

Understanding research philosophies and approaches

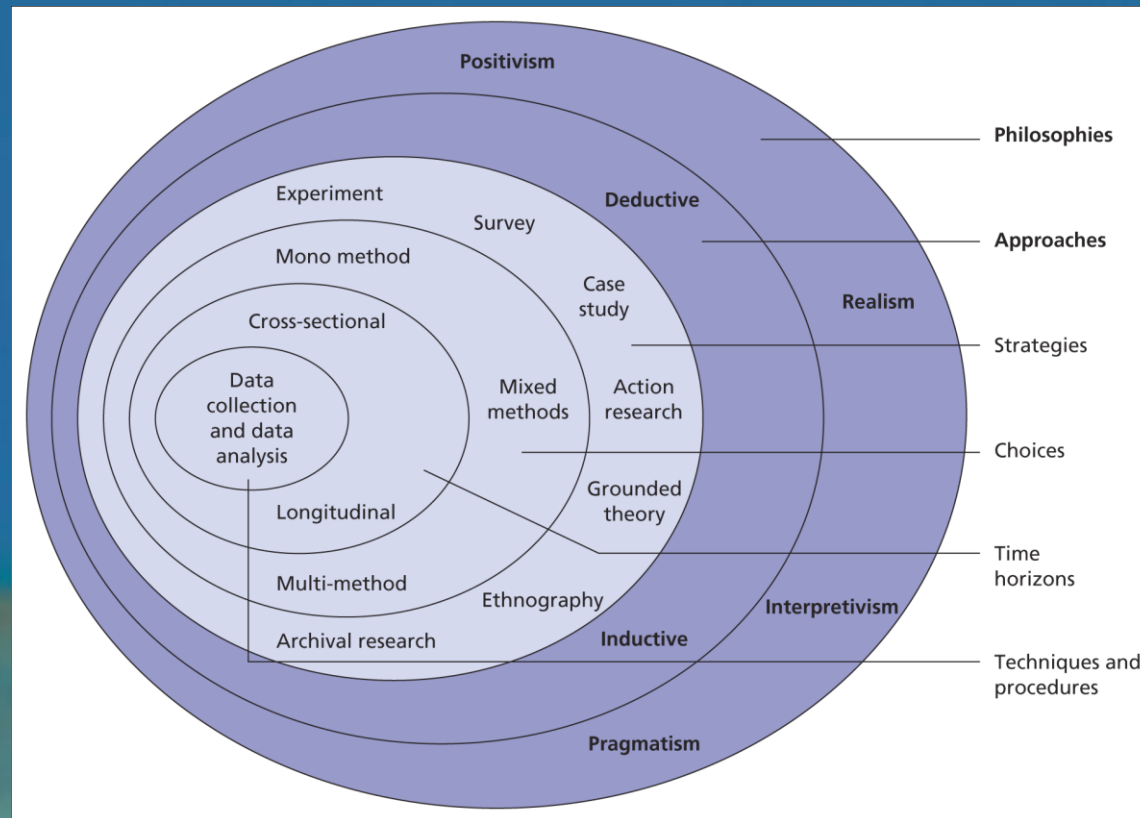
Useful ideas and concepts from Chapter 4

Understanding research philosophies and approaches

- By end of this discussion you should be able to:
- Define the key terms ontology, epistemology and explain their relevance to business research;
- Explain the relevance for business research of philosophical perspectives such as positivism, realism, pragmatism, and interpretivism;
- understand the main research paradigms which are significant for business research;
- Distinguish between main research approaches; deductive and inductive;
- State your own epistemological and axiological positions.

Underlying issues of data collection and analysis

The research 'onion'



Saunders *et al*, (2008)

Figure 4.1 The research 'onion'

Understanding your research philosophy (1)

‘Research philosophy is an over-arching term relating to the development of knowledge and the nature of that knowledge’

Adapted from Saunders *et al*, (2009)

Understanding your research philosophy (2)

Thinking about research philosophy

- **Ontology:** is concerned with nature of reality. This raises the questions of the assumptions researchers have about the way the world operates and commitment held to particular views. The two aspects of ontology we describe here will both have their devotees among business and management researchers. In addition, both are likely to be accepted as producing valid knowledge by many researchers

Ontology

- The first aspect of ontology we discuss is objectivism. This portrays the position that social entities exist in reality external to social actors concerned with their existence.
- The second aspect, subjectivism holds that social phenomena are created from the perceptions and consequent actions of those social actors concerned with their existence

Ontology

- Blaikie (1993) describes the root definition of ontology as ‘the science or study of being’ and develops this description for the social sciences to encompass ‘claims about what exists, what it looks like, what units make it up and how these units interact with each other’. In short, ontology describes our view (whether claims or assumptions) on the nature of reality, and specifically, is this an objective reality that really exists, or only a subjective reality, created in our minds.

Ontology

- For the everyday example, they use the example of a workplace report – asking one to question whether it describes what is really going on, or only what the author thinks is going on. They go on to highlight the complexity that is introduced when considering phenomena such as culture, power or control, and whether they really exist or are simply an illusion, further extending the discussion as to how individuals (and groups) determine these realities – does the reality exist only through experience of it (subjectivism), or does it exist independently of those who live it (objectivism).

