Positivist and interpretivist research

Qualitative research can be defined as, 'A multi-method in focus, involving an interpretive, naturalistic approach to its subject matter. This means that qualitative researchers study things in their natural settings, attempting to make sense of or interpret phenomena in terms of the meanings people bring to them. Qualitative research involves the studied use and collection of a variety of empirical materials case study, personal experience, introspective, life story interview, observational, historical, interactional, and visual texts-that describe routine and problematic moments and meaning in individuals' lives' (Denzin and Lincoln, 1994). Qualitative research emphasizes qualities of entities - the processes and meanings that occur naturally (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000).

Qualitative research methods have for many years made a significant contribution to management research. In this essay, I critically evaluate Gephart's paper on qualitative research, where he writes pertaining to traditional research methods such as positivism and post positivism, interpretive research and critical postmodernism. In the second part of the essay, I evaluate David Silverman's " On Finding and Manufacturing Qualitative Data" from the book " A Very Short, Fairly Interesting and Reasonably Cheap Book about Qualitative Research" where his methodology merges with the two methods highlighted in Gephart's paper.

Gephart in his paper brings to light three main research traditions used in management research. They are positivism and postpositivism, interpretive research and critical post modernism, which have evolved from the behaviourist and cognitive perspectives of qualitative research. In this part

of the essay I shall give an overview about the three research traditions and the distinctions between them.

Positivist and post positivist research traditions arise from the behaviourist perspective of qualitative research which is based on the knowledge of consistent relationships. The term " positivism" was first introduced by Auguste Comte, " Our doctrine is one which renders hypocrisy and oppression alike impossible. And it now stands forward as the result of all the efforts of the past, for the regeneration of order, which, whether considered individually or socially, is so deeply compromised by the anarchy of the present time. It establishes a fundamental principle by which true philosophy and sound polity are brought into correlation; a principle which can be felt as well as proved, and which is at once the keystone of a system and a basis of government." (Auguste Comte, 1798-1857).

A major tenet of logical positivism is its " thesis of the unity of science" (Hempel, 1969 & Kolakowski, 1968). In its broadest sense, positivism is a position that holds the goal of knowledge. In a positivist view of the world, science is seen as the way to get at truth, to understand the world well enough to predict and control it. In other words, Positivism assumes an a priori (truth) which is discoverable through methodical, rigorous, careful observation that can be proven through testable and repeatable methodologies.

A post-positivist might begin by recognizing that the way scientists think and work and the way people think in their everyday life are not distinctly different. It can be defined as, non-foundational approach to human

knowledge that rejects the view that knowledge is erected on absolutely secure foundation" for there are not such things; Post-positivists accept fallibilism (the philosophical doctrine that absolute knowledge is impossible) as an unavoidable fact of life (Phillips & Burbules, 2000). It is characterized by a more nuanced belief in an ontologically realist " out there" reality that can only be known within some level of probability (Groat & Wang, 2002). Additionally, Post-positivists concede that the " experimental methodologies employed in the natural sciences are often inappropriate for research involving people" (Groat & Wang, 2002). Within Post-positivist methodologies, the researcher is autonomous from the subject of inquiry, objectivity is important, and the inquirer manipulates and observes in a dispassionate, objective manner. This perspective assumes modified experimental, manipulative methodologies that can include both qualitative and quantitative practices (Denzin & Lincoln, 2003). Positivism and post-positivism are almost similar, the only difference is, Post-positivism takes into account the criticisms against and weakness of the rigidity of positivism, and now informs much contemporary social science research, including reality-oriented qualitative inquiry (Patton, 1990).

Interpretive research tradition arises from the cognitive perspective of qualitative research which is based on shared understanding and awareness of multiple social and organisational realities. The foundation assumption for interpretive research is that knowledge is gained or at least filtered, through social constructions such as language, consciousness, and shared meanings (Klein & Myers, 1999). In addition to the emphasis on the socially constructed nature of reality, interpretive research acknowledges the

intimate relationship between the researcher and what is being explored, and the situational constraints shaping this process. Interpretive research traditions take the position that humans are social animals that live in societies and as such investigate and interpret lived experience and their inter subjective realities (Bruce H. Rowlands, 2005). Interpretive researchers thus attempt to understand phenomena through accessing the meanings participants assign to them (Orlikowski & Baroudi, 1991). Unlike atoms, molecules and electrons, people create and attach their own meanings to the world around them and to the behaviour that they manifest in that world (Schutz, 1973). Interpretive studies assume that people create and associate their own subjective and inter-subjective meanings as they interact with the world around them.

