

# Interpretivism approach in the study of workers behaviour psychology essay



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The study of worker's behaviour is a very complex phenomenon as it involves people's attitudes, feelings and behaviours, which characterise life in an organisation. The field of human behavior is solidly grounded by researcher such as Taylor, Maslow, Herzberg and Elton Mayo. With the pace of industrial revolution, studies are now more focused on areas such as job satisfaction and analysis, performance evaluation, employee motivation and the human factor at workplace. Hence, the interpretivism approach has gained momentum in the study of human behaviour.

This literature review will introduce the different research philosophies which have been used in the field of human behaviour, firstly, providing a descriptive analysis of the Positivist approach, which focuses on quantitative methods as opposed to the Interpretivist approach, which focuses on qualitative methods and secondly how the early approach to research in human behaviour has shifted towards qualitative methods as it enhances understanding of workers' behaviours in organisations and hence facilitate management decisions.

For decades, the way in which research is conducted has produced arguments relating to which research philosophies, approaches and strategies are best to follow. A research philosophy is a belief about the way in which data can be gathered, analysed and used. Galliers (1991) identified two major school of thoughts as Positivist (also called scientific) and interpretivist (also known as anti-positivist).

Positivism is a belief that it is possible to obtain objective knowledge through observation and that such knowledge is verified by statements about the

circumstances in which such knowledge is true. Smith (1998) provides a useful insight into positivist thinking within social sciences with this description: 'Positivist approaches to the social sciences . . . assume things can be studied as hard facts and the relationship between these facts can be established as scientific laws. For positivists, such laws have the status of truth and social objects can be studied in much the same way as natural objects'. In other words, Positivism views the social world as the natural world in terms of how it can be studied, because human behaviour is determined by rules and developed with social groups.

Positivism is considered to be an empirical testing of theories by means of experimentations before reaching a general principle. Positivism adopts a clear quantitative approach to investigating phenomena by using data that are objective, discernible and measurable. According to House (1983) 'evaluation of information is considered to be scientifically objective' in the sense that they can be verified by logical inspection regardless of who uses the techniques. Hence, the positivist approach to research is favoured due its exactness and impartiality. (e-International Relations, 2010).

Positivist research is usually conducted with a large number of participants. The research design tend to be comparative, hence the use of surveys or experimental designs is usually preferred. The methods used are more likely to produce quantifiable and testable data such as official statistics, structured interviews and observation. Typically, they are rigid, unchanging and free from social constraints. However, the use of these methods can sometimes be very expensive and time consuming. Thus, critics argue that the positivist approach yields useful, but limited data, which only provide a <https://assignbuster.com/interpretivism-approach-in-the-study-of-workers-behaviour-psychology-essay/>

superficial view of the phenomenon under investigation (Bond, 1993; Moccia, 1988; Payle, 1995)

Early positivist theorist in the field of organisational and human behaviour searched for underlying principles of what happens in organisational settings. They were concerned with efficiency, or how to economically maximise worker's productivity (Denhardt, 2008; Simon, 1947a). However, Dahl (1947) rejects the idea that the study of human behaviour could be classified as a positivist approach and could be designed as true experiments that produce uniform, reliable and verifiable data. A major criticism of the positivist approach is that it does not allow a comprehensive study and examination of human beings and their behaviours. Hence, the increasing importance of the human factor in the workplace leads to the emergent to a shift towards the interpretivist paradigm.

Interpretivism approach focuses on methods that examine people and their social behaviour (Gill and Johnson, 1997). This approach considers human beings as part of the social world, which exists due to the interaction and actions of human beings. It emphasises a search for meaning, understanding and social interaction as the basis for knowledge. According to Cantrell (1993, p84), the aims of interpretivist approach research are to understand phenomena, to interpret meaning within particular social and cultural contexts, and to uncover beliefs and elicit meaning from action and intention through dialogical interaction between researchers and participants.

