

Research Philosophies – Importance and Relevance

0. INTRODUCTION

When undertaking research of this nature, it is important to consider different research paradigms and matters of ontology, epistemology and axiology. Since these parameters describe perceptions, beliefs, assumptions and the nature of reality and truth (or knowledge of that reality), as well as the individuals values, they can influence the way in which the research is undertaken, from design through to conclusions, and it is therefore important to understand and discuss these aspects in order that approaches congruent to the nature and aims of the particular inquiry are adopted, and to ensure that researcher biases are understood, exposed, and minimised. Whilst James and Vinnicombe (2002) caution that we all have inherent preferences that are likely to shape our research designs, Blaikie (2000) describes these aspects as part of a series of choices that the researcher must consider and he shows the alignment that must connect these choices back to the original Research Problem. If this is not achieved, methods incompatible with the researcher's stance may be adopted, with the result that the final work will be undermined through lack of coherence.

Blaikie (1993) argues that these aspects are highly relevant to Social Science since the humanistic element introduces a component of 'free will' that adds a complexity beyond that seen in the natural sciences and others, such as Hatch and Cunliffe (2006) draw attention to the fact that different paradigms 'encourage researchers to study phenomena in different ways', going on to describe a number of organisational phenomena from three different perspectives, thus highlighting how different kinds of knowledge may be derived through observing the same phenomena from different philosophical perspectives. As well as stimulating debate, Denzin and Lincoln (2003) and Kvale (1996) highlight how these different positions can result in much tension amongst academics.

This essay aims to discuss these factors in more detail, demonstrate awareness and understanding and conclude by describing the approach to be undertaken in this study, as a prelude to the full research design.

1. 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. Hatch and Cunliffe (2006) use both an everyday example, and a social science example to illustrate the point. 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).

As a result, we all have a number of deeply embedded ontological assumptions which will affect our view on what is real and whether we attribute existence to one set of things over another. If these underlying assumptions are not identified and considered, the researcher may be blinded to certain aspects of the inquiry or certain phenomena, since they are implicitly assumed, taken for granted and therefore not opened to question, consideration or discussion.

When considering that different views exist regarding what constitutes reality, another question must be how is that reality measured, and what constitutes knowledge of that reality. This leads us to questions of Epistemology.

2. EPISTEMOLOGY

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. 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 and 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.

In considering this link, the need to understand the position of the researcher becomes more obvious. If the researcher holds certain ontological positions or assumptions, these may influence the epistemological choices or conclusions drawn. Hence, as with ontology, both objective and subjective epistemological views exist. Eriksson and Kovalainen (2008) describe an objective epistemology as presuming that a world exists that is external and theory neutral, whereas within a subjective epistemological view no access to the external world beyond our own observations and interpretations is possible. Saunders, Lewis and Thornhill (2007) discuss this further, highlighting that certain researchers therefore argue that data collected from objects that exist separate to the researcher (an external reality) is less open to bias and therefore more objective, and that if social phenomena are studied, these must be presented in a statistical, rather than narrative, form in order to hold any authority, a position of course that many researchers would challenge and Blaikie (1993) contends that since social research involves so many choices, the opportunity for researchers values and preferences to influence the process makes it difficult to ultimately achieve true objectivity.

These discussions lead us to the next area for consideration, which Blaikie (2000) describes as the 'research paradigm' and by others (Saunders, Lewis and Thornhill, 2007) as the 'research philosophy'. These philosophies are formed from basic ontological and (the related) epistemological positions, and have developed in both classical and contemporary forms to effectively classify different research approaches. Denzin and Lincoln (2003) describe a research paradigm as 'an interpretive framework' and in borrowing from Guba, as a 'basic set of beliefs that guides action'. The next chapter considers three key paradigms – those of positivist (classical), interpretivist / constructivist (classical) and realist (contemporary).

3. RESEARCH PARADIGMS

Three key paradigms are briefly discussed, and a simple classification used to distinguish the key components. These paradigms are chosen not only for their prevalence in management research, but because they effectively form the 'poles' from which other paradigms are developed or derived. Often, different names are used to describe apparently similar paradigms; in part this is as a result of similar approaches being developed in parallel across different branches of the social sciences.

Positivist

The positivist position is derived from that of natural science and is characterised by the testing of hypothesis developed from existing theory (hence deductive or theory testing) through measurement of observable social realities. This position presumes the social world exists objectively and externally, that knowledge is valid only if it is based on observations of this external reality and that universal or general laws exist or that theoretical models can be developed that are generalisable, can explain cause and effect relationships, and which lend themselves to predicting outcomes. Positivism is based upon values of reason, truth and validity and there is a focus purely on facts, gathered through direct observation and experience and measured empirically using quantitative methods – surveys and experiments - and statistical analysis (Blaikie, 1993; Saunders, Lewis and Thornhill, 2007; Eriksson and Kovalainen, 2008; Easterby-Smith, Thorpe and Jackson, 2008; Hatch and Cunliffe, 2006). Hatch and Cunliffe (2006) relate this to the organisational context, stating that positivists assume that what truly happens in organisations can only be discovered through categorisation and scientific measurement of the behaviour of people and systems and that language is truly representative of the reality. The positivist approach is not seen to lend itself to this study, since the literature upon which the study is framed, that of Organisational Democracy, is not predicated on theoretical models or general laws upon which hypotheses might be developed or tested.

