

APPROACHES TO CONDUCTING RESEARCH IN MANAGEMENT SCIENCES : A PHILOSOPHICAL AND METHODOLOGICAL REFLECTION

INTRODUCTION

The field of management is a relatively new discipline. However, even in pre-modern times, one form of technique or the other was used in solving organisational problems. But as modern organisations become more and more complex, both in scope, content of activities and context, modern managers now face newer challenges at work. The organisation of work in modern times seems to have become a kind of jigsaw puzzle. This situation has arisen as a result of rapid growth and development of modern industrial activities in this century. The growth in industrial activities has also affected the activities of modern governments; and this seems to have ostensibly created a reciprocal interaction between the organised business activities of the entrepreneur and the development of policy instruments formulated by government to control business activities. The intensive nature of the interrelationship between the activities of industry and the public sector has generated a lot of debate as to how best to manage the scarce and limited resources of the modern state.

The situation is becoming more complicated, therefore, calls our attention to the introduction of more appropriate techniques in the organisation of work and work related activities at the work place. Some scholars (Shott 1979; Hochschild, 1979; Denzin, 1970; Becker, 1953) have argued that problems in management sciences could be solved through the use of analysing qualitative data in social research. Other scholars (Dantzig, 1967; Goodeve, 1948; Akcoff and Sasiemi, 1968, Kemper 1978a, 1978b) have argued that it is unlikely that problems in management sciences could be solved by merely analysing qualitative data in social enquiry. They argue that organisational problems could

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only be solved through the application of scientific tools in the analysis of data. The first group sees research in management sciences as involving the investigation and interpretation of the social world using qualitative techniques in the analysis of data. The second group sees all social action or the social world as an objective reality, therefore, could be investigated and interpreted using the commons of scientific principles and rigours applicable in the natural sciences. This debate has had a long standing tradition which appears to have defied any form of meaningful settlement. But management scientists should as a matter of necessity adopt a position if their studies are to be given a place of prominence in contemporary research agenda.

In view of the issues we have raised, what we have set out to do in this paper is threefold. First, we shall discuss assumptions relating to ontology, epistemology, models of human nature and methodology employed in analysing and interpreting the social world from the point of view of the subjectivist frame of reference. Second, we shall also discuss assumptions relating to ontology, epistemology, models of human nature and methodology, employed in positivism in the analysis and interpretation of data in management of social sciences. The third and perhaps final issue addressed here is an attempt to identify areas of pragmatic affinity between the two polarities-relativism and absolutism. This will be our contribution to the debate between relativist and absolutist scholars in their search for answers in interpreting the social world.

DEFINING MANAGEMENT SCIENCES

The term management sciences is used in a very broad sense in this paper. Management sciences among others include disciplines such as organisational behaviour, industrial or organisational psychology, industrial sociology, economics, operations research, political science, statistics, cultural anthropology, accountancy, personal management, organisation theory and all other related disciplines. Depending on the persuasion and school of thought of each contributor, the various disciplinary areas which constitute management sciences could as well be described as behavioural or social sciences. In this paper, we are not interested in the identification of semantical differences between different scholars. The terms management, behavioural or social sciences, therefore are used interchangeably.

RESEARCH APPROACHES IN MANAGEMENT SCIENCES : THE SUBJECTIVIST-OBJECTIVIST ASSUMPTIONS

Research approaches in management sciences could be typologised into two broad categories-the positivist or objectivist and subjectivist or relativist approaches. The positivist or relativist approaches in management sciences assumes or adopts scientific methodology in their method of data collection, analysis and interpretation. The positivist uses nomothetic methodology that are found in the natural sciences in the study of the social world. The subjectivist or relativist on the other hand assumes or adopts ideographic methodology in their method of data collection, analysis and interpretation. We shall explain the concept of nomothetic and ideographic methodologies later in this paper.

Management scientists have in the main adopted these two approaches in social enquiry. But there seems to be areas of conflict in the adoption of these two broad categories as a result of the unit of analysis in all management sciences. The view has been advanced that because the management sciences are concerned with the investigation and interpretation of social phenomena, it is wrong to adopt positivist methodology or scientific investigations that are popular in the natural sciences. But positivist scholars, on the other hand, have argued that irrespective of the environment and social context in which we find ourselves, the appropriate methodology to adopt in an attempt to establish any form of objective reality is through the use of methods that are adopted in the natural sciences.