Positivism and Interpretive research can be distinguished as objective versus subjective (Burrell & Morgan, 1979), nomothetic versus idiographic (Luthans & Davis, 1982), quantitative versus qualitative (Van Maanen, 1979), outsider versus insider (Evered & Louis, 1981), and etic versus emic (Morey & Luthans, 1984).

Critical postmodernism transcends mere description or reconstructs reality and derives meaning from situations through its critical approach. Critical postmodern theory is about the play of differences of micro political movements and impulses of ecology, feminism, multiculturalism, and spirituality without any unifying demand for theoretical integration or methodological consistency (Boje, Fitzgibbons & Steingard, 1996). Critical postmodern is definable as the nexus of critical theory, post colonialism, critical pedagogy and postmodern theory (Boje, 2001). Critical postmodern

theory is a way to get a clearer understanding of the relation between modern and postmodern, and take a Deleuzian journey into the middle of the hybridity of pre-modern, modern, and postmodern (Boje, 1995). Critical postmodern spatial theory privileges the lived spatialities of left-margined communities as sites of socio-spatial critique. A postmodern identity politics enacts critical postmodern spatial theory by nurturing the development of, and solidarity between, 'counter publics', which are subaltern community spaces where private spatialities of alienation are brought to public discourse (Allen, 1999). This tradition is focused on how meanings and reality are shaped over time and seeks to uncover and understand the historical evolution of these meanings, practices, contradictions and expose hidden inequalities in societies.

The five distinguishing characteristics of the three research traditions (i) positivism and post positivism (ii) interpretive research and (iii) critical postmodernism, are as follows.

First is in terms of the underlying assumptions about reality. Positivism and postpositivism adheres to realism and rely on the assumption of an objective world external to the mind that is mirrored by scientific data and theories; interpretive approach proceeds through the advocacy of relativism with investigation proceeding with data derived from interlinking contextual realities so that data holds both objective and subjective characters; while critical postmodernism adheres to historical realism or the assumption that material or symbolic reality comprised by multidimensional values that crystallizes over time so that the investigation involves the collection of objective and subjective data.

Second is in terms of the goal of the investigation. Positivism and post-positivism proceeds with the goal of discovering truths, interpretive research is in line with the goal of describing and understanding of meanings, and critical postmodernism is guided by the goal to uncover hidden interests and contradictions in order to arrive at criticisms that in turn facilitate change.

Third is in terms of the tasks involved in the investigation. Positivism and postpositivism involves the identification, explanation and control of variables directed towards the verification of hypothesis or non-falsified hypotheses, interpretive research applies through producing descriptions of members' meaning and definitions of situation in order to have a clear understanding of the manner that reality is constructed, while critical postmodernism involves the task of determining insights from the structures of relationships and historical changes that reveal contradictions.

Fourth is in relation to the unit of analysis of the research traditions. Positivism and postpositivism utilises variables as the core unit of analysis, interpretive research focuses on verbal and non verbal actions, while critical postmodernism centres on contradictions, criticism, signs and symbolism as key elements of the research. Variables become the core unit of analyses because of their objective reality. Verbal and non verbal are the units of analyses in interpretive research because of their subjective nature. Conflict, criticism and symbolism are the core unit of analyses of postmodernism because these elements appropriately capture historical realism.

Fifth is with regard to the focus of the methods. Positivism and postpositivism involves the discovery of facts and the comparison of these

facts with predefined hypothesis or propositions, 'interpretive research does not predefine dependent or independent variables, does not set out to test hypotheses, but aims to produce an understanding of the social context of the phenomenon and the process whereby the phenomenon influences and is influenced by the social context' (Walsham, 1995), while critical postmodernism involves the derivation and understanding of historical evolution of meanings, conflicts and inequities evolving through time as the method of data gathering and analyses.

Since positivism and post positivism involve objective reality, the methods that apply in these research are those useful in gathering facts while methods able to derive meaning appropriately applies to interpretive research and critical postmodernism because these should be able to capture subjective realities in order to derive meaning.