Epistemology

- It concerns what constitutes acceptable knowledge in a field of study.
- Closely coupled with ontology and its consideration of what constitutes reality, epistemology considers views about the most appropriate ways of enquiring into the
- nature of the world (Easterby-Smith, Thorpe and Jackson, 2008) and ‘what is knowledge and what are the sources and limits of knowledge’ (Eriksson and Kovalainen, 2008). Questions of epistemology begin to consider the research method, and Eriksson and Kovalainen go on to discuss how epistemology defines how knowledge can be produced and argued for.

Epistemology

- Blaikie (1993) describes epistemology as ‘the theory or science of the method or grounds of knowledge’ expanding this into a set of claims or assumptions about the ways in which it is possible to gain knowledge of reality, how what exists may be known, what can be known, and what criteria must be satisfied in order to be described as
- knowledge. Chia (2002) describes epistemology as ‘how and what it is possible to know’ and the need to reflect on methods and standards through which reliable and verifiable knowledge is produced.

Epistemology

- Hatch and Cunliffe (2006) summarise epistemology as ‘knowing how you can know’ and expand this by asking how is knowledge generated, what criteria discriminate good knowledge from bad knowledge, and how should reality be represented or described. They go on to highlight the inter-dependent relationship
- between epistemology and ontology, and how one both informs, and depends upon, the
- other.

Understanding your research philosophy (4)

Aspects of philosophy

- Positivism - the stance of the natural scientist
- Realism - direct and critical realism
- Interpretivism – researchers as ‘social actors’
- Pragmatism

Positivism

- Positivism can be defined as “research approaches that employ empirical methods, make extensive use of quantitative analysis, or develop logical calculi to build formal explanatory theory”

Realism

- Is another philosophical position which relates to scientific enquiry. The essence of realism is that what the senses show us as reality is the truth; that objects have an existence independent of the human mind. In this sense, realism is opposed to idealism, the theory that only the mind and its contents exist

Direct realism and critical realism

- It says that what you see is what you get: what we experience through our senses portrays the world accurately.
- critical realism: critical realists argue that we experience are sensations, the images of the things in the real world, not the things directly. Critical realists point out how often our senses deceive us.

Interpretivism

- Interpretivism advocates it is necessary for the researcher to understand differences between humans in our role as social actors. This emphasizes the differences between conducting research among people rather than objects such as trucks and computers.

Interpretivism

- Interpretive research is concerned with the meanings that people attach to norms, rules, and values that regulate their interactions. Care is taken not to impose a previous understanding of norms, rules, and values on others but rather to understand their beliefs and actions from their point of view. The focus is not only on what they tell us directly about the reasons for their beliefs and actions but also on the social practices that underlie them. Social practice gives meaning to social action

pragmatism

- Pragmatism holds that the most important determinant of the epistemology, ontology, axiology adopted is the research question.

Research paradigms

Definition

‘A way of examining social phenomenon from which particular understandings of these phenomena can be gained and explanations attempted’

Saunders *et al.* (2009)

Research Approaches (1)

Deduction

5 sequential stages of testing theory

- Deducing a hypothesis
- Expressing the hypothesis operationally
- Testing the operational hypothesis
- Examining the specific outcome of the enquiry
- Modifying the theory (if necessary)

Adapted from Robson (2002)

Research Approaches (2)

Characteristics of Deduction

- Explaining causal relationships between variables
- Establishing controls for testing hypotheses
- Independence of the researcher
- Concepts operationalised for quantitative measurement
- Generalisation

Research Approaches (3)

Induction

Building theory by –

- Understanding the way human build their world
- Permitting alternative explanations of what's going on
- Being concerned with the context of events
- Using more qualitative data
- Using a variety of data collection methods

Choosing your research approach

The right choice of approach helps you to

- Make a more informed decision about the research design
- Think about which strategies will work for your research topic
- Adapt your design to cater for any constraints

Adapted from Easterby-Smith *et al.* (2008)

Combining research approaches

Things worth considering

- The nature of the research topic
- The time available
- The extent of risk
- The research audience – managers and markers

Deductive and Inductive research

Major differences between these approaches

Deduction emphasises	Induction emphasises
• scientific principles • moving from theory to data • the need to explain causal relationships between variables • the collection of quantitative data • the application of controls to ensure validity of data • the operationalisation of concepts to ensure clarity of definition • a highly structured approach • researcher independence of what is being researched • the necessity to select samples of sufficient size in order to generalise conclusions	• gaining an understanding of the meanings humans attach to events • a close understanding of the research context • the collection of qualitative data • a more flexible structure to permit changes of research emphasis as the research progresses • a realisation that the researcher is part of the research process • less concern with the need to generalise

Saunders *et al*, (2009)

Table 4.2 Major differences between deductive and inductive approaches to research

Summary: Chapter 4

Research philosophy

- relates to the development of knowledge and the nature of that knowledge
- contains important assumptions about the way in which you view the world

Summary: Chapter 4

Three major ways of thinking about research philosophy

- Epistemology
- Ontology – objectivism and subjectivism
- Axiology

Summary: Chapter 4

Social science paradigms can generate fresh insights into real-life issues and problems

Four of the paradigms are:

Functionalist

Radical humanist

Interpretive

Radical structuralist

Summary: Chapter 4

The two main research approaches are

Deduction - theory and hypothesis are developed and tested

Induction – data are collected and a theory developed from the data analysis