According to the interpretivist view, the social world is open and changing by ways people go about their lives. Research methods therefore, must be

capable of capturing the quality of people's interpretations and understanding the meanings to people course of actions. Hence, the utility of qualitative data is preferred as it is more acquiescent to the study of organisation and human behavior. Qualitative research is a class of research methods in which the researcher actively interacting with the participants of the particular study (Muchinsky, 2003). In other words, the researcher gets involved with the phenomena being researched. Thus, qualitative research produces narrative descriptions of events as opposed to quantitative research which produces results in numerical data (Landy & Conte, 2004; Strauss & Corbin, 1990)

The interpretivist approach makes use of flexible and multiple methods, the most desirable way of studying a small sample in depth over time. The favoured common methods used include interviews, observational research and focus groups. The characteristics of these methods are extremes to those used in quantitative research as they are exploratory rather than explanatory and focus on meanings than establishing facts.

The interpretivist paradigm disagrees with the notion that human beings and its behaviour can be studied with scientific methods. Interpretivist theorists are more concerned with the study of organisation from inside as they assumed that a better understanding of how the company functions can only be achieved from the perspective of the workers. The favoured research design in Ethnography with the use of qualitative method such as observation is useful in answering questions on why employees behave the way they do in organisations and what happens in the organisation (Ehigie, R. I & Ehigie B. O, 2005: 621-638).

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Ethnography study is by means of which you assess people in their day to day activities, their behaviour and culture in a natural setting. Fetterman (1998) describes it as the art and science of describing a group or a culture. The group can be categorised as work group, organisations or team of individuals where as culture can be the prevailing culture in an organisation. Ethnography can be used to gain understanding of the real world context, social as well as work settings (Hughes et al, 1995; Blomberg et al, 1993). Bret et al (2003) argues that since organisations are presently turning towards the use of work teams, ethnography studies have become an important research method in understanding the complex interactions with work teams. Hence, the use of ethnographic methods help in gathering information by mainly watching and talking with people, and by scrutinising documented reports and records (Riemer, 2008: 205).

Observation is one of the ethnographic methods used by researchers to observe the population of the phenomena to be studied to develop an understanding of their behaviour and culture. The personnel of an organisation who usually make use of this method are supervisors, human resource experts as by nature of their job responsibilities they are expected to observe worker's behaviour on the job (Krumm, 2001). Frederick Taylor, one of the early contributors in the study of motivation and performance at work carried out series of experiments at the Bethlehem Steel Company which included non-participant observation of workers. As the workers were constantly aware that they were being observed, there was a drastic change in their work pattern and consequently resulted to improvement in work performance, organisation productivity and earnings. Taylor (1856-1915)

advocated that monetary rewards were the main cause of motivation, therefore observational studies on workers did not affect their performance, as they were driven by the financial rewards they would achieve by their course of actions.

A very good example of participant observation can be related to the “Hawthorne experiments” allegedly conducted by Elton Mayo. The researchers involved in the Hawthorne Experiments did not understand the impact of human values and interaction until they personally interacted with the workers (Denhardt, 2009: 3). Thus, through this interaction they had a better understanding of the workers' actions in relation to the working environment.

However, observational studies are also criticised as only small samples can be investigated such as in the case of Taylor's research which was only conducted on manual workers. It is believed that if the research was conducted on white collar workers the findings would have been different. Another criticism by (Muchinsky, 2003; Sackett & Larsen, 1990), observation is not frequently used in the study of human behaviour as it relies extensively on time and energy. One criticism of Mayo's research is that the population involved knew that they were being studied. The critics argued that to capture a clearer picture of the research, the participants should not be made aware that they are being studied. Despite these criticisms, it is believed that Taylor's observational studies have immensely contributed to present day management and gave birth to the concept of performance related pay system.

To summarise, it can be argued that qualitative methods found its way in the study of both organisational and human behaviour. However, as a researcher to understand the phenomenon being studied, the use of converging information from different sources, regardless of its form is more advisable. Although Spector (2005) argued that qualitative methods of research offer an alternative to the highly quantitative methods, it is opined that both quantitative and qualitative research methods can help researchers understand issues better than either of the two separately. The use of qualitative methods is growing in the study of organisational and human behaviour (Lee, 1999) as human element are substantially emphasised in an organisation. Although the qualitative methods have significantly contributed to our understanding of human behaviour in the organisations, many avenues for future research are still open and new ones continue to emerge.