There has been a long drawn argument between subjectivist and objectivist scholars in their analysis and understanding of the social world. These arguments are based on the premise that "all theories of organisation are based upon a philosophy of science and theory of society." It is therefore important to discuss the philosophical assumptions upon which the various approaches are predicated. Burrell and Morgan (1979) have argued that the convenience exists to conceptualise the management sciences based on four sets of assumptions. These assumptions, according to Burrell and Morgan, are related to ontology, epistemology, human nature and methodology.

It is the view of Burrell and Morgan (1979) that management scientists should see their subjects through "explicit or implicit assump-

tions about the nature of the social world and the way in which it may be investigated." The first set of assumptions are of an ontological nature. These are assumptions which concerns or deals with the very purpose of the phenomena to be studied or investigated. Management scientists are faced with a fundamental ontological question. This has to do with questions relating to the 'reality' to be investigated. Ontological assumptions create the necessary pathway for the researcher to understand the reasoning behind the very essence of studying any phenomenon. Ontological assumptions are made to stimulate individuals to ask questions relating to the phenomena they are investigating-to establish the fact, whether or not the phenomena to be investigated is real, and of an objective nature. Ontological assumptions are made by researchers to identify the nature of the phenomena to be investigated-whether the phenomena being investigated is concrete, hard, and has objective features and characteristics.

Burrell and Morgan (1979) went further to argue that, succeeding the assumptions relating to ontology are other associated assumptions which are essentially of an epistemological nature. Epistemological assumptions which we make as management scientists centre on the theory of knowledge. These are assumptions which have to do with how knowledge develops and is communicated to other people in intelligible form. The question of epistemological assumptions does not only address issues relating to communication of ideas or knowledge to people but also anchors on how to establish a line of divide between what is regarded as 'true' from what is regarded as 'false'. The ability to develop a level of consciousness to discriminate between what is generally regarded as true or false is what shapes our frame of reference. On a rather philosophical note, Burrell and Morgan (1979) have in fact argued that the "dichotomy of 'true' and 'false' itself presupposes a certain epistemological stance." All epistemological assumptions therefore are based on the "view of the nature of knowledge itself, whether knowledge could be identified and it's nature communicated as being hard, real or tangible or whether knowledge is something of softer, subjective, spiritual or even transcendental, which is based on our experience of the past. In other words, whether knowledge as a phenomenon could be acquired through learning or something which the individual has to experience personally.

Closely following the heels of the ontological and epistemological assumptions but which are "conceptionally separate" are a third set

of assumptions relating to 'human nature.' The assumptions relating to human nature tries to identify the relationship or tissue of connection between human beings and the environment in which they operate and transact. Burrell and Morgan (1979) have argued that there cannot be any meaningful discussion in the management sciences if the nature of human beings which form the object and subject of discussion is excluded. It is therefore possible to identify perspectives in the literature which advocate the view that human beings respond either in a mechanistic or deterministic way to situations they experience in the external world. If human beings respond in a mechanistic way to their environments, then the environments condition and shape their behaviours. But if human beings respond to their environments in a deterministic way then it is assumed that they create, control, manage and direct activities in their environments.

The three sets of assumptions discussed above have a symbiotic relationship and implication of a 'methodological nature.' Each of these assumptions has an overwhelming influence on the way we try to explain the social world. The kind of ontologies, epistemologies and nature of human beings determines the type of methodology one adopts in social research. There are methodologies used in the social sciences which conceptualise the social world in the same way as the natural world; as being objective, hard, "real and external to the individual." But there are others who see the social world in a rather subjective form, therefore softer and even of transcendental and spiritual nature. Burrell and Morgan (1979) have argued that if management scientists subject themselves to methodologies which treat the social world as a tangible entity, constituting any form of objective reality, then the issues involved border on the "analysis of relationship and regularities between the various elements which it comprises." The focus, therefore, is on how to identify and define the elements and how to design ways of expressing these relationships. The perspective that adopts a methodological stance which sees the social world as objective reality, attempts to establish principles and universal laws to explain and "govern the reality which is being observed."

