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**QUALITATIVE
METHODSⁱⁿ
2nd
EDITION BUSINESS
RESEARCH**



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RESEARCH PHILOSOPHY

This chapter will provide information on:

- the relevance of philosophical issues in business research
- the key concepts and positions of the philosophy of science
- the logic of how theory and empirical analysis are related
- the role of reflexivity in qualitative research.

THE RELEVANCE OF PHILOSOPHICAL ISSUES IN BUSINESS RESEARCH

There are several issues that you need to take into consideration when starting a research project. Some of these are more practical by nature, relating to the research design and process, the planning of the practicalities concerning data acquisition, access to the research site, gathering materials and analyzing them. We will valorize most of these issues throughout the book, and we will discuss in detail in Chapter 3 the entire planning process that relates in general to research design.

Among the issues that you need to consider at the beginning of your research project are the philosophical aspects and questions that lurk behind every research method and methodological approach. In order to gain a good understanding of what you can do with methods in your research, you should at least be somewhat

familiar with the basic philosophical concepts, positions and traditions. All research methods are closely connected to research philosophy and to the ways it is possible to bring forward new knowledge through research.

Many practically-oriented business researchers do not explicitly state the philosophical viewpoints of their research. These are not always necessary to explicate. However, this often implies that they either find philosophical questions as non-relevant in their research settings, or take their own philosophical position as self-evident and known. The latter case is particularly prevalent in mainstream quantitative research.

In fact, it often happens during business research seminars, wherein philosophical discussions arise, especially in relation to qualitative business research settings. There can be several reasons for this. Qualitative research offers an alternative to the mainstream quantitative research approach, and it also often allows for the discussion of the taken-for-granted philosophical assumptions of quantitative research.

It is possible to do qualitative business research without much knowledge of the basic concepts in the philosophy of social sciences that concern various ways of doing research. We think that it is helpful for you to have knowledge of the basic philosophical concepts and ideas for research in order to be able to design a solid piece of study that delivers what it promises (Box 2.1). Statements – and clarity in thinking – about what constitutes your research phenomenon have implications for the ways in which it is possible to gain knowledge of it.

The exploration of philosophical concepts assists you in specifying your overall research design and strategy. These will in turn set the directions for your research, how to proceed from your research questions to the conclusions. You will need to make decisions about the type of empirical data you will collect, how you will analyze them, rules about how to interpret the analyses, and ideas about how to present your conclusions. The exploration of the basic philosophical concepts will also help you in making decisions about the issues that all have effect on your research design: what kinds of questions do you ask in your research, and in what ways can you answer those questions with your research?

BOX 2.1

The relevance of philosophical issues

Understanding philosophical issues provides you with a better understanding about:

- why researchers are interested in different topics and research questions;
- why qualitative research can be performed in many ways;
- why qualitative data can be collected and analyzed in many differing ways;
- why different methods are being used in analyzing the data.

Qualitative approaches attach to philosophical questions in different ways

It is particularly relevant for a novice business researcher to learn that qualitative research approaches can be related to the philosophy of social sciences in differing ways. Most research approaches are not related to only one specific tradition of the philosophy of science. This means that methods can be used within several philosophical traditions; therefore, you do not necessarily need to be an expert in the philosophy of science to get it right. For example, case study (see Chapter 11), action research (see Chapter 13) and focus group research (see Chapter 14) can be used in research with connections to several philosophical traditions.

On the other hand, some qualitative research approaches do sign up for specific philosophical thinking through their theoretical ideas and attachments. A good example of these approaches is critical research, which draws to a varying degree on critical theory (see Chapter 18). When you choose to follow these approaches in your research project, it is advisable to learn more about the philosophical questions and developments of that particular approach.

Reflexivity in qualitative research

With the constant growth of information and research knowledge, it becomes ever more important to assess the 'production process' of that knowledge and the knowledge itself. In practice, this usually means that you reflect on how you produce knowledge as a researcher, what kind of knowledge it is, and how you can relate this new knowledge to other knowledge you might already have. This everyday reflection is a way to think through your research project throughout the entire process.

In scientific thinking, reflection bears the same idea as in everyday life. It means careful reconsideration of knowledge: how it is produced, described and justified. Reflexivity is especially important when you think of your epistemological assumptions and commitments in research. On what basis knowledge is argued for and claimed is a question that is not solely related to qualitative research, but to all research knowledge. However, it is most often discussed and brought forward in a qualitative research setting, to add to the transparency of knowledge claims and sources of information, and to open up the relationships that exist between the knower, that is, you as a researcher, and your subjects of interest, that is, the economy, society, organizations, companies, firms and the people who work there.

KEY CONCEPTS OF THE PHILOSOPHY OF SCIENCE

Ontology, epistemology, methodology and methods are key concepts in the philosophy of social sciences. For many researchers, ontology, epistemology and methodology together can be related to each other as a unifying framework, or even one unified view that some

researchers have called a paradigm (Burrell and Morgan, 1979; Guba and Lincoln, 1994). ‘Paradigm’ as a term has been diluted and come to signify different things in business studies, ranging from meta-theoretical aspects in research to different types of classifications made on the basis of theories, methods used, even empirical research topics.

