confirm the situation, exactly as Hercule Poirot, Sherlock Holmes, Maigret and Columbo do, by laying a fateful trap in order to verify their hunches and conclusions as to who the murderer actually is.

This approach to research has appeal in management as it often links organisational objectives with those of the research and education community. In areas such as marketing, for example, this approach can be used to test market reaction to a new product, or assess the effectiveness of a new process.

Action research, as a research design is much used in management and organisations studies and is based on this type of philosophy. Its twin premises are (Lewin, 1948):

- a belief that the best way of learning about an organisation or social system is through attempting to change it and this therefore should to some extent be the objective of the action researcher;
- the belief that those people most likely to be affected by or involved in implementing these changes should as far as possible become involved in the research process itself.

These two factors lead to a third, that is that action research and the researcher are then seen as part of this change process itself.

So, for example, attempting an organisational change might reveal a great deal about power in the organisation concerned, but it would also reveal important information on the change strategy used, how and under what conditions it might be modified, and even information on the methods and skills that need to be employed in implementation. Because of the multiple outcomes possible and organisational change that takes place, the approach has appeal to Masters students particularly those who are already managers researching into their own organisations and in the process of developing themselves as managers.

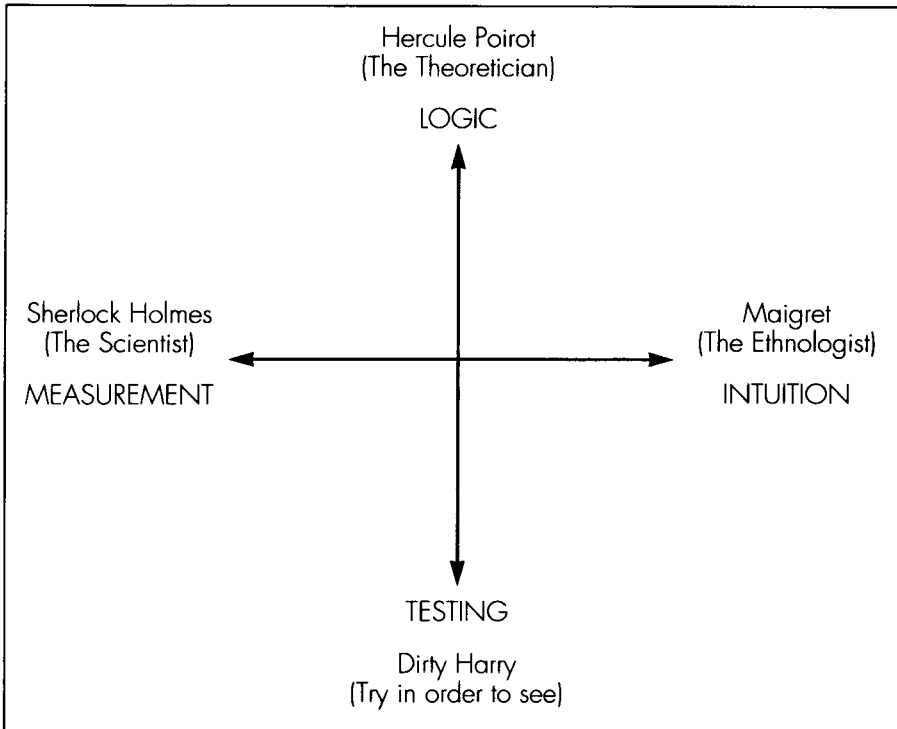


Figure 1

CONCLUSIONS

This article has looked at four styles and strategies for research (depicted in Figure 1). Our view is that good researchers need not only to understand which strategy is most appropriate to the inquiries they wish to make but also to have some competence in them all. Our belief is that in management research of whatever kind the skills of each quadrant will at some stage be required.

One final thought we have is that, as with the learning cycles of Kolb (1975), it may not always matter exactly where the researcher begins as long as he/she is

flexible enough within the research to use other strategies as it becomes evident that they are more appropriate to the investigation.

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