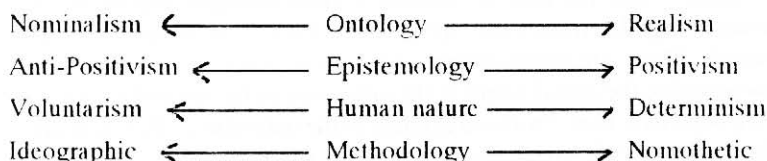
But if a management scientist subscribes to the view that society or the social world could be explained or created through the subjective experience of individuals, it means that our search for understanding the social world around us is based on the subjective experience of the

individual who is attempting to study and explain the social world. The central issue in this perspective border essentially on how individuals create, modify or interpret social phenomena via their understanding of the social world around them. The interpretation and explanation of the social world is seen to be a reflection of the unique features and finite provinces of meanings the individual gives to the phenomena under investigation. This approach in methodological parlance highlights the fact that the social world is on the whole relativistic in nature therefore, could be seen as "antiscientific" as opposed to the "ground rules" which are generally used in the natural sciences. Burrell and Morgan made an attempt to use a schema to illustrate the dimensions on which to explain the subjective - objective debate in social enquiry. Burrell and Morgan's (1979) schema is replicated below:

THE SUBJECTIVE- OBJECTIVE DIMENSION

The subjectivist approach
to social science

The objectivist approach
to social science



THE ONTOLOGICAL DEBATE BETWEEN NOMINALISM AND REALISM

The ontological debate between nominalist and realist conception of the social world has been a long drawn battle. The nominalist argument on what represents the social world anchors on the fact that what is regarded as social world external to the individual is merely the imagination of that individual, nothing but names, concepts, ideas, and labels used by individuals to describe situations. The nominalist does not accept the view that there exists any 'real' structure in the social world. The 'names' used by individuals are referred to as artificial creations whose value is merely to make sense in our analysis of situations and in negotiating the social world in which we are an integral part. The realist on the other hand argues that the social world in which we exist is something of an objective type. The social world of the realist is assumed

to be hard, tangible and is made of 'immutable structures.' The realist has postulated that whether we see, feel nor touch these structures, they still exist as 'empirical entities.' The realist developed the ontological argument that we may not even be aware of the existence of some of these structures therefore, cannot even give them names, labels or 'concepts to articulate them'. The realist has a strong belief that the social world exists quite differently and "independently of the individuals appreciation of it". The individual is born into the social world and learns to live within it. The individual cannot create the social world or any part thereof. The social world maintains an objective form therefore, determines the behaviour of the individual. Ontologically, it is argued that the existence of the social world is beyond the realm of imagination of the individual. The realist believes very fervently that the social world has an existence which is tangible with immutable structures, therefore is as much as the natural world.

THE EPISTEMOLOGICAL DEBATE BETWEEN ANTI-POSITIVISM AND POSITIVISM IN SOCIAL ENQUIRY

The epistemology of anti-positivism argues that it is practically impossible to establish regularities and search for general laws which could be used in defining, explaining and interpreting the social world. It is the view of the anti-positivist that the social world is highly relativistic, therefore, 'can only be understood from the point of view of the individuals who are directly involved in the activities which are to be studied'. Anti-positivists completely reject the notion of the 'observer', which dominates the epistemology of the positivist. Anti-positivists do not believe in the argument that those who observe situations and other social activities are better disposed towards understanding and explaining these activities. Anti-positivists argue that it is only possible to 'understand' social action or human activities if we put ourselves in the place of those individuals whose activities we are attempting to understand, while they are in action. They believe that we can only understand human activities from the 'inside' rather than the 'outside'. Anti-positivists do not believe that science can generate any form of objective knowledge.

Positivists on the other hand attempt to understand and interpret the social world by trying to establish regularities and general laws. Positivists themselves may differ in essentials and details in their search

for regularities and establishment of general laws but they are all in agreement as to how knowledge grows overtime. They all see knowledge as a cumulative process. Knowledge to them is like mental bricklaying. Anytime a new 'block' of knowledge is laid, the tendency is that the old knowledge becomes obsolete. It is therefore, important to tear down the old knowledge and allow the new stock of knowledge to assume its proper place. Positivist scholars believe in experimenting in their environments as a natural step towards establishing objective reality in the social world.

THE DEBATE BETWEEN VOLUNTARISM AND DETERMINISM AS MODELS OF HUMAN NATURE

There have been rival claims between positivists and anti-positivists as to the correct model of human nature in social scientific theory. The debate had rested on two extremes of a continuum, each group holding very fast to its claims of the proper model of human nature in social analysis. On one extreme are positivists, who hold a determinist view, arguing that man and his activities are determined by the situation in which he finds himself or the environment in which he exists and transact. On the opposite end of the continuum we have those who maintain a voluntaristic position, arguing that man is completely autonomous and free-willed. For management or social science theories to be imbibed and articulated by both determinists and voluntarists in an attempt to understand human nature they must adopt either of these two broad categories. But those who are unable to identify themselves with any one particular conceptual rubric should adopt a 'middle of the road' position by synthesizing the two extremes of a bipolar system to understand the correct nature of human beings. We shall discuss a possible point of convergence between positivism and relativism in understanding human nature, later in this paper.

