MANAGEMENT & BUSINESS RESEARCH

6th Edition

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CONTENTS

well as making regular contributions to the Scottish Business School's doctoral programme. In 1983 he attended the International Teachers' Programme in Sweden where he met Mark and embarked on a PhD under Mark's supervision. Collaboration continued through the 1990s with the ESRC Teaching Fellowship Scheme. In 1996 he was instrumental in establishing the Graduate Business School at Manchester Metropolitan University and in 2003 joined the ESRC Training and Development Board. There, he was involved in establishing the training guidelines for both doctorate and professional doctorate provision and more recently in initiatives to address capacity building in management and business. In 2003 he contributed to the ESRC's Evolution of Business Knowledge programme. His research interests have included: performance, remuneration and entrepreneurship, management learning and development and leadership, and he has published (with others) a number of books including: *Remuneration Systems* (Financial Times/Prentice Hall, 2000); *Management and Language: The Manager as Practical Author* (Sage, 2003); *The SAGE Dictionary of Qualitative Management Research* (Sage, 2008); *Performance Management: Multidisciplinary Perspectives* (Palgrave, 2008); *Gower Handbook of Leadership and Management Development* (Gower, 2010) and, more recently, *Management Research* in the Sage 'A Very Short, Fairly Interesting and Reasonably Cheap Book About' series. He was President of the British Academy of Management in 2007, Dean of Fellows in 2012, and in 2009–2015 he was Chair of the Society for the Advancement of Management Studies.

PAUL R. JACKSON is Professor of Corporate Communications and member of the Business Economics and Strategy group at the Alliance Manchester Business School, University of Manchester. He has a first degree in Psychology from the University of Sheffield and an MSc in Applied Statistics from Sheffield Polytechnic (now Sheffield Hallam University). His first university post was as a research assistant in studies on impression formation, where he decided that it was worth learning how to write programs in Fortran so that the computer could do the tedious work of adding up and he could do the interesting bits. His research interests have included laboratory studies of impression formation, large-scale surveys of the impact of unemployment on psychological health, longitudinal field studies of the effects of empowerment and work design on employee health and performance, employee communication and team-working, CSR and innovations in business models.

He has published widely in journals such as the *Academy of Management Journal*, *Journal of Applied Psychology*, *British Medical Journal*, *Human Relations*, *Journal of Occupational Health Psychology* and *British Journal of Management*. His books include: *Developments in Work and Organisational Psychology: Implications for International Business* (Elsevier, 2006); *Psychosocial Risk Factors in Call Centres* (HSE Publications, 2003); *Change in Manufacturing: Managing Stress in Manufacturing* (HSE Publications, 2001); *Organisational Interventions to Reduce the Impact of Poor Work Design* (HSE Publications, 1998).

Over the years he has undertaken various roles, including Director of Doctoral Programmes at the University of Sheffield and, at UMIST, Head of the Division of Marketing, International Business and Strategy, as well as designing the doctoral training programme at MBS. He has been teaching research methods to undergraduate, Masters' and doctoral students since 1975 and has contributed to books on research methods teaching as well as workshops for students and teachers on behalf of the British Academy of Management.

LENA J. JASPERSEN is a University Academic Fellow in Innovation Management at the University of Leeds. As an early career researcher with a multidisciplinary background in international sociology and organization studies, her research interests have focused on the processes of technology innovation and diffusion. Part of her role as an Academic Fellow

is to develop a portfolio of research projects; hers relate to the exploration of patterns of medical technology innovation, including investigations into the influence of regulation on innovation strategies in medical technology and strategies for managing innovation in complex innovation ecosystems.

Lena's background brings both an international and an interdisciplinary dimension to her research. She holds Masters' degrees from the University of Bielefeld (Germany) and Keele University (UK) and was awarded a PhD with Recommendation of Research Excellence from the University of Leeds. Her doctoral research focused on the role of cross-sector partnerships in creating low-carbon development pathways. The results provided a critical analysis of how partnerships can facilitate but also inhibit the adoption of off-grid renewable energy technologies in Central America. Lena has a strong interest in research methods, particularly working on participatory methods and visual tools that can enhance the collection of both qualitative and quantitative network data. Together with colleagues, she has conducted research on global development and published an interdisciplinary volume on conducting field research in development contexts (*Understanding Global Development Research*, Sage, 2017). She has also published an organizational ethnography of the work of the oldest UN human rights treaty monitoring body, the Committee on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination (*The UN-real World of Human Rights*, Nomos, 2012).

PREFACE TO THE SIXTH EDITION

Firstly, welcome to the sixth edition of *Management and Business Research*; we hope you find it both useful and enjoyable to read. It has always been our intention for students to read the whole book in order to gain as complete an overview as possible before they begin to make specific choices, but the book is also for individuals to gain some early insights into how various techniques and approaches might be used and the skills that might be needed for the methods and techniques described to yield the best results. Over its various iterations the book has gone from success to success in supporting students entering the magical realm of empirical research. Much of what we set out could not have been achieved without examples from both our own research and also examples from students' own research. This sixth edition is no exception and Lena Jaspersen brings both international and interdisciplinary research experience to this edition. We welcome suggestions and ideas from students and staff alike and invite anyone who would like to make suggestions for examples and improvements to email us. This will hopefully further improve the next edition.

The first edition of this book appeared in 1991, at a time when there were very few management research methods books on the market. It quickly became established as the leading text because it covered all of the essential ground, yet was not too long or intimidating for students to get an overview of the key issues in research and the nature of the research process – many commented that they could do this by reading the book in a weekend. Students and staff also commented that they liked it because it did not shrink from tackling difficult issues, but avoided either trivializing them, or making them unnecessarily complex. The success of the book was attested by the sales figures, and by the fact that it has become the most highly cited management methodology book in the world according to Google Scholar.

A second edition was published in 2002, which included a substantial updating of the material since methodology had by then become a hot topic. In addition, research methods had also begun to be taught at undergraduate level, resulting in a modest repositioning of the book.

The third edition maintained the continuity by continuing to provide a comprehensive treatment of philosophies and methods, with coverage of both qualitative and quantitative techniques; but it also introduced some radical departures both in terms of content and design. The most significant changes were the strengthening of the way in which quantitative methods were treated. The edition now covered not only basic techniques for collecting and analysing quantitative data but also multivariate analysis and structural equation modelling.

In keeping with our desire to avoid complications, we covered the principles and logic of analytic methods without introducing complicated algebra. We claimed in the third edition that this part of the book now provided advanced statistics without tears!

The fourth edition was the first edition that deployed full colour. There were additional boxed examples, usually drawn from our own experiences and from those of our students. We also rethought some of the material on philosophy and research design and extended the coverage of qualitative analysis, particularly with the use of computer-assisted methods. The exercises, based on our own extensive methodology teaching, were appropriately updated in response to student feedback. We retained the companion website, developing our guidance to teachers. Perhaps most striking of all to this edition was the addition of a system of icons based around the metaphor of research being like a tree that sucks up nutrients (data, ideas and experiences) from the ground and then converts them into leaves and fruits (reports, publications and theses). Without wanting to labour the metaphor exhaustively, we then went on to develop the icons to illustrate some of the points and as a general orientation tool.

The fifth edition built on changes made to the book's structure in the fourth edition. We changed the order of some of the chapters in order to improve the logic of our arguments and make the text flow better. As with other editions we increased the number of examples and exercises to help illustrate the points being made or the issues being discussed.

The sixth edition has made further use of extensive feedback made available through our publishers and aims to both update our material while ensuring that it includes relevant current practice. It is the first edition of the book to be published as an interactive e-book. This new format has enabled us to make use of a wide range of online resources and related exercises. The book also features a new series of interviews with academics, practitioners and students sharing experiences of conducting research.

YOUR GUIDE TO USING THIS BOOK AND ITS ONLINE RESOURCES

This book comes with a wide range of useful learning features and online resources to help with your research.

Inside the book

Turn to the back of the book for your **'tree metaphor' pull out guide** to doing research and understanding the underlying philosophy. A great tool for visualizing the research process and working out your own stance!

'The "tree metaphor" has provided me with an excellent visual aid of how to approach my future research projects. Prior to seeing this metaphor I struggled with putting the wide range of features of research into perspective.'

Sinead Shean,
postgraduate student MSC
Human Resource Management

‘It’s interesting to see how the decisions we’re making during our research project are similarly faced by experienced researchers in the field.’
Andy Vicat, MBA student

Research in Action – real-world research experiences from a range of academics, practitioners and students together with their own personal top tips

Examples – interdisciplinary research examples illustrate the application of key research steps in practice

Exercises – practical exercises on key aspects of carrying out research

Glossary terms – definitions in the margin enable you to understand key research terminology and concepts

Summaries – recap on the key topics that the chapter dealt with to help you consolidate what you have read

Further Reading – useful articles and books to help with specific aspects of the research process

Your digital resources

Don’t forget to use the wealth of digital resources available with this book to help with your research. To access the resources just log into your interactive eBook and click on the icons or visit **https://edge.sagepub.com/easterbysmith6e** to access the book’s website.

Icons throughout the book indicate when extra online resources are available:


Videos, including useful explanations of research philosophy concepts and developing a convincing argument by one of the authors Professor Richard Thorpe