All these concepts – ontology, epistemology, methodology and methods – relate to each other, but in various ways, depending on the more general philosophical position of your research. In this chapter we will introduce some key philosophical concepts and positions, and discuss their relation to the qualitative research approaches that we illustrate in this book (Box 2.2).

BOX 2.2

Some key philosophical concepts

Questions that the key philosophical concepts aim to answer:

<i>Ontology</i>	What is there in the world?
<i>Epistemology</i>	What is knowledge and what are the sources and limits of knowledge?
<i>Methodology</i>	How can knowledge about a given issue or problem be produced?
<i>Methods</i>	What are the specific ways of data collection and analysis that can be used?
<i>Paradigm</i>	What are the conceptual and/or methodological models that relate to a scientific discipline during a particular period of time?

Ontology

Ontology concerns the ideas about the existence of and relationship between people, society and the world in general. Ontological assumptions embrace all theories and methodological positions. Several of the qualitative approaches that we will introduce in this book are based on the ontological assumption in which reality is understood as being some form of subjectivism. This means that reality is understood to be based upon perceptions, and experiences that may be different for each person, and may change over time and context. However, the conceptual understandings of reality can be shared.

In comparison, in most quantitative research it is usual to assume that the social world exists for everyone as a distinctive and separate, that is, objective, reality. The division between objectivism and subjectivism is one aspect of ontology in philosophy, which refers to the study of conceptions of reality. Instead of subjectivism, the term constructionism is often used to describe the social nature of reality.

Objectivism as an ontological starting point assumes that the social world exists independently of people and their actions and activities. The objectivist view on

ontology assumes that social reality has an independent existence outside the knower, that is, you as a researcher. Constructionism, on the other hand, assumes that social actors produce social reality through social interaction. This means that they also can change their views and understandings of social reality through interaction.

In other words, the subjectivist view on ontology (i.e. constructionism) assumes that the reality for a knower, such as you, is the outputting of social and cognitive processes. Therefore, two realities alike cannot exist. A focal point in the social constructionist view is that reality does not exist outside individuals; 'reality' is always about individuals' and groups' interpretations (Blaikie, 1993: 94).

When considering the ontological perspective of your research, you should think about what you see as the fundamental properties in the social world that are worth studying. This may sound rather difficult, because ontological assumptions are usually more or less taken for granted. Let us look at an example. If you are interested in studying what managers do and why, you must first decide whether you believe that they act, for instance, on the basis of biologically determined personalities, cognitively adopted attitudes, or socially constructed identities. All three interest fields can indicate very different world views in terms of what is considered as essential in existence and being, what should be studied, and how it can be studied.

Epistemology

In addition to ontology, which focuses on the question 'What is there in the world?', it is helpful to understand what epistemology in research means. Ontological claims in research are closely related to epistemological claims, and they usually are discussed together. Epistemology is concerned with the questions 'What is knowledge?' and 'What are the sources and limits of knowledge?'

As well, in epistemology there is an objectivist and a subjectivist view. According to the objective view in epistemology, it is possible that there exists a world that is external and theory neutral. According to the subjective epistemological view, no access to the external world beyond our own observations and interpretations is possible.

In addition, there are several avenues from which epistemology can be discussed (Box 2.3). These directions do not conflate to the qualitative–quantitative divide, but are based on the ways through which knowledge claims are made. We will take these up as an initial orientation to epistemic questions of research, and to show you the complexity that lies behind each method. In case you are interested in finding out more about the differences between epistemological directions, you can read specific literature or attend a course in the philosophy of sciences and social sciences.

Understanding the above-mentioned aspects, of what can be known that exists, makes it easier for any researcher to realize that whatever knowledge we produce in research, that knowledge is seldom based on one unified idea of science and research.

Instead, different and equally legitimate philosophically embedded views exist regarding how and in what ways we can know the world. This is the basic assumption concerning the methods and knowledge on methodological tools.

Within epistemology, there are several schools of thoughts that are associated with the main philosophical positions in social science, which we will introduce later in this chapter. First, there is empiricism, in which reality is constituted of observable material things. Empiricism is associated with the philosophical position called positivism. Second, there is subjectivism, which views reality as being socially constructed. This means that knowledge is available only through social actors. This epistemological view is associated with the position called interpretivism. Third, there is substantialism, which takes reality as material, but acknowledges that people interpret it differently in different times and contexts. This epistemological view is most often associated with the position called critical realism.

BOX 2.3

Foundation for different epistemological directions

The key division between different epistemological directions lies in three basic assumptions.

1. Epistemologies differ in terms of whether or not they can be considered as being 'foundationalist' epistemologies. Foundationalist epistemologies seek permanent and reliable criteria for knowledge that is produced in research.
2. Epistemologies differ in terms of the role that they give to the researcher. Is the researcher an autonomous and detached knower, or are they part of the knowledge production process, and if so, to what extent?
3. Epistemologies differ in terms of how they establish the relationship between idea and object, or concept and observation. The concept can be separate, it can be closely related and even corresponding, or it can be contextually different from observation (Schwandt, 2001: 71).