THE METHODOLOGICAL DEBATE BETWEEN IDEOGRAPHIC AND NOMOTHETIC THEORY IN SOCIAL RESEARCH

The ideographic methodology in social research is concerned with the argument that to understand the social world requires the researcher to obtain first hand knowledge of the subject under investigation. This requires the investigator to have very close contact with the background and life-history of the subject of investigation. The ideographic

research methodology focuses on the analysis of the subjective information to be generated by the researcher. The information to be generated could be obtained by 'getting inside' the situation to be investigated and taking active part in the daily flow of activities. The researcher could analyse insights or information emanating from such encounters with one's subjects. This could be done through the analysis of information found in diaries, biographies, resumes and journalistic records. Blumer (1969) has argued that the ideographic research methodology emphasises the relevance and usefulness of allowing "one's subject unfold its nature and characteristics" while the investigation is going on.

The ideographic methodology was highlighted earlier by Glasser and Strauss (1967) in their 'Grounded Theory' approach in social research. Brown (1973) also discussed the concept of 'Grounded Theory' elaborately in his review of literature in respect of approaches to conducting research in management or social sciences. The 'Grounded Theory' approach highlights the fact that in all social scientific productions it is necessary for the researcher to collect as much information as possible, in view of the fact that the knowledge being sought for is 'grounded' in the data the researcher is able to collect. The Grounded Theory approach has little or no favour for a priori hypotheses formulation and testing. It is a research approach which assumes that as the researcher analyses the research data, the answers being looked for shall emerge as findings. The 'Grounded Theory' approach therefore ignores hypotheses formulation and testing but encourages the use of research questions.

Two important variants of the ideographic research methodology which have become acceptable and popular in management sciences are the concepts of interactionism and ethnomethodology. Interactionism as a research approach was popularised by Weber (1949) and Mead (1938). Interactionism as management science research approach is concerned with the 'interpretation of meaning'. The researcher interacts with respondents who are likely to act or react to the researcher's questions and the researcher interprets the actions of the respondents by giving meaning to such actions.

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involving the phenomenon under investigation. While actively participating in the group, the researcher is also observing, grasping and comprehending those aspects of people's culture which influence the behaviour of group members in organisation. Although this approach is relatively new in mainstream management science investigations but it has a fairly long historical tradition in cognitive anthropology and interactionist sociology. Since management science principles are essentially derived from both anthropological and sociological theory, it follows therefore, that what is new is the practice and what is not new is the theory.

The second major strand of the debate is the use of nomothetic methodology in conducting research in management sciences. The nomothetic approach to social enquiry lays a great deal of premium on the application of scientific techniques in the analysis and interpretation of data. The nomothetic approach to conducting research in management sciences, according to Burrell and Morgan (1979) places great emphasis "on the importance of basing research upon systematic protocol and technique". The nomothetic approach adopts techniques and methods characteristic of the natural sciences. It subjects all data to the crucible and rigours of scientific examination, which has as its focus the process of formulating and testing hypotheses. The major tool of analysis in the nomothetic approach to conducting research in management sciences is the use of quantitative techniques. The specific research instruments used in the nomothetic approach are surveys, questionnaires, personality tests and other standardised instruments.

The specific research instruments mentioned above form the basis of the nomothetic methodology in management sciences. These instruments are essentially statistical in character. The techniques that are relevant in analysing and interpreting social reality in management sciences are the non-parametric statistics. Other aspects of the nomothetic approach which are relevant in conducting research in management sciences is the use of operations research techniques. A fundamental feature of the use of scientific techniques in conducting research in management sciences "is its ideal of objectivity", a kind of ideal which subjects scientific knowledge to objective and impartial tests. The nomothetic methodology in conducting research in management sciences relies in explaining social phenomena via scientific experimentation. Scientism is the ideological preoccupation of the researcher who

adopts the nomothetic methodology in conducting research in management sciences. The analysis and interpretation of all social phenomena is based on the principles of sciences.

THE SUBJECTIVIST-OBJECTIVIST DEBATE IN CONDUCTING RESEARCH IN MANAGEMENT SCIENCES : THE NEED FOR A CONVERGENCE THESIS

Both anti-positivists and positivists have a common goal of analysing and interpreting social phenomena. They both have different ways of attempting to achieve the same goal-the issue is not that of goal-setting but the problem is how to get to the goal. The process of attempting to get to the goal is where the argument begins to tilt towards the two polarities.