Realist

Born from a frustration that positivism was over-deterministic (in that there is little room for choice due to the causal nature of universal laws) and that constructionism was so totally relativist (and hence highly contextual), realism takes aspects from both positivist and interpretivist positions. It holds that real structures exist independent of human consciousness, but that knowledge is socially created, with Saunders, Lewis and Thornhill (2007) contending that our knowledge of reality is a result of social conditioning. According to Blaikie (1993), whilst realism is concerned with what kinds of things there are, and how these things behave, it accepts that reality may exist in spite of science or observation, and so there is validity in recognising realities that are simply claimed to exist or act, whether proven or not. In common with interpretivist positions, realism recognises that natural and social sciences are different, and that social reality is pre-interpreted, however realists, in line with the positivist position also hold that science must be empirically-based, rational and objective and so it argues that social objects may be studied 'scientifically' as social objects, not simply through language and discourse. Whereas positivists hold that direct causal relationships exist, that these relationships apply universally (leading to prediction) and that the underlying mechanisms can be understood through observation, realists take the view that the underlying mechanisms are simply the powers or tendencies that things have to act in a certain way, and that other factors may moderate these tendencies depending upon circumstances, and hence the focus is more on understanding and explanation than prediction. Although Blaikie describes realism as 'ultimately a search for generative mechanisms' he points out that realists recognise that the underlying mechanisms can act apparently independently or 'out of phase' with the observable events, and that events can occur independently of them being experienced, a view that Hatch and Cunliffe (2006) describe as a 'stratified' form of reality whereby surface events are shaped by underlying structures and mechanisms but that what we see is only part of the picture. From an organisational perspective, Hatch and Cunliffe (2006) describe the realist researcher as enquiring into the mechanisms and structures that underlie institutional forms and practices, how these emerge over time, how they might empower and constrain social actors, and how such forms may be critiqued and changed. Realists take the view that researching from different angles and at multiple levels will all contribute to understanding since reality can exist on multiple levels (Chia, 2002) and hence realism may be seen as inductive or theory building. When considering the phenomena under study here – that of the emergent Enterprise2.0 intervention, findings from the pilot study appear to suggest that this is not yet an objective reality but instead is one that is socially constructed. These interventions might be considered experimental, and so a realist approach, which seeks to identify the underlying 'generative mechanisms' seems incompatible with an environment where individuals are still making sense of and developing meaning from those limited interventions that exist.

Interpretivist / Constructivist

This position is described by Hatch and Cunliffe (2006) as anti-positivist and by Blaikie (1993) as post-positivist since it is contended that there is a fundamental difference between the subject matters of natural and social sciences. In the social world it is argued that individuals and groups make sense of situations based upon their individual experience, memories and expectations. Meaning therefore is constructed and (over time) constantly re-constructed through experience resulting in many differing interpretations. It is these multiple interpretations that create a social reality in which people act. Under this paradigm, therefore, it is seen as important to discover and understand these meanings and the contextual factors that influence, determine and affect the interpretations reached by different individuals. Interpretivists consider that there are multiple realities (Denzin and Lincoln, 2003). Since 'all knowledge is relative to the knower' interpretivists aim to work alongside others as they make sense of, draw meaning from and create their realities in order to understand their points of view, and to interpret these experiences in the context of the researchers academic experience (Hatch and Cunliffe, 2006), and hence is inductive or theory building. The focus of the researcher is on understanding the meanings and interpretations of 'social actors' and to understand their world from their point of view, is highly contextual and hence is not widely generalisable (Saunders, Lewis and Thornhill, 2007). Understanding what people are thinking and feeling, as well as how they communicate, verbally and non-verbally are considered important (Easterby-Smith, Thorpe and Jackson, 2008), and given the subjective nature of this paradigm, and the emphasis on language, it is associated with qualitative approaches to data gathering (Eriksson and Kovalainen, 2008). The close nature of the researcher and the researched in this paradigm, and the risk that any interpretation is framed within the mind of the researcher means that steps must be introduced to avoid bias. The use of self-reflection is advised. When considering the phenomena under study here, this position seems to provide the most appropriate frame. Understanding the emerging individual and group perspectives that exist with respect to the Enterprise2.0 experiments and interpreting these within a more established literature, seems to be the first step towards the possible development of later research that may identify whether or not underlying mechanisms exist, and whether or not more general laws may be developed.