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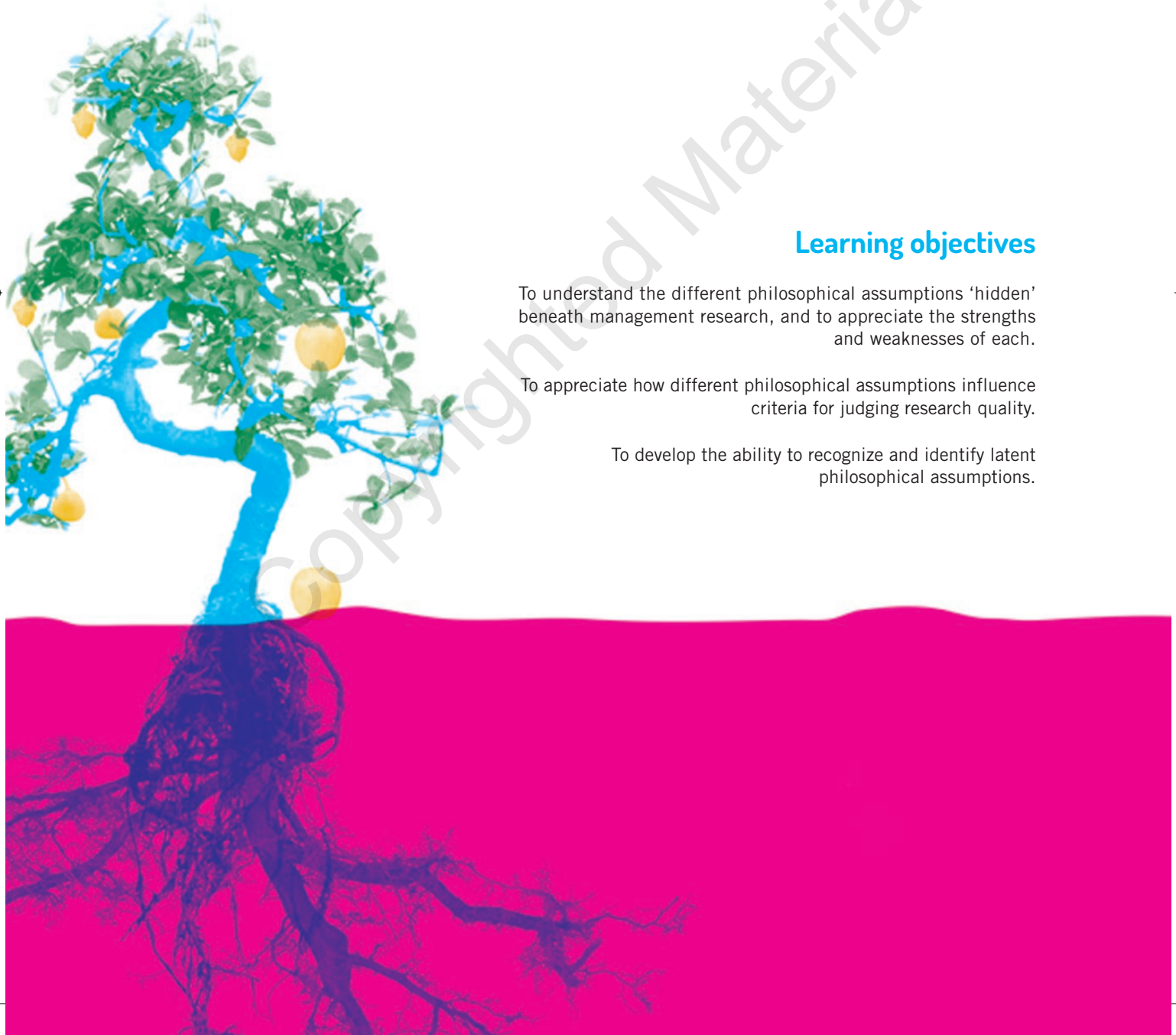
‘I particularly like the individual login you receive to the eBook. As I student myself, I often use many difference devices.’
Eleanor Pownall-Gray, fourth year student BA Management



Learning objectives

To understand the different philosophical assumptions 'hidden' beneath management research, and to appreciate the strengths and weaknesses of each.

To appreciate how different philosophical assumptions influence criteria for judging research quality.

To develop the ability to recognize and identify latent philosophical assumptions.

THE PHILOSOPHY OF MANAGEMENT AND BUSINESS RESEARCH

3

Chapter contents

Introduction

> It is a capital mistake to theorise before one has data. Insensibly one begins to collect facts to suit theories, rather than theories to suit facts. (Arthur Conan Doyle, 1891: 63)

The relationship between data and theory has been hotly debated by philosophers for many centuries. Failure to think through such philosophical issues can adversely affect the quality of management and business research. They are therefore of central concern in its design and evaluation. The aim of this chapter is to consider the main philosophical positions that underlie the designs of research – in other words, how do philosophical factors affect the delivery of satisfactory outcomes from the research activity?

There are at least four reasons why an understanding of philosophical issues is very useful. First, researchers have an obligation to understand the philosophical underpinnings of their research in order to have a clear sense of their reflexive role in research methods. After all, how do we think about what we know and what we study? For example, when we study leadership in organizations, to what extent is our research shaped by our own experiences with authority? How can we know whether an observed action amounts to leadership? We believe that researchers have to be able to answer these and similar questions if they are to make a creative contribution to their field.

Second, understanding the philosophical foundations of one's research is essential for clarifying research designs (see Chapter 4). This involves considering not only what kind of evidence is required and how it is to be gathered and interpreted, but also how this will provide good answers to the basic questions being investigated in the research. Third, knowledge of philosophy can help researchers to recognize which designs will work and which will not. It should enable them to avoid going up too many blind alleys and should indicate the limitations of particular approaches. Fourth, it can help researchers to identify, and even create, designs that may be outside their past experience. It may also suggest how to adapt research designs according to the constraints of different subject or knowledge structures.

Arguments, criticisms and debates are central to the progress of philosophy. We believe that it is important to understand both sides of an argument because research problems often require eclectic designs that draw from more than one tradition. In this chapter, we try to provide a balanced view of the different philosophical positions underlying research methods and designs. Therefore, the chapter starts by reviewing some key debates among philosophers of the natural sciences and the social sciences. Then, we explore these philosophies further, and review a number of alternative positions.

The tree as a metaphor for the research process

This chapter uses the metaphor of a tree to represent how the research process unfolds. It is intended to help students understand key concepts such as ontology, epistemology, methodology, and methods and techniques, and make the links between them and how they are related. These are concepts that students have traditionally found difficult to grasp – yet they are so important to coherent and robust research. We encourage our readers to engage with this metaphor and to revisit the pages explaining its elements.

The tree metaphor

We use the metaphor of a tree to represent how the research process unfolds. The key elements of the tree are the *roots*, the *trunk* and *branches*, the *leaves*, and the *fruit* – and each of these parallels an aspect of conducting research.

Richard Thorpe explains the tree metaphor

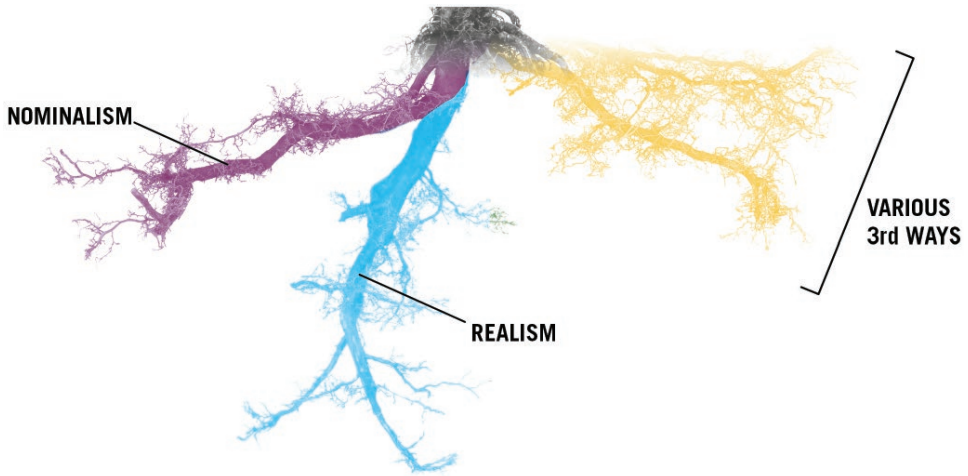


FIGURE 3.1 Roots as research traditions

The *roots* of the tree represent the research traditions. In the same way as *roots* draw nutrition from the soil, the research traditions are drawn up and form the basis of the researcher's ideas in relation to aspects of the research such as design, methods and forms of analysis.

The roots of the tree (see Figure 3.1) show three different possible research traditions that we will return to later in the chapter – a realist perspective, a nominalist perspective and one that we have identified as 'various other third ways'. The various third way approaches are invariably a mixture of the realist and nominalist traditions.

The *trunk* transports the nutrients from the roots through the branches to the leaves and fruit; it also provides strength and shape to the tree. The simplified cross-section of the tree trunk shown above represents the four main features of a research design: ontology, epistemology, methodology, and methods and techniques. Each of these concepts relates to the others. The inner ring of the trunk (heartwood) is the densest part of the trunk, and represents **ontology**, the basic assumptions that the researcher makes about the nature of reality.

The second ring of the trunk represents **epistemology**, the assumptions about the best ways of inquiring into the nature of the world.

The third ring from the centre represents the **methodology**, the way research techniques and methods are grouped together to provide a coherent picture.

The outer fourth ring of the trunk – the bark – represents the individual **methods and techniques** that are used for data collection and analysis, such as interviews and questionnaires. These are the most observable but their use depends on the underlying assumptions and decisions made about methodology, epistemology and ontology.

The four rings are named and ordered in this way because the most visible parts of research projects are, as we have said, the methods and techniques yet, although they are increasingly hidden from the external observer, for them to be both used and chosen a

ontology views about the nature of reality

epistemology views about the most appropriate ways of enquiring into the nature of the world

methodology a combination of methods used to enquire into a specific situation

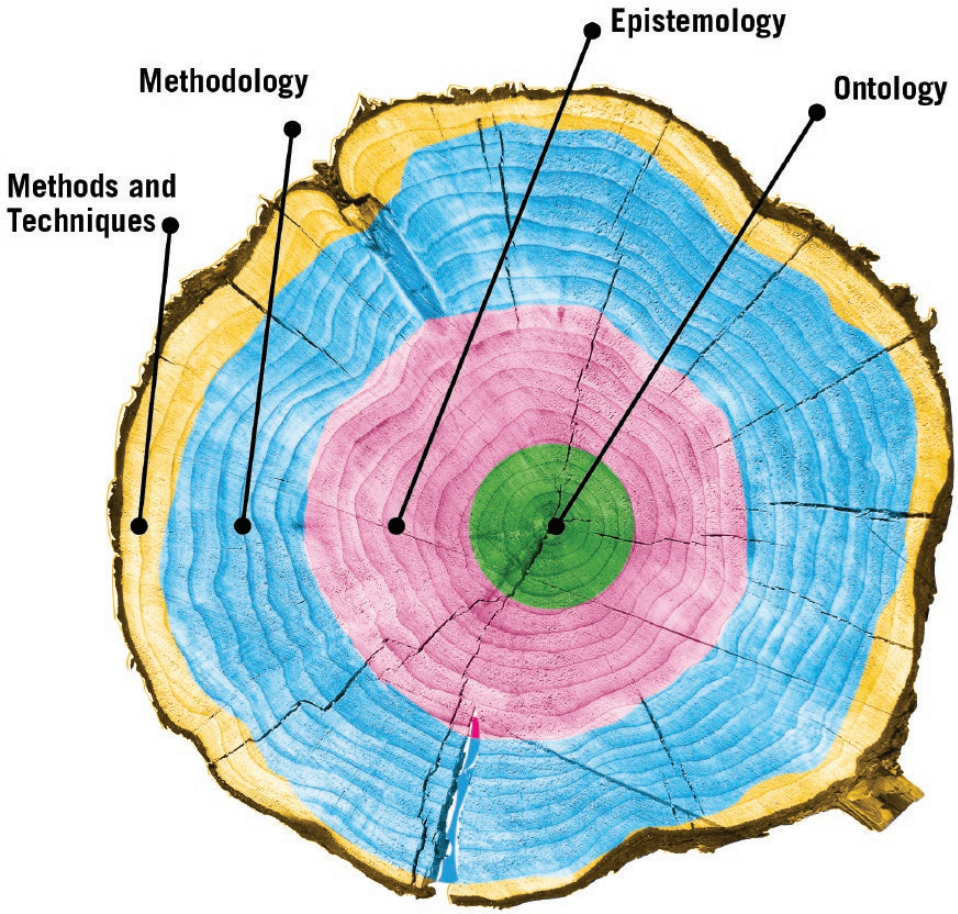


FIGURE 3.2 The trunk of the tree: ontology, epistemology, methodology, and methods and techniques

considerable amount of thinking and consideration will be necessary. The three inner rings then can be said to each make a critical contribution to the strength, vitality and coherence of the research project. Without a strong and healthy trunk, a tree can easily be blown over. Similarly, a piece of research that lacks a clear ontology, epistemology or methodology cannot withstand critical review.

methods and techniques the instruments and processes for gathering research data, analysing it and drawing conclusions from it

The essence of ontology, epistemology, methodology, and **methods and techniques** is summarized in Table 3.1 below.