Over the last generation there has been a shift in qualitative methods, from a scientist-oriented research, toward a more dynamic representational strategy . Beginning in the late 19th century, Antipositivism was perhaps the first movement to challenge the rigid nature of dominant Positivism. Early Antipositivists like Wilhelm Dilthey (1833-1911), Heinrich Rickert (1863-1936) and later, Max Weber (1864-1920), addresses the Positivist failure to " appreciate the fundamental experience of life, and instead favour physical and mental regularities, neglecting the meaningful experience that was really the defining characteristic of human phenomena". Adorno, 1969 (cited in Fuchs. C & Sandoval. M., 'Positivism, Postmodernism, or Critical Theory? : A Case Study of Communications Students' Understanding of Criticism) stresses that positivism is only oriented on appearance, whereas critical

theory stresses the difference between essence and appearance. Above all, critical theory, poststructuralism, and postmodernism are effective as critiques of positivism, interrogating taken-for-granted assumptions about the ways in which people write and read science (Stockman, 1984). Such opinions against positivism lead to a breakthrough from positivism to other research traditions such as interpretive research and critical postmodernism which meet the needs of current researchers.

In contradiction to Gephart, Silverman takes a rather interpretive and critical postmodernist stance when writing his piece about manufactured data and found data. Silverman in his paper uses Sack's insights to support the positive things that can be learnt through observations (found data) and the critique view on the use of interview data (manufactured data). He also states that researchers prefer to manufacture data using artificial research settings such as interviews and focus group which use pre-determined research questions. Manufacture of data to answer a specified research problem is precisely the method which quantitative or positivist researchers prefer as explained by Gephart. Alternatively, naturally occurring (found) data arises from being aware that the research situation is not straight forward as eliciting data from interviews. Indeed collecting data through reading, looking, listening, facial expressions, sights, sounds, smells etc are taken into account. It provides a broader perspective of the research problem in hand when compared to manufactured data.

Data manufactured through interview talk is approached with very different expectations, this can be explained by, The meaning of an answer is not a straightforward matter of external or internal reference, but also depends on

the local and broader discursive system in which the utterance is embedded (Wetherell & Potter, 1988). Positivist might interpret interviews in a different manner when compared to interpretive and critical postmodernist.

Positivist researchers believe that their research methods and data mirror reality. The positivist researcher might strive to discover objectively the truth hidden in the subject's mind, 'Rather than an interviewee providing prepared/manufactured responses to standard questions designed to be unbiased and neutral, we strive to engage in social construction of a narrative with our participants. In this way we hope to activate the respondent's 'stock of knowledge''. (Richie and Rigano, 2001: 744, cited in 'Post-Positivist Approaches To Research : Anne B Ryan). 'We regard ourselves as people who conduct research among other people, learning with them, rather than conducting research on them (Wolcott, 1990). 'Researchers don't ask themselves 'is this the truth?' Rather, we talk about the issues raised during the interviews, the participants' reactions, and our interpretations of these interwoven ideas. In this context, it seems right to open up the interpretive discussions [to our respondents], not for them to confirm or disconfirm them, but to share our thinking and how the ideas might be used.' (Richie and Rigano, 2001: 752, cited in 'Post-Positivist Approaches To Research : Anne B Ryan)

Use of manufactured data in qualitative research might make the respondent bias his result, as stated by Crotty (1998) Leading to the epistemological idea that the very act of observation causes a particle to behave differently. Sacks states that, we can treat what people say as an account which positions itself in a particular context. Here the researcher is viewing what

people say as an activity awaiting analysis, thus the researcher's interpretations play a key role in manufacturing data. Bringing " such subjectivity to the fore, backed with quality arguments rather than statistical exactness" (Garcia & Quek, 1997).

Many researchers have criticized the use of manufactured data in qualitative research, which is the positivist view as stated by Gephart and the greater use of naturally occurring data or found data which is the interpretivistic approach. The Dead Social Scientist Test describes manufactured data as, 'The test is whether the interaction would have taken place in the form that it did had the researcher not been born or if the researcher had got run over on the way to the university that morning'(Potter, 1996). In all research, the choice of data depends on the research problem. " Equally, there is no question that all polarities should be investigated - particularly where, as here, they involve an appeal to 'nature'' (Speer 2002). As Kuhn (1964) stated in his publication 'The structure of Scientific Knowledge', scientists work withinâ€" and are constrained byâ€" prevailing " paradigms" while questioning the " alleged objectivity and value-free neutrality of scientific discovery".