4. AXIOLOGY

Finally, in considering Research Philosophy and approach, it is important to consider how the individual values of the researcher may play in each stage of the Research Process. Saunders, Lewis and Thornhill (2007) cite Heron, who argues that our values are the guiding reason for our action. Further, articulating their values as a basis for making judgements about the research topic and research approach are a demonstration of axiological skill. For example, using surveys rather than interviews would suggest that the rich personal interaction is not something that is valued as highly as the need to gather a large data set. It is argued that through understanding and being aware of your own values and transparently recognising and articulating these as part of research process will mean that your research is strengthened, in terms of transparency, the opportunity to minimise bias or in defending your choices, and the creation of a personal value statement is recommended.

5. APPROACH FOR THIS STUDY

This study will adopt an Interpretivist position. Figure 1 (below) summarises the key aspects of this study, and will be discussed further in this chapter. The primary aim of this study is to inquire into what individual perspectives (thoughts and feelings) exist across the organisation with respect to the intervention (Enterprise2.0), interpreting these findings in the context of the academic literature on Organisational Democracy. Literature has been used to inform the study, but since this is not predicated on the existence of universal laws or causal models, this study does not set out to test pre-existing theory, for example through the use of hypothesis or experiments and will rely instead upon qualitative data, with rich, open interviews with many different organisational actors and at all organisational levels to discover and understand the individual and shared sense of

meaning regarding the intervention. The study is also interested in the factors that affect the different interpretations gathered from informants. Since the pilot study indicated that Enterprise2.0 does not yet appear to be an objective reality and instead is one that is socially constructed, the emphasis here is on understanding the individual and shared meaning rather than on explaining underlying mechanisms, or identifying causal effects. This study is inductive, rather than deductive and theory building, rather than theory testing. Given that this study will be highly contextual, the external validity may be restricted with generalisation considered through recourse to existing theory and literature. Since interpretivists place great emphasis on communication and language, this approach seems particularly suited to the focus of this particular study - the ability of Enterprise2.0 to enable meaningful conversation between leaders and workers.

Research Philosophy

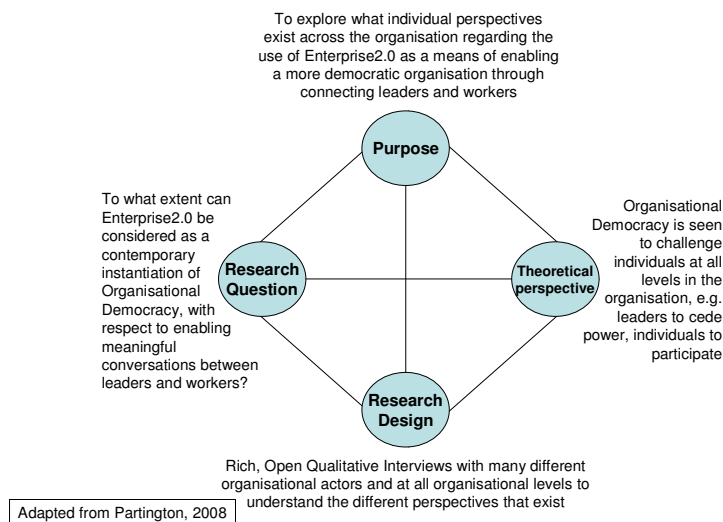


Figure 1 - Key aspects of the study

REFERENCES AND FULL BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Blaikie, N. (2000), *Designing Social Research*, 1st ed, Polity Press, Cambridge.
- Blaikie, N. (1993), *Approaches to Social Enquiry*, 1st ed, Polity Press, Cambridge.
- Chia, R. (2002), "The Production of Management Knowledge: Philosophical Underpinnings of Research Design", in Partington, D. (ed.) *Essential Skills for Management Research*, 1st ed, SAGE Publications Ltd., London, pp. 1-19.
- Denzin, N. and Lincoln, Y. (2003), "The Discipline and Practice of Qualitative Research", in Denzin, N. and Lincoln, Y. (eds.) *Collecting and Interpreting Qualitative Materials*, 2nd ed, SAGE Publications, Inc., California, pp. 1-45.
- Easterby-Smith, M., Thorpe, R. and Jackson, P. (2008), *Management Research*, 3rd ed, SAGE Publications Ltd., London.
- Eriksson, P. and Kovalainen, A. (2008), *Qualitative Methods in Business Research*, 1st ed, SAGE Publications Ltd., London.
- Hatch, M. J. and Cunliffe, A. L. (2006), *Organization Theory*, 2nd ed, Oxford University Press, Oxford.
- James, K. and Vinnicombe, S. (2002), "Acknowledging the Individual in the Researcher", in Partington, D. (ed.) *Essential Skills for Management Research*, 1st ed, SAGE Publications Ltd., London, pp. 84-98.
- Kvale, S. (1996), *InterViews*, 1st ed, Sage Publications, Inc., London.
- Partington. (Cranfield School of Management), (2008), *Research Strategies Overview* (unpublished Teaching Material), UK.
- Saunders, M., Lewis, P. and Thornhill, A. (2007), *Research Methods for Business Students*, 4th ed, Prentice Hall Financial Times, Harlow.

[2795 words]