Moving up and along the branches, the *leaves* form the tree's canopy. They collect energy from sunlight, and so represent the *collection and analysis of data* within a research project. It is the collection of research data that stimulates new ideas and enables the evaluation of existing theories. We distinguish between three main kinds of data based on the underlying *epistemology* (second ring in the trunk), according to whether they are essentially positivist, constructionist or hybrid approaches. We explain the meanings of these concepts below.

The *fruit* of the tree represents the writing up and dissemination of the research. Here again we show the relationship between the research output, and the ontology, epistemology, methodology, and methods and techniques that all underpin the research.

A realist ontology is usually linked to a positivist epistemology, which in turn tends to produce a quantitative study design (methodology) and some numerical data collection and

TABLE 3.1 Ontology, epistemology, methodology, and methods and techniques

	What it is about?	Questions we ask
Ontology	Philosophical assumptions about the nature of reality	What is reality? What types of beings are there? How is it that different 'types' of beings exist? What is a 'type'?
Epistemology	A general set of assumptions about ways of inquiring into the nature of the world	What is knowledge? How do we know what we know? How is knowledge acquired?
Methodology	A combination of methods used to enquire into a specific situation	What question am I asking and what kind of conclusion do I hope to come to? How can I best research this question? What data is available?
Methods and techniques	Individual techniques for data collection, analysis, etc.	How can I collect and analyse this data? How does this method or technique help me to answer my research question? Is this method or technique appropriate to the context and research question I am investigating?

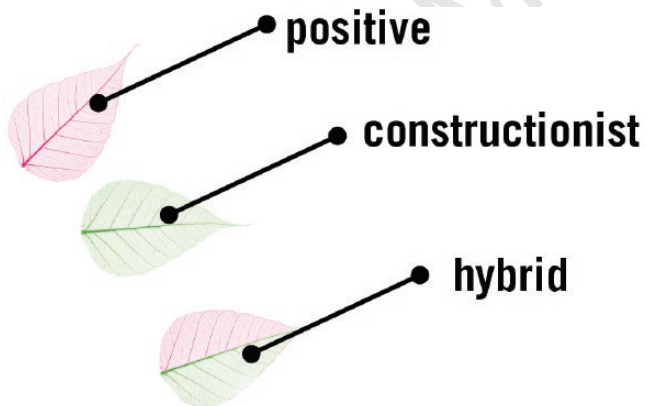


FIGURE 3.3 Leaves representing positivist, constructionist or hybrid approaches

FIGURE 3.4 Relationship between the research output, and the ontology, epistemology, methodology, and methods and techniques

analysis (methods and techniques). The fruits of this labour will see the output characterized as 'hard' (in the sense that they emulate the outcomes of 'hard' or natural sciences) – hence are depicted as an acorn or a walnut.

A nominalist ontology connects with a constructionist epistemology, which in turn will suggest a qualitative approach to data collection and analysis being adopted and perhaps multiple perspectives being taken on a particular phenomenon. The fruits (outputs) from research conducted in this way might be 'softer' (i.e. akin to soft skills) and we can characterise them as a fig or a bunch of grapes.

One of our various third way positions, for example a critical realist perspective to be discussed later in the chapter, might result in a mixed methods design involving the use of both quantitative and qualitative data collection and analysis. In this case the output might be both 'hard' and 'soft' and involve both words and numbers. Such output may be illustrated by fruit such as an apricot or a plum – a soft outside and a large, hard stone at its centre. In this way, the views and values adopted by the researcher from the early stages of the framing of the research, the design of the research project and the collection of the data are coherently connected and linked.

The philosophical debates

Most of the central debates among philosophers concern matters of ontology and epistemology. Ontology is about the nature of reality and existence; epistemology is about the theory of knowledge and helps researchers understand best ways of enquiring into the nature of the world. At this point it is important to note that natural and social scientists generally draw from different ontological and epistemological assumptions when developing their methodologies for conducting research. Sometimes, they do this consciously and deliberately; more often, they simply follow the traditions passed on by those who trained them.

We think this is a shame. Awareness of philosophical assumptions can both increase the quality of research and contribute to the creativity of the researcher.

Ontology: from realism to nominalism

Ontology is the starting point for most of the debates among philosophers. Although there are strong parallels between the ontological debates within the natural sciences and the social sciences, there are also differences. Since the scientific community has been debating methodological issues for much longer than social scientists, we still start with a summary of the methodological debates among scientists before coming back to discuss social sciences specific to this form of research. We introduce four ontological positions, which are situated on a continuum.

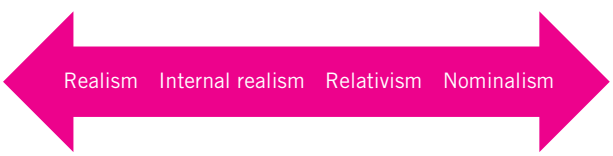


FIGURE 3.5 Continuum of ontological positions

Ontologies and natural science

Among philosophers of *natural science*, the main debate has been between **realism** and **relativism**. There are several varieties of realism. A long-standing position emphasizes that the world is concrete and external, and that science can progress only through observations that have a direct correspondence to the phenomena being investigated. This position has been modified by philosophers of science in recent decades, who point out the difference between the laws of physics and those of nature, and the knowledge or theories that scientists have about these laws.

The next position along the continuum is **internal realism**. This position holds that there is a single reality, but that it is never possible for scientists to access that reality directly. It is only possible to gather indirect evidence of what is going on in fundamental physical processes (Putnam, 1987). A nice illustration of this is the 'bubble chamber', which was developed in the 1950s to track the paths of sub-atomic particles during experiments. The bubble chamber is a tank filled with an unstable transparent liquid, such as superheated hydrogen; as these high-energy particles pass through the chamber, they make the liquid boil, leaving a track of tiny bubbles that can be photographed. Thus, the bubbles provide a visible record of the activity of sub-atomic particles, which cannot otherwise be 'seen' directly.

Internal realism does accept, however, that scientific laws, once discovered, are absolute and independent of further observations. The position of *relativism* goes a stage further in suggesting that scientific laws are not simply out there to be discovered, but that they are created by people. It has been strongly influenced by the work of Latour and Woolgar (1979), who have studied the way scientific ideas evolve within research laboratories, and noted the amount of debate and discussion that take place about how to explain observed patterns and phenomena. People hold different views, and their ability to gain acceptance from others may depend on their status and past reputation. Thus, the 'truth' of a particular idea or theory is reached through discussion and agreement between the main protagonists. Furthermore, Knorr-Cetina (1983) points out that the acceptance of a particular theory, and hence the 'closure' of a scientific debate, may be highly influenced by the politics of business and commercial resources.

The international debate about climate change is a good example of the difficulties in reaching agreement about the significance of 'scientific' evidence. Although the same evidence is potentially available to all protagonists, no single piece of evidence is accepted as definitive by all, and both supporters and sceptics of the climate-change hypothesis tend to select evidence that specifically supports their own views. This links closely to the quotation at the start of this chapter. In addition, there are bodies with very strong, entrenched interests – oil companies, environmentalists and national governments – which see their political and economic concerns as bound up with a particular outcome from the debate. The relativist position assumes that there may never be a definitive answer to the climate-change debate, just different accommodations as the interests of different groups interact with the gradual accumulation and acceptance of scientific evidence. We shall return to some of these political and ethical issues in Chapter 5.

Realist scientists have responded to the relativist challenge by arguing that even if scientists work through social and political networks, the truth of scientific laws is quite independent of the process of discovery. Richard Dawkins, the biologist, has famously said that even the most dedicated relativist does not believe, when flying at 40,000 feet in a Boeing 747, that the laws of physics that hold the jet in the air are mere constructs of the imagination (Irwin, 1994).

realism
an ontological position which assumes that the physical and social worlds exist independently of any observations made about them

relativism
an ontological view that phenomena depend on the perspectives from which we observe them; also an epistemological position that observations will be more accurate/credible if made from several different perspectives

internal realism
a philosophical position which assumes that reality is independent of the observer, but that scientists can only access that reality indirectly

TABLE 3.2 Ontological positions

Realism	The world is real and exists independently of perception. Science is based on observations of real phenomena, observable behaviour and facts that are considered to be 'hard facts'.
Internal Realism	The world is real and causally independent of the human mind but it is impossible to observe it directly as our understanding of its structure (types, kinds, categories, etc.) is a function of the human mind. Scientific laws, once discovered, are absolute.
Relativism	Scientific laws are created by people who are embedded in a context (so it's in the eye of the beholder).
Nominalism	Reality is created by us and as such does not exist independently of our perception.

Ontology and the social sciences

There have been similar debates within the *social sciences*. Here, we are interested in the behaviour of people rather than inanimate objects; and this raises an important question about whether the assumptions and methods of the natural sciences are appropriate to be used in the social sciences (Blaikie, 2007). In our view, the answer depends both on the topic of enquiry and the preferences of the individual researcher. Therefore, concepts such as social class and racial discrimination, for example, can be treated as real phenomena, which exist independently of the researcher, and which have real consequences for the life chances and career success of people of different classes or races.

nominalism an ontological view that objects in the world are 'formed' by the language we use and the names we attach to phenomena

Debates within the social sciences have primarily been between the three positions towards the right of the continuum (Figure 3.5): internal realism, relativism and **nominalism**. When researching race or class, internal realists argue that it can be difficult to agree what these concepts mean or how to measure them, but that such disagreements do not alter the reality of their consequences.