Interpretive approach is synonymous with ethnography. " Doing ethnography" is doing an interpretation of the behaviour of human subjects in their local settings. Interpretivistic do not reject the concept of a ``real world'' out there but presented the ``reality'' which mattered most and they try to understand the respondents response in their own terms. Researchers are the measuring instruments and their understanding will derive from personal experience rather than manipulation of variables, as

Hirschman(1986) puts it, personally experienced knowledge serves as scientific data. Reality has to be constructed through the researcher's interpretation and ability to communicate the respondent's reality; hence the researcher has to be a part of the research to conduct a successful research. Qualitative researchers can access naturally occurring data by finding everyday features in extraordinary settings, this is an interpretive approach.

Naturally occurring data can serve as a wonderful basis for theorizing about things that the researcher would never imagine. What ordinarily happens in the world around us means 'we can start with things that are not currently imaginable, by showing that they happened' (Sacks, 1992). Sanday (1979) states that, empathy and identification with the observed people are needed to go about the understanding held by the human subjects. Geertz says that, the trick is not to get yourself into some inner correspondence with your informants. The researcher uses ethnography and manages to interpret an individual behaviour in such a way that it no longer appears to be absurd but appears rational. A successful interpretation is one which makes clear the meaning originally present in a confused, fragmented, cloudy form.. what is initially strange, mystifying, puzzling, contradictory (for the researcher) is no longer so, is accounted for (Taylor, 1979).

As stated by Potter (2002), naturally occurring data opens up a wide variety of novel issues that are outside the prior expectations embedded in interview questions. In addition to the interpretive approach through the critical approach, the researcher is able to delve into the determination of differential characteristics, nature of conflict, aspects underlying differences and conflicts, and consequences of differences and conflict which help to

address the issues that arise in naturally occurring data. With these types of information derived through the application of critical postmodernist tradition, the investigative approach is able to assess data and explain reasons for these differences and conflicts that in turn catalyses the determination of solutions that leads to eventual change.

It can be supported as with the following evidence. Critical postmodern theory is a way to get a clearer understanding of the relation between modern and postmodern, and take a Deleuzian journey into the middle of the hybridity of pre-modern, modern, and postmodern (Boje, 1995). A critical postmodern project can move us beyond exploitation, racism, sexism, and abuse by reframing and restoring organization theory away from its patriarchal lingo in order to reaffirm social justice, equality, democracy, and the wonders of multiplicity (Boje, 1995: 1004). In a critical postmodern theory, such as Tamara, we can explore the 'micro-practices' of organizational life, as well as contextualize the stories of the marginal Other, within the workings of a post-industrial supply and distribution chain addicted to sweatshops, and the cover-stories produced and distributed by the postmodern storytelling organizations that turn out consumer identities and spectacles for mass consumption (Boje, 1995: 998-2). On the plus side, there is always resistance to the forces of global and individual domination and exploitation that stem from the strange hybridity of premodern, modern, and postmodern organizing amalgams. Ultimately, the criticism provides insights into historical events to catalyse change that should be for the betterment of relationships and systems.

It can be summarised that good qualitative research is difficult and challenging to undertake. Data manufactured through artificial research settings such as interviews and focus groups restricts the information available to the researcher and it also leads to biased results since the respondent is aware of the researcher's need. The positivist researcher might strive to manufacture data by discovering objectively the truth hidden in the subject's mind; while interpretivist tries to collect naturally occurring data by understanding the respondent's response in their own terms. Reality has to be constructed through the researcher's interpretation and ability to communicate the respondent's reality; hence as Silverman states the researcher has to be a part of the research to conduct a successful research.

Thus naturally occurring data (interpretivist) is more suitable for qualitative research than manufactured data (positivist) because,

- Naturally occurring data does not flood the research setting with the researcher's own categories (embedded in questions, probes, stimuli, vignette and so on)
- It does not put people on the position of disinterested experts on their own and others' practices and thoughts.
- It does not leave the researcher does not leave the researcher to make a range of more or else problematic inferences from the data collection arena to topic as the topic itself is directly studied.
- It opens a wide variety of novel issues that are outside the prior expectations embedded in, say, interview questions.
- It is a rich record of peoples living their lives, pursuing goals, managing institutional tasks and so on. (Potter, 2002)

Ultimately the type of data used in qualitative research depends on the research topic hence researchers prefer to combine and test their observations by asking questions from the research sample.

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