If we examine the rival claims made by anti-positivists and positivists in their analysis and interpretation of social phenomena based on different ontologies, epistemologies, models of human nature, and methodologies, the view had been powerfully articulated that these are competing approaches in social research. While anti-positivists have argued that their approach to the analysis and interpretation of the social world is the only viable option open to the researcher, positivists have strongly condemned this claim, arguing that it is 'fatally wrong' to compare two approaches that are entirely different.

The wide polarity created by anti-positivists and positivists in their attempt to understand the social world has caused a great deal of concern among scholars. Dilthey (1976) has therefore made some efforts through the use of hermeneutics to establish some form of conceptual mediation and modulation between two competing polarities in social research. According to Burrell and Morgan (1979), "Hermeneutics is concerned with interpreting and understanding the products of the human mind which characterise the social world", (p. 236). It is Dilthey's thinking that over time, human-beings 'externalise the internal processes of their minds through the creation of cultural artefacts which attain an objective character'. Such cultural artefacts could be exemplified and typified in the form of 'institutions, works of arts, literature, languages, religions' and other forms of characterisations of human thought. Other scholars (such as Weber, 1949; Hughes, 1958; Runciman, 1972) have also shown great concern as to how best to reduce the gap between the

rival claims of antipositivists and positivists in their understanding of social reality. Johnnie (1991) in a rather philosophical discourse has argued that the boundary line between social constructionists (antipositivists) and positivists in their analysis and interpretation of the social world cannot be stretched beyond a breakable limit. This is because the arguments of both groups are all poised on the same continuum. But the demarcating point is merely the method adopted by each group to get closer to the 'truth'. Since what is regarded as 'true' or 'false' in management sciences is still a matter of the theoretical and ideological persuasion of each research. It is therefore difficult to conclude that one approach is superior to the other.

In an attempt to blur the contours of demarcation between the two research approaches adopted by anti-positivists and positivists, Bulmer (1984) has argued that any attempt to polarise the two dominant approaches stands the danger "of reifying the distinction between them and implying that each may be a self-contained and alternative method of social enquiry". He says this is not the true situation but the opposite of the truth. Bulmer went further to argue that different styles of research complement each other; and that a combination of different approaches can be fruitfully exploited to the advantage of management or social scientists. The view expressed above had earlier been advanced by Anderson (1972) when he argued that there is need to combine both qualitative and quantitative data in the analysis and interpretation of social phenomena. Using the same argument in sociological analysis, Coser (1984) has argued that sociology as a discipline is not sufficiently advanced "to rely on a precisely measurable variables". He believes that qualitative data collected within a small universe could theoretically provide a lead, which at a later stage in the development of the discipline could be subjected to the rigours of statistical analysis.

In another stimulating discourse, Sieber (1973) has highlighted the danger inherent in treating different research approaches as alternatives. Sieber has therefore advocated that it is likely to be more fruitful to combine different approaches within a single study. Sieber went on to argue that :

"The integration of research techniques within a single project opens up enormous opportunities for mutual advantage in each of the three major phases- design, data collection and analysis. These mutual benefits are

not merely quantitative.. but qualitative as well - one could almost say that a new style of research is born of the marriage of survey and field work methodology".

The argument presented above by Sieber was also supported by Warwick (1983) where the importance of "methodological marriages" was stressed. Warwick had insisted that it is important to adopt different approaches or styles, as the weaknesses of one approach may be counterbalanced by the other.

EPILOGUE

There is no one best method or approach to be adopted in social research. The approach should depend on the individual researcher, the unit of analysis, the research design and the context in which the study is to be carried out. Zelditch (1962) had demonstrated that there were several routes to obtain different types of information. Zelditch therefore, went on to argue that :

"Frequency distribution might best be obtained by enumerators and samples, but incidents and histories were illuminatingly studied by direct observation and institutionalised norms and statutes by interviewing informants".

There is therefore, no one 'best' method or approach in conducting research in management sciences. The best approach almost always is a function of the background of the researcher, the researchers ideological persuasion, the contextual factors militating in favour or against the researcher and the nature of the phenomena under investigation. The adoption of a combination of the different research approaches is likely to lead scholars in the management sciences closer to the 'truth'. But this does not mean that researchers in the management sciences should always adopt a combination of the two approaches simultaneously. Some studies may require a combination of both approaches, while others may require the adoption of single research approach .

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