Relativists argue that social class and racial discrimination are defined and experienced differently by different people, and this will depend greatly on the class or race to which they belong, and the contexts or countries in which they live. This means, for example, that when studying a concept such as motivation, how someone (or a group) might be motivated might be highly dependent on their cultural historical context – their background, age and interests. Thus, there is no single reality that can somehow be discovered, but there are many perspectives on the issue. The relativist position assumes that different observers may have different viewpoints and, as Collins (1983: 88) says, 'what counts for the truth can vary from place to place and from time to time'.

The nominalist position goes further by suggesting that the labels and names we attach to experiences and events are crucial. Postmodern authors, such as Cooper and Burrell (1988), view social life as paradoxical and indeterminate, and argue that social reality is no more than the creation of people through language and discourse (Cunliffe, 2001). According to this position, there is no truth; and the interesting questions concern how people attempt to establish different versions of truth. An example of this is the current trend in politics where seemingly irrefutable 'facts' reported in the media are being regularly challenged with 'fake truths' by other parties offering alternative perspectives. Here, we witness truths being created, claimed and negotiated that at times may appear as 'out of touch with reality'. It is often the rhetoric and language used that connects with certain constituencies, as well as the way an argument is put together that wins the day (makes the most persuasive case).

EXERCISE 3.1

Social media and fake news

Individual: Go online and read the article 'Social media and fake news in the 2016 election' by Allcott and Gentzkow (2017). What can you learn from this article about the social construction of truths?

Fake news

Applied to issues of class, the idea of 'social class' is not a 'truth' but a social construction that offers an explanation of why some people (and families) are systematically more successful than others. For some, it provides a critique of the way privilege is maintained through educational and employment institutions; for others, it may provide a justification of the superiority of some classes over others. Similarly, in the context of race, the label 'institutional racism' provided a sharp critique of the internal practices of the Metropolitan Police following their botched investigation into the murder in London of the black teenager Stephen Lawrence in 1993.

These four ontological positions are summarized in Table 3.3.

TABLE 3.3 Four different ontologies

	Realism	Internal realism	Relativism	Nominalism
Truth	Single truth	Truth exists, but is obscure	There are many 'truths'	There is no truth
Facts	Facts exist and can be revealed	Facts are concrete, but cannot be accessed directly	Facts depend on viewpoint of observer	Facts are all human creations

It is important to note that the adoption of a distinct ontology has implications for the kind of questions we ask. We can illustrate this with two examples, one physical and the other social. First, consider investigating winners in the game of tennis as played on the professional circuits. A *realist* view of tennis would concentrate on aspects of performance that can be measured – the speed of service, the number of 'break points' won or lost within a game, the duration of a match, whether they do better on grass or clay courts, and other past statistics for each player.

The *internal realist* would also be concerned with measurement, but with an emphasis on accuracy, and the tension between human judgements made by line judges and referees, and the technological data provided by technology such as the Hawk-Eye equipment used to determine whether a tennis ball falls within the lines of the court. This perspective would place emphasis on identifying any distinctive physical characteristics of successful players. These features can be monitored and enhanced through fitness training, physiotherapy and practice.

From a *relativist* position, the focus would be less on the physical characteristics of the players and more on their mental capabilities. How do they develop their strategies in advance to deal with different types of opponent, and how might these strategies be adapted in 'real time' while playing? Another important aspect from this perspective is the relation between the players and the crowd: how can they get the crowd to support them rather than the opposition?

From a *nominalist* perspective, the focus could be on the way players make sense of particular successes and defeats in post-match interviews, and then what happens in the discussion with the trainer afterwards. Given the impact that partisan crowds can have on the performance of players, the development of media-friendly personas could be very important. And then, there are other less visible aspects such as who controls the finances of the professional game, the way careers are forged, and the stories of the vast majority of hopeful young people who never make it onto the professional circuit.

The second example, which is more relevant to conventional business, is the notion of corporate profit. Again, the adoption of different ontologies lets us examine different aspects – a bit like wearing different sets of glasses. A *realist* view will assume that there is a single figure that represents the difference between income and expenditure, and that the accounts posted by companies at the year-end are an accurate account of their corporate profit that is how much money came in and went out over the financial year.

The *internal realist* will see a more complex position: the boundaries may be permeable, with acquisitions and divestments taking place during the year; highly diverse activities may be woven into single threads; and decisions will be taken about how to divide ongoing activities between one year and the next. Thus, the profit figure posted will appear more like an approximation of the 'true' profit of the company.

From a *relativist* position, it would be recognized that profit is just one indicator of corporate health, and other indicators (such as sales growth, innovation rates and stock market valuations) may be equally relevant – with no one view taking precedence.

The *nominalist* perspective will draw attention to the way profit figures are constructed from many operational decisions about what to show or hide, and at corporate levels may well be manipulated so that tax liabilities are minimized, or so that directors can maximize their annual bonus payments.

EXERCISE 3.2

Applying the tree metaphor

The following quiz takes us back to the metaphor of a research tree. Based on the examples discussed in the previous section, can you answer the following questions?

1. If the research is based on a nominalist position (i.e. the roots draw their sustenance from soil infused with nominalist principles) what kind of research output might be most appropriate and expected in terms of the kind of fruit the tree produces?
2. If the research is based on a realist position (i.e. the ontology infused in the heartwood – centre ring of the tree) what epistemological position (i.e. the adjacent ring in the tree) might be most appropriate and expected in terms of the kind of data that would be collected?
3. If the research is based on one of a number of 'third way' positions (i.e. the roots draw their sustenance from soil infused with a mixture of both nominalist and realist principles) how might this reflect the data collected and the type of fruit produced on our fictional tree?

Epistemology: positivism versus social constructionism

positivism the key idea of positivism is that the social world exists externally, and that its properties should be measured through objective methods

social constructionism the idea that 'reality' is determined by people rather than by objective and external factors, and hence it is most important to appreciate the way people make sense of their experience

As indicated above, epistemology is the study of the nature of knowledge and ways of enquiring into the physical and social world: how do we know what we know? It has formed the basis for a sustained debate among social scientists as to how social science research should be conducted. There are two contrasting views: **positivism** and **social constructionism**. Each of these positions has to some extent been elevated into a stereotype, often by the opposing side. Although we can draw up comprehensive lists of philosophical assumptions and methodological implications associated with each position, there is no single philosopher who subscribes to all aspects of one particular view.

Indeed, when we look at the actual practice of research, even self-confessed extremists do not adhere consistently to one position or the other, as we shall see below. And although there has been a gradual trend from positivism towards constructionism since the early 1980s, there are many research studies – both in management and the wider social sciences – that deliberately combine methods from both traditions. These so-called mixed methods have great potential for finding deeper insights into management and organizational research, but researchers sometimes come unstuck when using them because they are not aware of the pitfalls of combining worldviews that are fundamentally different from each other. It follows that we need to understand these differences at an early stage in the research process.

Positivism

The key idea of positivism is that the social world exists externally, and that its properties can be measured through objective methods, rather than being inferred subjectively through sensation, reflection or intuition. The nineteenth-century French philosopher Auguste Comte (1853: 3) was the first person to encapsulate this view, saying: 'All good intellects have repeated, since Bacon's time, that there can be no real knowledge but that which is based on observed facts'. This statement contains two assumptions: first, an ontological assumption that reality is external and objective; and second, an epistemological assumption that knowledge is of significance only if it is based on observations of this external reality; it is the result of empirical verification. It isn't simply related to the consideration of a method of inquiry. It also relates to where the judgement resides in respect to evidence. This has a number of implications, although not all of them were proposed by Comte (see Table 3.4).

TABLE 3.4 Philosophical assumptions of positivism

- **Independence**: the observer must be independent of what is being observed.
- **Value-freedom**: the choice of what to study, and how to study it, can be determined by objective criteria rather than by human beliefs and interests.
- **Causality**: the aim of the social sciences should be to identify causal explanations and fundamental laws that explain regularities in human social behaviour.
- **Hypothesis and deduction**: science proceeds through a process of hypothesizing fundamental laws and then deducing what kinds of observations will demonstrate the truth or falsity of these hypotheses.
- **Operationalization**: concepts need to be defined in ways that enable facts to be measured quantitatively.
- **Reductionism**: problems as a whole are better understood if they are reduced to the simplest possible elements.
- **Generalization**: in order to move from the specific to the general, it is necessary to select random samples of sufficient size, from which inferences may be drawn about the wider population.
- **Cross-sectional analysis**: such regularities can most easily be identified by making comparisons of variations across samples.

It is worth repeating that these assumptions are not simply the view of any single philosopher; they are a collection of points that have come to be associated with the positivist viewpoint. Some 'positivists' would disagree with some of these statements. Comte, for example, did not agree with the principle of reductionism.

The view that positivism provides the best way of investigating human and social behaviour has developed into a distinctive paradigm over the last 150 years. The term **paradigm** came into vogue among social scientists, particularly through the work of Thomas Kuhn (1962). Most of the time, according to Kuhn, science progresses in tiny steps, which refine and extend what is already 'known'. But occasionally, experiments start to produce results that do not fit into existing theories and patterns. Then, perhaps many years later, a Galileo or an Einstein proposes a new way of looking at things, which can account for both the old and the new observations. It is evident from these examples that major scientific advances are not produced by a logical and incremental application of scientific method. Rather, they also and significantly result from independent and creative thinking that goes beyond the boundaries of existing ideas. The result of this is a 'scientific revolution', which not only provides new theories, but also may alter radically the way people see the world, and the kind of questions that scientists consider as important to investigate. The combination of new theories and questions is referred to as a new paradigm.

paradigm
a consensual pattern in the way scientists understand, and inquire into, the world

Social constructionism[1]

A new paradigm has been developed by philosophers during the last half-century, largely in reaction to the limited success that has been achieved from applying the principles of positivism to the social sciences. This stems from the view that 'reality' is not objective and exterior, but is socially constructed and is given meaning by people in their daily interactions with others. The idea of social constructionism, as developed by authors such as Berger and Luckman (1966), Watzlawick (1984) and Shotter (1993), focuses on the ways that people make sense of the world – especially through sharing their experiences with others via the medium of language. Social constructionism is one of a group of approaches that Habermas (1970) has referred to as interpretive methods. We will touch on these, and a number of other approaches, in the course of this and the following chapter.

What, then, is the essence of social constructionism? First, it is the idea, as mentioned above, that many aspects of 'societal reality' are determined by people rather than by objective and external factors. As formulated in 1928 by William Isaac Thomas and Dorothy Swaine Thomas: 'If men define situations as real, they are real in their consequences' (Thomas theorem). According to this view, we should therefore try to understand and appreciate the different experiences that people have, rather than search for external causes and fundamental laws to explain behaviour. This is because human action arises from the sense that people make of different situations, rather than as a direct response to external stimuli. Hence, the task of the social scientist should not only be to gather facts and measure the frequency of patterns of social behaviour, but also to appreciate the different constructions and meanings that people place upon their experience (for example, what people, individually and collectively, are thinking and feeling, and the ways they communicate with each other, whether verbally or non-verbally).

Constructivist project

[1]There are a number of terms equivalent to 'social construction', notably constructivism and interpretivism, which we will encounter again in later chapters.

Comparing the two approaches

The methods of social constructionist research can be contrasted directly with those characteristic of positivist research, as summarized in Table 3.5. Again, it should be emphasized that these represent a composite picture rather than the viewpoint of any single author or project.

TABLE 3.5 Contrasting implications of positivism and social constructionism

	Positivism	Social constructionism
Researchers	must be independent	is part of what is being observed
Human interests	should be irrelevant	are the main drivers of science
Explanations	must demonstrate causality	aim to increase general understanding of the situation
Research progresses through	hypotheses and deductions	gathering rich data from which ideas are induced
Concepts	need to be defined so that they can be measured	should incorporate stakeholder perspectives
Units of analysis	should be reduced to the simplest terms	may include the complexity of 'whole' situations
Generalization through	statistical probability	theoretical abstraction
Sampling requires	large numbers selected randomly	small numbers of cases chosen for specific reasons

EXAMPLE 3.1

Study of managerial stress

The implications of holding these different views may be seen, for example, in the way researchers study managerial stress. The positivist would start with the assumption that occupational stress exists, and would then formulate measures of stress experienced by a large number of employees in order to relate them to external causes (such as organizational changes, interpersonal conflicts and critical performance reviews). Measures of stress could be based on standardized verbal reports from the managers or on physiological factors, such as blood pressure.

Social constructionists would be interested in the aspects of work that managers consider 'stressful', and perhaps in the strategies that they develop for managing these aspects. They would therefore arrange to talk with a few managers about their jobs, and about the aspects they find more (or less) difficult, and would attempt to gather stories about incidents that the managers had experienced as stressful.

It should be clear by now that there is a link between epistemology and ontology, with positivism fitting with realist ontologies, and social constructionism fitting with nominalism.

The links between epistemologies and ontologies are summarized in Table 3.6, where positivism and social constructionism are linked to internal realist and relativist ontologies, while strong positivism and strong social constructionism are linked to the realist and nominalist ontologies. We take the argument a step further by suggesting that, with the weaker versions of both epistemologies, there are overlaps in these positions, and the methodologies

that follow from them combine different features of each. However, as already indicated in Figure 3.5, the different ontologies can be seen as being situated on a continuum. It is therefore easier, and indeed more appropriate, to mix neighbouring approaches (and related methodologies) rather than those located on opposite ends of the spectrum.

TABLE 3.6 Methodological implications of different epistemologies

Ontology		**Realism**	**Internal realism**	**Relativism**	**Nominalism**
Epistemology		**Strong positivism**	**Positivism**	**Constructionism**	**Strong constructionism**
Methodology	Quantitative ←				→ Qualitative
	Aims	Discovery	Exposure	Convergence	Invention
	Starting points	Hypotheses	Propositions	Questions	Critiques
	Designs	Experiments	Large surveys; multi-cases	Cases and surveys	Engagement and reflexivity
Methods and techniques	**Data types**	Numbers and facts	Mainly numbers with some words	Mainly words with some numbers	Discourse and experiences
	Analysis/ interpretation	Verification/ falsification	Correlation and regression	Triangulation and comparison	Sense-making; understanding
	Outcomes	Confirmation of theories	Theory-testing and generation	Theory generation	New insights and actions

In the *strong positivist* position, it is assumed that there is a reality that exists independently of the observer, and hence the job of the researcher is to discover the laws and theories that explain this reality. This is most readily achieved through the design of experiments that eliminate alternative explanations and allow key factors to be measured precisely in order to verify or falsify predetermined hypotheses.

triangulation using different kinds of measures or perspectives in order to increase confidence in the accuracy of observations

Less strong versions of positivism accept that reality cannot be accessed directly. The research therefore needs to infer the nature of this reality indirectly through conducting surveys of large samples of individuals, activities or organizations. Data will normally be expressed in quantitative form, but this may be supplemented by qualitative data. This should enable patterns and regularities in behaviour to be identified, thus allowing propositions to be tested and new ideas to be developed. Even so, it is only a matter of probability that the views collected will provide an accurate indication of the underlying situation.

From the *constructionist* position, the assumption is that there may be many different realities, and hence the researcher needs to gather multiple perspectives through a mixture of qualitative and quantitative methods, and to collect the views and experiences of diverse individuals and observers. This is sometimes described as **triangulation**.

The idea behind triangulation is that it can be useful to combine research methods when investigating social phenomena. So the term is mostly used to indicate a triangulation of methods of a similar type (such as different qualitative methods). This said, some also use the concept of triangulation when referring to sources of data. For example, researchers investigating incentive schemes – such as performance-related bonuses – have used questionnaires and interviews (Bowey et al., 1986). In order to gain a more complete understanding of the motives of managers and employees in relation to these new schemes, the research team then undertook a number of ethnographic studies where they observed what was happening. These studies revealed important new insights into aspects of motivation and the whole nature of what constituted a 'reward' to those working under the scheme. By triangulating the data (survey data, interview transcripts, records of observations), it was therefore possible to come to a more complete picture of the incentive schemes operated and the effects they had on performance.

This idea of connecting different elements to come to a more accurate understanding of the whole is what the notion of triangulation ultimately is about. Have a look at Example 3.2 below to find out more about the origin of the term.

EXAMPLE 3.2

Triangulation

Triangulation is based on the idea that seafarers, wishing to avoid rocks hidden just below the surface in coastal waters, need to identify their position with reasonable accuracy. In the days before the invention of radar and GPS, this could be done only by taking compass bearings on three different landmarks, and then drawing lines on the chart from these points, thus producing a small triangle that would indicate the position of the vessel. The degree of accuracy is indicated by the size of the triangle (small triangles generally being better than larger ones). The course of the ship can then be plotted on the chart by joining up the series of triangles created by such sightings, and the navigator can then see whether or not they are in danger of hitting the rocks.

Triangulation

The *strong social constructionist* perspective is different again because it assumes there is no pre-existing reality, and the aim of the researcher should be to understand how people invent structures to help them make sense of, and influence, what is going on around them. Consequently, much attention is given to the language and discourse that can be used both to create meanings and to influence – or 'enact' – the environment. Researchers following this path are encouraged to be critical of the way meanings can be imposed by the more powerful on the less powerful. Furthermore, the recognition that the observer can never be separated from the sense-making process means that researchers acknowledge that theories which apply to the subjects of their work must also be relevant to *themselves*. Such reflexive approaches to methodology are recognized as being particularly relevant when studies are considering power and cultural differences (Anderson, 1993; Easterby-Smith and Malina, 1999; Cunliffe, 2003, 2011).

EXERCISE 3.3

Spotting the epistemology

Group discussion: Researchers normally betray their epistemology in the language they use. Have a look at the examples below. What epistemologies are likely to be associated with the following statements?

Epistemological challenges – *The New Yorker*

1. 'We advance research on absorptive capacity by extending and empirically validating the conceptual distinction between potential and realized absorptive capacity' (Jansen et al., 2005: 1000).
2. 'This paper develops a holistic model of the overall process, by integrating knowledge oriented, routine oriented, and social/context of perspectives' (Hong et al., 2006: 1027).
3. 'This article contributes to the study of managerial agency in the absorption of new knowledge and skills … Empirical data are drawn from a longitudinal study of a …' (Jones, 2006: 355).
4. 'We (also) examine the influence of tacit and explicit knowledge on IJV performance. We find that relational embeddedness has a stronger influence on the transfer of tacit knowledge than it has on the transfer of explicit knowledge' (Dhanaraj et al., 2004).
5. 'These findings can be explained by elements of JCT and social exchange theory. As expected, when both LMX quality and empowerment were low the most negative outcomes resulted, and in general, when both variables were high the most positive outcomes resulted' (Harris et al., 2009: 397).
6. 'Organizational routines are ubiquitous, yet their contribution to organizing has been under-appreciated. Our longitudinal, inductive study traces the relationship between organizational routines and organizational schemata in a new research institution' (Rerup and Feldman, 2011: 577).
7. 'This brings me to a discussion of the credibility performance of agency–client relations. In some respects the very structure of a corporation can be seen in how it arranges performances … Like an individual, a corporation may be seen as a performer …' (Moeran, 2005: 917).

Epistemological foundations

Strengths and weaknesses of the main traditions

Here, we summarize some of the strengths and weaknesses of each position (see Table 3.7). This should help the researcher to choose which methods are most likely to be of help in a given situation.

We start with quantitative methods, which are based on the stronger version of the positivist paradigm. In this case, the main strengths are that they can provide wide coverage of

the range of situations; they can be fast and economical; and, with statistical analysis of data from large samples, their outcomes may be of considerable relevance to policy decisions.

On the debit side, these methods tend to be rather inflexible and artificial; they are not very effective in understanding processes, or the significance that people attach to actions; they are not very helpful in generating theories; and, because they focus on what is (or what has been recently), they make it hard for the policy-maker to infer what changes and actions should take place in the future. In addition, much of the data gathered may not be relevant to real decisions, even though they can still be used to support the covert goals of decision-makers.

The strengths and weaknesses of stronger forms of the *social constructionist* paradigm and associated interpretative methods are fairly complementary. Thus, they have strengths in their ability to look at change processes over time, to understand people's meanings, to adjust to new issues and ideas as they emerge, and to contribute to the evolution of new theories. They also provide a way of gathering data, which is seen as natural rather than artificial.

There are, of course, weaknesses. Data collection can take up a great deal of time and resources; and the analysis and interpretation of data may be very difficult, and depend on the intimate, tacit knowledge of the researchers. Qualitative studies often feel very untidy because it is harder to control their pace, progress and end points. There is also the problem that many people, especially policy-makers, may give low credibility to studies based on apparently 'subjective' opinions.

TABLE 3.7 Strengths and weaknesses of different epistemologies

	Strong positivism	Positivism	Constructionism	Strong constructionism
Strengths	If it works, it can provide highly compelling conclusions	Can provide wide coverage; potentially fast and economical; easier to provide justification of policies	Accepts value of multiple data sources; enables generalizations beyond present sample; greater efficiency, including outsourcing potential	Good for processes, and meanings; flexible and good for theory generation; data collection less artificial
Weaknesses	Hard to implement social experiments and to control for alternative explanations of results; focus may be very narrow	Inflexible and artificial; not good for process, meanings or theory generation; implications for action not obvious	Access can be difficult; cannot accommodate institutional and cultural differences; problems reconciling discrepant information	Can be very time-consuming; analysis and interpretations are difficult; may not have credibility with policy-makers

Mixing approaches and methods

The overwhelming amount of research in business and management is underpinned by the weaker forms of positivism and social constructionism. Given this, it is tempting for researchers to seek out, or see advantage in, compromise positions that serve to combine the strengths, and avoid the limitations, of each of the more extreme positions. This is a trend we have identified recently, particularly among PhD students. However, mixing approaches can be a very challenging endeavour and, as we will explain in the following chapter, you can't really mix everything! Is it methods within one family (qualitative or quantitative), or is it methods between families (qualitative and quantitative data), or is it the mixing between epistemologies?

Richard Thorpe presentation: Disciplines and paradigms

Finally, students might ask themselves whether their approach really reflects what they want to achieve. We often see, for example, a qualitative study where an inordinate amount of counting has been done and is then relied upon as the basis of understanding to the exclusion of rich qualitative data and insights, which were originally going to form the basis of new theory and understanding. Conversely smallish surveys, which aren't in any way random or checked for their bias, are nevertheless used to conduct some statistical analysis and draw inferences.

While it is possible – at times even rewarding – to conduct research situated at the boundary between the four approaches illustrated above, we usually advise our students to limit such experimentation to neighbouring columns as otherwise they are likely to encounter internal contractions that can be difficult to dissolve. We will return to this point in the section on mixed methods in Chapter 4.

RESEARCH IN ACTION

Philosophy in action

Emmanuella Plakoyiannaki

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Can you tell us why it is so important to know about the philosophy of business research?

It is important to know about the philosophy of business research in order to understand our own research journeys but also the wider social system in which we work. Let me explain. Our assumptions about the world shape the way we see, understand and investigate phenomena. Leonardo Da Vinci used to say that all knowledge is ultimately grounded on perceptions. Therefore, the production of knowledge is not value-free but stems from our assumptions about the nature of reality. Paradigms serve as lenses that bring together such assumptions and tools for knowledge creation (Welch et al., 2011): our assumptions about ontology (nature of reality) shape our perceived relationship with the knowledge we are uncovering (epistemology) and the tools we use to examine reality (methodology). They have substantial impact on our definition of rigour and producing 'reliable' science.

The philosophy of business research also allows us to understand and position ourselves in society. It helps us to pick up the dynamics and transformations taking place in the (business) world (e.g. social networks), problematize contemporary phenomena and address grand challenges such as poverty, inequality or immigration.

Most problems can be approached from different perspectives. Using as an example the context of higher education, student satisfaction with a degree programme can be investigated from a positivist perspective using a questionnaire survey that fractionates and reduces the phenomenon into a set of variables (e.g. satisfaction with the content, teaching standards, support and resources, etc.). While greater precision and broader understanding can be derived from this simplification, it fails to capture some of the

deeper social or emotional aspects. Moreover, a survey approach makes it harder to tap into dynamic, individualized, student-specific understandings of programme satisfaction. A phenomenological study based on biographical interviews could capture student experiences through language and discourse, emphasizing the simple presence and use of words denoting positive or negative cues.

How do you determine your ontological and epistemological stance when you conduct your own research?

My personal starting point is always my understanding of the phenomenon through experience. This experience is generated by (academic) reading (trying to understand qualities and dimensions of the phenomenon) and reality (trying to understand manifestations of the phenomenon). It is then my research question that guides my ontological and epistemological assumptions. Finally, it is my own identity as a researcher and the research identity of my co-authors that play a crucial role in thinking about my/our paradigmatic positioning. I have to say that this process is often implicit, tacit and comes with experience.

Can you give us an example?

Together with Pavlos Dimitratos, Jeffrey Johnson and Stephen Young, I have investigated how behavioural differences in the way firms internationalize (time, market presence, entry mode) can be attributed to their International Entrepreneurial Culture (IEC). Given the tacit nature of our focal phenomenon, we adopted a qualitative, multiple case study design. We opted for a qualitative positivist approach to *case study research* (see Welch et al., 2011) with an emphasis on theory building through the development of testable propositions across settings (Eisenhardt, 1989). We chose this paradigmatic positioning (the theory-building view of Eisenhardt) as it emphasizes comparison and replication logic through the identification of patterns. This resonated with our research question that sought to investigate behavioural differences across dyads of internationalized SMEs. We examined 18 knowledge-intensive companies, using the firm-level process of opportunity exploitation as the principal unit of analysis. We sought to address the questions 'whether and how, if at all, there were differences in terms of IEC attitudinal characteristics linked to the pursuit of international opportunities (Dimitratos et al., 2016: 1214). We obtained evidence from a variety of data sources including company archives, in-depth interviews with managers and structured observation in different company settings in the USA, the UK and Greece. We found that firms within each of these dyads manifest dissimilar IEC features and hence dissimilar behaviour in international markets. Our findings were enriched by contextual nuances associated with industry sector, nationality, internationalization experience and size of the investigated companies.

How would it have mattered if you had adopted a different stance?

Our research question and our emphasis on theory building through replication and pattern matching inspired the ontological and epistemological positioning of the study. Adopting a different paradigmatic perspective would have changed the focus of the study and most likely generated different findings altogether. For example, a focus on managerial cognition and sense-making processes of opportunity exploitation would point to a constructivist approach, which allows bringing to the forefront the individual voices of our interviewees and shared meanings of the phenomenon contributing different nuances to IEC and internationalization debates.

TOP TIP

It is important to develop an understanding of philosophy of business research so as to select methodological authorities and sources that echo our own research questions, focus and philosophical assumptions. In doing so, we enhance the coherence of our work and avoid confusion.

Richard Thorpe discusses paradigms and research approches

Paradigms and research approaches

In this section, we review the philosophical positions and assumptions that underpin some of the more popular approaches and methodologies that you'll encounter when doing research into business and management.

In the context of academic research, some of the current approaches might be considered as *paradigms* because they contain distinct sets of assumptions about ontology and epistemology that are shared by supporters and that largely exclude adherence to other points of view. Others, perhaps less grand than paradigms, might be regarded as schools of thought, or meta-methodologies.

Epistemology and researcher engagement

Up to this point, we have reviewed the fundamental philosophical positions that underlie the practice of management and business research, with an emphasis on the epistemological dimension. In this section, we introduce a second dimension that is particularly relevant to both the status and the future potential of such research: the engagement of the researcher with the research context.

This second dimension contrasts two views on the relationship between researchers and the objects of their research: first, that researchers should strive to be independent of, and 'detached' from, the people and processes that they are studying; and second,

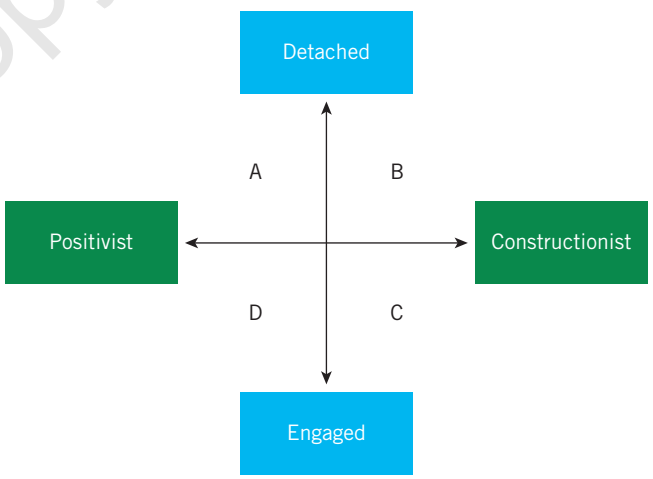

FIGURE 3.6 Epistemology and research style

that – when studying social systems like complex organizations – there is positive value in getting close to the things they are studying, and this is increasingly known as an '**engaged**' style of research.

engaged research involves close collaboration between academics and practitioners in determining the research aims, its implementation, and the practical implications

Thus, we can take the epistemological dimension of positivist–constructionist, and add this new dimension of detached–engaged. We will treat these as being orthogonal to each other, and this produces a two-by-two matrix, which is illustrated in Figure 3.6.

EXAMPLE 3.3

The analogy of the detective

In order to make sense of this matrix, consider the analogy of the business researcher and the fictional detective. Both are seeking answers to questions, albeit different kinds, and their careers and reputations depend on their ability to solve problems. In the case of the detective, to identify the murderer (normally within one or two hours if on TV); and for the researcher, to identify (for example) how the advent of social media is affecting public perceptions of organizations (within four months if an undergraduate project, or three years if a doctorate).

The point is that there are a number of distinct ways in which fictional detectives operate, and these are similar to the choices that researchers have when they conduct their investigations. Using the horizontal dimension of Figure 3.4, which represents two contrasting epistemologies, we can compare the scientific approach of Sherlock Holmes with the more intuitive style of the Agatha Christie character, Miss Marple. Whereas Holmes relies on detailed observation of physical evidence, and the process of logical deduction about the circumstances of the crime, Marple acts as an insider to the scene of the crime and makes use of her intuitive feel about the characters involved. Sherlock Holmes therefore represents the positivist side, and Miss Marple represents the constructionist side.

We can also identify characters who personify the vertical dimension in Figure 3.4. Thus, the other famous Agatha Christie character, Hercule Poirot, is a classic example of the detective who is totally *detached* and unruffled by the number of homicides that surround him as he travels around with his high-society friends. His only concern is his apparent inability to solve the crime immediately, although it is his superior intellect – those 'little grey cells' – that always enable him to get there in the end (and well before Superintendent Japp).

Poirot stands in sharp contrast to many of the Hollywood detectives, who become actively *engaged* in the world of the criminals they hunt, and who regularly provoke violent exchanges with their quarries. Clint Eastwood's portrayal of Dirty Harry provides an example of a cop who acts first and thinks later – in contrast to the effete, intellectual style of Hercule Poirot, who is all brain and no action.

Of course, the poles in Figure 3.6 represent extreme positions and, in many respects, it is interesting to explore the spaces between the axes, shown in the matrix as the four quadrants A, B, C and D. Continuing with the detective analogy briefly, in quadrant A, we could envisage Dr Temperance Brennan, the straight-laced scientist in the American forensic science drama *Bones*, or Amanda Burton who plays Professor Sam Ryan in *Silent Witness*. Both characters have high intellectual ability and demonstrate strong belief in the primacy of scientific technique. In quadrant B, we might find Inspector Morse, also

(Continued)

with a combination of his high intellect and his intuitive feel for the community in and around Oxford University. There would be many contenders for quadrant C, but perhaps our favourite would be lead detective Sarah Lund, who wears the same Nordic sweater throughout ten episodes of *The Killing*; highly intuitive, she is always getting herself into dangerous situations. Finally, for quadrant D, our favourite representative would be Lisbeth Salander, heroine of *The Girl with the Dragon Tattoo*, who combines extraordinary technical ability with devastating martial arts performance.

We have organized the research paradigms into a matrix of four quadrants, since they rarely fit precisely into any single category, and the quadrants provide greater flexibility. In developing this model, we were influenced by *Sociological Paradigms and Organisational Analysis* (Burrell and Morgan, 1979). Although the paradigms themselves are conceptually distinct, this does not necessarily mean that all research approaches fall neatly into one paradigm or another. Some fit neatly into one quadrant; others may spread over two or more.

In the sections that follow, we will review a number of different research approaches associated with each quadrant defined in Figure 3.6. We present them by the quadrant from which their primary inspiration comes.

Quadrant A: detached positivism

The scientific method

Scientific method is closely associated with positivism and therefore shares many of the same assumptions, including the need for independence of the observer from the subject of observation; specifying in advance the expected findings; and defining terms in ways that enable them to be measured. There is also a preference for large samples that can enable statistical analysis, in order to establish how far the results can be generalized.

Scientific method is used widely in most disciplines: it underpins most 'hard' sciences (such as physics, chemistry and biology) and medical research, but is also extensively used in business and management research, including in the areas of strategy, human resource management, market research, financial modelling and simulation.

One of the problems in management research is that the top journals are dominated by studies that use this scientific method. Roughly 80 per cent of papers published in the leading US-based journals are positivist, against around 25 per cent in the leading Europe-based journals (Easterby-Smith et al., 2009). The lack of balance here has several consequences. First, it discourages ambitious researchers from getting involved in more qualitative/constructionist approaches. Second, it means that research projects may try to follow positivist methods, when other methods would be both cheaper and more insightful. Third, there is a lack of understanding, and occasional intolerance, from researchers operating out of the scientific model when evaluating non-positivist work. This is because they unconsciously use the criteria for assessing positivist research to judge work that is based on another, sometimes incompatible paradigm.

critical realism an approach to social research with an explicit ontological position, which combines features of both positivism and constructionism

Critical realism

Critical realism is sometimes portrayed as a compromise position between the stronger versions of positivism and constructionism, but with more emphasis on the former. Over the last three decades, it has been adopted by a number of management and organizational researchers because it provides a structured way of thinking about social and organizational problems.

It starts with a realist ontology, which recognizes social conditions (such as class or wealth) as having real consequences, whether or not they are observed. It then incorporates a relativist thread, which recognizes that social life is both generated by the actions of individuals and has an external impact on them (Ackroyd and Fleetwood, 2000).

A key feature of critical realism is the idea of a 'structured ontology', which differentiates between three levels:

- the *empirical* domain, which comprises the experiences and perceptions that people have
- the *actual* domain, which comprises events and actions that take place, whether or not they are observed or detected
- the *real* domain, which comprises causal powers and mechanisms that cannot be detected directly, but that have real consequences for people and society (Bhaskar, 1978: 13).

These three domains correspond roughly to three of our ontological positions, respectively relativism, internal realism and realism.

Two other features are important in critical realism. First is the idea that causality exists as the potential – rather than the automatic – correlation of events (the latter is normally associated with strong positivism). Second is the idea drawn partly from critical theory (which we return to when discussing quadrant C) that many of these underlying mechanisms do not work in the interests of ordinary people and employees. So there is a more or less explicit focus on power and powerlessness – and an underlying assumption that greater awareness of underlying causes among those without power (ordinary people and employees) will provide potential for their emancipation from their effects. For example, a critical realist studying incentive systems may focus on how employees experience the effects of such schemes and their reaction to them. In many studies into pay, what is found is that managers tend to think that employees will behave in entirely rational ways: whenever additional pay is made available, employees will work harder to earn it, leading to higher pay for the employee and increased performance for the organization. Research has shown, however, that employees can operate in very different ways (Thorpe, 2000). Employees may use *whatever resources they have* in order to gain additional pay, and this does not necessarily lead to higher performance of the organization. For example, it can make sense for an employee to slow down midweek so that the firm schedules overtime.

We have located critical realism as being only just in the detached positivism quadrant because its proponents are explicit about its realist ontology; also, there is more emphasis on theory-building than on direct engagement with the world through empirical research. Still, there are implications for management and business research, suggesting an agenda that may be critical of the status quo.

Quadrant B: detached constructionism

Hermeneutics

hermeneutics a philosophy and methodology about the interpretation of texts; stresses that textual materials should be understood in the context within which they are written

Although **hermeneutics** were originally developed by Protestant groups in seventeenth-century Germany as a means of interpreting the Bible, the theory still has some relevance to management research. Essentially, it provides a way of interpreting textual material, which can comprise both formal written texts and spoken words that can be recorded. Two of the best-known proponents of hermeneutics are Ricoeur (1981) and Gadamer (1989).

Gadamer is particularly concerned about the context within which texts are written. He points out that contemporary interpretations of earlier texts are influenced by the culture in which the interpreter is located; so, in order to understand a particular text, one must try to understand what was going on in the world of the writer at the time that the text was written. When interpreting textual material, we therefore have to be aware that there may be no single correct interpretation of a particular text because both the writing and the reading will be context-dependent.

In the context of management research, some of the insights from hermeneutics have obvious relevance if the researcher wishes to analyse corporate documents such as annual reports. In this case, instead of (for example) conducting a content analysis of statements about the environment in annual reports for 1980, 1990 and 2000, one would need to analyse references in each report separately in relation to the social, economic and political context at each point of time. Thus, the analysis would be between context-based observations, rather than simple additions and enumerations of mentions.

Postmodernism

postmodernism
a collection of philosophies that are opposed to realism, and are generally critical of scientific progress

Postmodernism first came to wide academic attention with the English publication of Jean-François Lyotard's (1984) book, *The Postmodern Condition*, although the term had been used intermittently in relation to literary criticism since 1926 (Chia, 2008). A loose cluster of other (mainly French) philosophers have been associated with the development of ideas around postmodernity, including Derrida (1978) and Foucault (1979).

There are two key ideas to postmodernism. First, it provides a critique of scientific progress, suggesting that it is not necessarily a good thing. Lyotard, for example, examines the impacts of computerization on the control of knowledge, and demonstrates how technology enables many large corporations to become more powerful than states. Thus, scientific progress is discontinuous and contested, rather than linear and continuous. Second, postmodernism contains an ontological position, which is opposed to realism, in that it negates the possibility of a single truth and objective reality. As a consequence, it is associated with adopting a relativist stance and sometimes dismissed as supporting extreme relativism and even nihilism.

There are several implications for management research. First, the opposition to systematic control and regularity leads to an emphasis on flux and flexibility. Thus, postmodernists do not see organizations as static and monolithic, and this makes their perspective particularly appropriate for studying organizational dynamics and change. Second, the opposition to realism places an emphasis on the invisible elements and processes of organizations, including tacit knowledge and the informal processes of decision-making. Finally, postmodernism retains a critical edge and is sceptical about the role and motivation of large industrial organizations, and questions whether they are of lasting value to society.


Postmodernism

Quadrant C: engaged constructionism

Pragmatism

pragmatism
a philosophical position that argues that knowledge and understanding should be derived from direct experience

Pragmatism originated in the writings of early twentieth-century American philosophers, particularly William James ([1907] 1979) and John Dewey (1916). It is often seen as a compromise position between internal realism and relativism: it does not accept that there are predetermined theories or frameworks that shape knowledge and truth; nor does it accept that people can construct their own truths out of nothing. The key point is that any meaning or structures must come from the lived experience of individuals. Dewey, in particular, talks about the need to balance concrete and abstract on one hand, and reflection and observation on the other.

Pragmatism is a valuable perspective in management research because it focuses on processes that are particularly relevant to studies of knowledge and learning. Its impact on methods can be seen in the tradition and methods of grounded theory, which we discuss in some detail in the next chapter.

Critical theory

Critical theory started as an intellectual movement, also known as the Frankfurt School, which sought to critique the effects of society and technology on human development. The key figure in this movement is Habermas (1970), who argues that society leads to inequalities and alienation, yet this is invisible to people who do not realize what is taking place. He therefore argues that there is a degree of irrationality in capitalist society, which creates a false consciousness regarding wants and needs. Thus, people are, for example, seduced into wanting consumer products that they do not really need.

critical theory a philosophy that critiques the structures and outcomes of capitalist society, and examines how powerful members of society maintain their dominance over the less powerful members

Habermas (1970) also identifies clear differences between the natural and social sciences, the former being based on sense-related experiences, and the latter on communicative experiences. This means that although understanding in the natural sciences is one-way (monologic), with scientists observing inanimate objects, communication in the social sciences should be two-way (dialogic), with both researchers and the researched trying to make sense of the situation. Hence, Habermas suggests that it is only through dialogue that social scientists will be able to work effectively. He also introduced the important idea that knowledge is determined by interests, and that very often it is the more powerful people in society who determine what is regarded as 'true'.

Critical theory has several implications for management and organizational research. It casts a sceptical eye on the motives and impact of powerful groups and individuals, which – in an emancipatory way – shows a concern for the interests of the least powerful members. Of course, awareness of the way in which knowledge is determined by political processes is of increasing relevance – especially within knowledge-intensive organizations.

We have found it difficult to pin critical theory to a single location on the map in Figure 3.6. Perhaps this is because scholars working in this area are more concerned with theory than with empirical research. But the distinction made by Habermas (1970) between the natural and the social sciences suggests that research informed by critical theory should be located away from the scientific end of the map, and the importance given to dialogue as a potential basis for change means that it fits best in quadrant C.

Feminism

Feminism is critical of the status quo, but from a specific angle: that women's experiences have been undervalued by society and by scientific enquiry. From a philosophical viewpoint, it contains a strong critique of science on the grounds that women's perspectives have been ignored by most scientific enquiry, in at least five respects (Blaikie, 2007): there are very few women employed within science; there is gender bias in the definition of research problems; there is bias in the design and interpretation of research; there are too many rigid dualisms in male-dominated science; and science is not as rational and objective as it claims to be. Furthermore, feminist theory identifies similar processes operating in the social sciences, especially with structured interviews, which create a status difference between the interviewer and respondent, even when the interviewer is a woman (Cotterill, 1992). As such, feminist theory argues that external knowledge is impossible and that we must therefore understand human behaviour from within, through understanding the experiences of women themselves.

feminism a philosophy that argues that women's experiences and contributions are undervalued by society and by science; also an emancipatory movement to rectify these inequalities

There is also an emancipatory agenda to feminism, although in relation to social sciences, there is a split between epistemologies known as 'feminist empiricism' and those known as 'feminist standpoint'. The former assumes that the problem is not with science itself, but with the way it is conducted; therefore, there is a need to rectify the norms and procedures of the natural and the social sciences so that they incorporate a gendered perspective. The feminist standpoint, on the other hand, is more radical. It suggests that social science and its methods are fundamentally flawed, and need to be completely rethought. In particular, social science needs to include issues of power dynamics and gender differences, and should make far greater use of subjective experiences and the procedures of reflexivity.

The relevance of feminism to management research is that it provides not only a spotlight on the historical and continuing inequalities of women working in most organizations, but also sensitivity to other areas of discrimination within organizational life, which may be caused by other factors, such as race and age.

Structuration theory

structuration theory an epistemology that assumes that social structure and individual behaviour are interlinked, and that each is produced and reproduced by the other

Structuration theory is most associated with the work of Anthony Giddens (1984), who developed the idea of 'duality of structure': that structure and agency should not be regarded as pre-ordained. Instead, he suggested that social structures are created and recreated through social action and the agency of individuals – but that this structure then guides and constrains individual agency. Hence, there is a continual interaction between social structure and social action. We all interact in a context that is already structured but by interacting we (re)create and sometimes change the structure. From the perspective of structuration theory, agency and structure may therefore be seen as two sides of the same coin.

Philosophically, he is at pains to point out that the laws of the natural and the social sciences are fundamentally different, because the former are potentially universal, while the latter depend upon the context (including both structure and action) within which things are taking place.

He is also concerned about the use of language, pointing out that words are not precisely 'representational', and that their use depends on agreement about their meaning, which may be the product of debates and reinterpretations. Because language is essentially problematic, he therefore advocates that social scientists should try to avoid specialist language, because it potentially obscures and creates confusion for outsiders. In order to communicate insights from social science, he suggests that social scientists should attempt to use common-sense language in the normal course of their work.

In the context of management research, structuration theory has relevance to understanding the relationships between employees and the organizations within which they work, or between communications and the information systems that are supposed to facilitate them. In other words, it can throw light on aspects of organizations where there is some kind of structural duality.

Quadrant D: engaged positivism

Systems theory

Systems theory was first developed in the 1950s as an interdisciplinary methodology for studying systems, both living and inanimate. The key figure at the start was Ludwig von Bertalanffy, a biologist who developed systems theory from observations of systematic processes within biology.

Systems theory has a number of basic assumptions. First of all, there is the assumption that complex systems should be studied as wholes, rather than through breaking them

down into their constituent parts. Second is the idea that when studying systems, human or otherwise, it is the relationships between parts that provide the most important information. Third is the belief that there are common properties in all systems, which therefore provide the potential for methodological unification across the social sciences.

Two variants of the basic systems theories are soft systems methodology and critical systems theory. The former is distinguished from traditional systems methods by its focus on learning (Checkland, 1989: 278). It has been successful as a framework for students doing projects within companies, because it is designed to be used collaboratively when looking for unstructured problems within organizations. The second variant is critical systems theory, which adds elements of critical theory, such as the need to develop critical social awareness, accept pluralism in organizations, and have a concern for emancipation. This can be most useful when investigating situations that contain conflict or sharp differences in the power of participants.

Within business schools, the proponents of systems theory are most likely to be found in management science departments, project-management groups or IT units. Since the methodology associated with many systems approaches encourages engagement and active collaboration with companies and other organizations, this approach fits well with the wider agenda (in the UK, at least) of encouraging collaboration between universities and companies.

Mapping philosophies and approaches

In Figure 3.7, we provide a sketch of how these nine philosophies relate to each other against the basic epistemological dimension introduced earlier in this chapter. The positions are intended to be indicative rather than precise mappings.

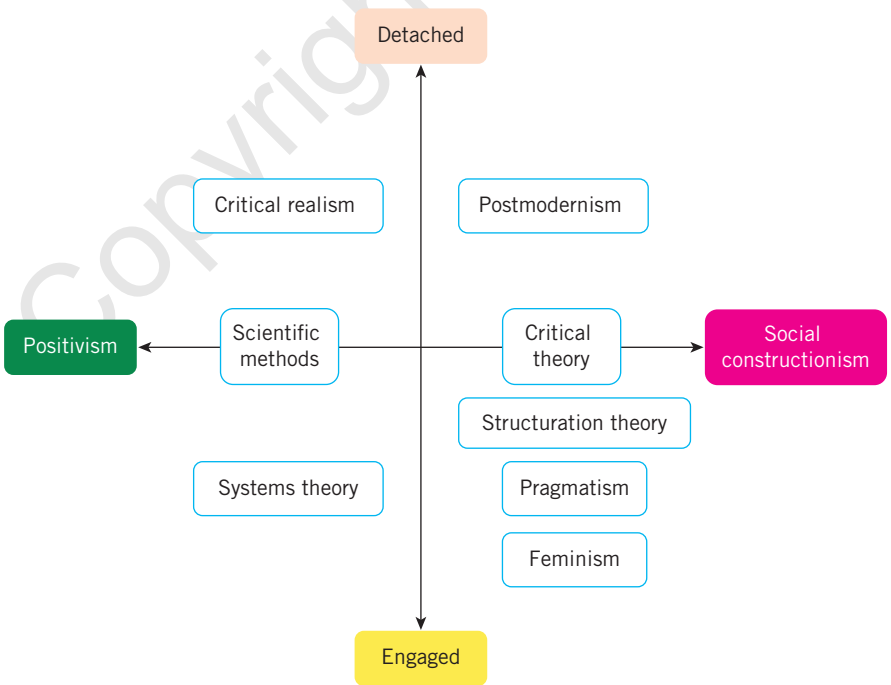

FIGURE 3.7 Mapping philosophies and approaches against epistemologies

Payment research

Some helpful examples of research on payment that cover all four quadrants are available on the book's website.

EXERCISE 3.4

Identifying philosophical positions

1 **Individual**: Write down a very brief description of some research that you are planning to do, or might do, including a title, the main question and how you would do it (one sentence for each). Consider:

- what ontology you are adopting (i.e. realist, internal realist, relativist or nominalist)
- what epistemology you are likely to adopt (strong/weak positivist or strong/weak constructionist).

Share your answers with two others and try to challenge the analysis that each provides.

2 **Group**: The idea of a 'balloon debate' is that contestants imagine that they are travelling in a hot-air balloon that is running out of fuel and is about to crash into a mountain. In order to save the lives of the majority, it is decided that one person must be tipped out of the basket. Each person in the basket must argue why they would represent the greatest loss to society if they were sacrificed. In groups of four or five people, argue the case for one of the philosophical positions outlined above. Each group should:

- pick one general philosophical position described in the penultimate section (i.e. critical theory, feminism, hermeneutics, etc.)
- summarize its main features
- draw out the methodological implications for researching a question or issue
- make the case to the rest of the class for why this is a valuable philosophy/method and why it should not be thrown out of the balloon.

After each group has presented, groups must identify one of two philosophies that should remain in the balloon. (There must be no self-nominations or tactical voting!)

Philosophy explained

It is worth watching the YouTube video 'How to get clear about method, methodology, epistemology and ontology, once and for all' in which David James explains how to get a clear understanding of these – once and for all.

Conclusion

> The way we think the world is (ontology) influences: what we think can be known about it (epistemology); how we think it can be investigated (methodology and research techniques); the kinds of theories we think can be constructed about it; and the political and policy stances we are prepared to take. (Fleetwood, 2005: 197)

In this chapter, we have concentrated on philosophies that underlie management research. Our main aim has been to help readers to identify philosophical assumptions underlying other people's work, and to understand how these might influence and assist their own research endeavours. At this point, we can emphasize the following key points:

- All researchers hold philosophical assumptions, although these are often tacit rather than explicit positions.
- Researchers need to be aware of their own philosophical assumptions.
- The strongest philosophical contrast is between realist and nominalist ontologies.
- There is usually correspondence between ontologies, epistemologies and methodologies.

In Chapter 5 we will start to work on how these philosophical positions influence specific research methods, and will provide a number of illustrations and practical exercises to assist in developing research plans and designs. But first, in the following Chapter 4, we examine research as an experience and examine how to engage with those involved in our research (research participants as well as supervisors and colleagues) and consider the ethics of management and business research.

Further reading

One of the few books that articulates what 'critical' management research looks like, and how it can be conducted , for example through increasing sensitivity to the aspects of organizations that normally lie hidden. Also provides a much deeper review of critical theory and why it is important:

Alvesson, M. and Deetz, S. (2000) *Doing Critical Management Research*. London: Sage.

A useful collection of readings that cover both the theoretical assumptions of critical realism and their applications to organizational research in different contexts, such as medicine and high-technology companies. The authors emphasize different features of critical realism and do not follow a single party line:

Ackroyd, S. and Fleetwood, S. (eds) (2000) *Realist Perspectives on Management and Organizations*. London: Routledge.

This book provides an excellent overview of different philosophical approaches to social research, with particular attention to the question of whether the research methods in the natural sciences are appropriate for the social sciences. It is quite comprehensive and very useful, provided you are prepared to put in the effort!

Blaikie, N. (2007) *Approaches to Social Enquiry*, 2nd edn. Cambridge: Polity Press.

A useful introduction to the principal epistemological debates in management research:

Johnson, P. and Duberley, J. (2000) *Understanding Management Research: An Introduction to Epistemology*. London: Sage.

Since postmodernism is such a wide and disparate field, it is probably best to start with edited collections. This book is one of a number of edited works on postmodernism, but has the advantage that it focuses on the relevance and application of postmodernism to organization

and management theory. Contributors include many of the leading European management scholars with expertise in postmodernism.

Hassard, J. and Parker, M. (eds) (1993) *Postmodernism and Organizations*. London: Sage.

For those interested in understanding organization as process, the following book provides a useful discussion of process philosophy and process studies drawing on some of the most influential thinkers on process theory:

Hernes, T. (2009) *Understanding Organization as Process: Theory for a Tangled World*. London: Routledge.

Check your understanding online

Visit the website **https://edge.sagepub.com/easterbysmith6e** for useful resources that will help reinforce what you've read in this chapter:


Take an interactive quiz to test your understanding of the key topics


Review suggested answers to Exercises 3.1 to 3.4 above


Use interactive flashcards to check your knowledge of essential concepts