Methodologies and methods

Methodologies are concerned with how we come to know of the world, but they are more practical in nature than epistemologies. Epistemology and methodology are closely related: the former involves the philosophy of how we come to know the world, whereas the latter involves the same from a practical point of view. Methodology refers to organizing principles, which provide the procedure for guiding the research process and research design that you will learn about in Chapter 3.

Sometimes methodology is called the philosophy of methods. The focal point of methodology is to describe how a given issue or problem can be studied. David Silverman (2005: 4) writes that methodologies can be defined broadly and schematically (e.g. quantitative and qualitative methodologies), or narrowly and precisely (e.g. grounded theory, case study, ethnography).

Methodology is focused on the specific ways (that is, the methods) that we use in research when trying to understand our world better. Methods are often divided into methods of data collection (e.g. interviews, observation) and methods of data analysis (e.g. thematic analysis, narrative analysis). In the method chapters of Part III on qualitative research approaches and methods (Chapters 11–20), you will learn more about these. Although some methods are better suited to some methodologies (e.g. observation with ethnography, or in a broader sense with qualitative methodology), they are not rigidly bound to each other in the way that certain methodologies would rely on a very restricted body of methods.

Paradigm

Very often in research methods books, and even in textbooks, you will find the term ‘paradigm’. The historian of science Thomas Kuhn gave the term paradigm the meaning that has become common and much used sometimes even misused within the research context. Kuhn referred to the set of practices that define a scientific discipline during a particular period of time. As a natural scientist, Kuhn did not consider the concept of paradigm to be appropriate for describing development in the social sciences.

Kuhn (1970), in his book *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*, writes that he developed the concept of ‘paradigm’ so as to be able to distinguish the development of social sciences from the development within the natural sciences. He had observed that the researchers in social science were never in agreement on theories, concepts or methodologies. Therefore, he concluded that although there cannot be any paradigms in the social sciences, social sciences are in a pre-paradigmatic phase in the development of scientific knowledge. For a paradigm, researchers need to share not only theories, but also a shared basis for theory choice (Kuhn, 1977: 322).

Despite this, the concept of paradigm is widely used in social sciences and in business research. In this discussion, paradigm as a term has shifted away from the original remarks made by Kuhn, and can be defined as a world view or a belief system that guides a researcher in their work (Guba and Lincoln, 1994). Burrell and Morgan’s (1979) model of ‘four sociological paradigms for organizational analysis’ gained wide popularity among business researchers in the 1980s and 1990s.

Even if Kuhn did not argue that paradigms would be invariable, they sometimes were mistakenly taken as such in the discussions. Also, the description of competing

paradigms of inquiry that was introduced in 1994 by Guba and Lincoln is often referred to. They identify positivism, postpositivism, critical theory, and constructionism as the major paradigms that frame social science research. They also claim that these paradigms compete for acceptance as the paradigm of choice in qualitative research. More recently, management and business researchers have been more concerned about epistemological discussions than debating on paradigms (Willmott, 1997; Johnson and Duberley, 2000; Seirafi, 2013).

THE MAIN PHILOSOPHICAL POSITIONS

As is the case with many other terms and concepts, social scientists use the main philosophical concepts in somewhat differing ways. The issues that we discuss here under the title of ‘philosophical positions’ can be found in other methodology books under such titles as ‘paradigms’, ‘epistemologies’, or ‘research philosophies’ and ‘research traditions’.

Also, the divisions made between philosophical positions vary in literature. Several textbooks label all qualitative research as being interpretative, but some prefer to make distinctions between various philosophical positions that inform qualitative research, including, among other things, postpositivism, critical realism, constructionism, and postmodernism. This is because some qualitative research is more inclined to follow the natural science model with hypothesis testing, etc. This is due to the differences in the epistemological and, more generally, philosophical positions of research settings. In the following, we will briefly describe the most common philosophical positions that business researchers rely on and describe how they direct research interests (Box 2.4).

BOX 2.4

The main philosophical positions

Positivism: knowledge of the world is obtained through applying the scientific methods to experiences and to the empirical world.

Postpositivism: a reformed version of positivism, which also includes critique towards the basic assumptions of positivism.

Critical realism: combines some of the ideas in positivist and constructionist thinking; concerned with the identification of the structures of the world.

Interpretivism and constructionism: background in hermeneutics and phenomenology; concerned with subjective and shared meanings.

Hermeneutics: refers to the necessary condition of interpretation and understanding as part of the research process.

Postmodernism: rejects the positivist, rational and generalizable basis for scientific research, which would explain the world from an objective standpoint.

Post-structuralism: stands for the most extreme rejection of positivism within postmodernism.

Positivism and postpositivism

Management and organization researchers Johnson and Duberley (2000: 38) have suggested that positivism, also known as logical positivism, is the mainstream philosophical position of management studies. They propose that while management as science is fragmented and diffuse, positivism has been one programme to unify management research. Another additional explanation for the dominance of positivism lies in the nature of management and business knowledge. This knowledge is often functional by nature, and there is a desire for universal truth that would hold fast across industries, businesses, cultures and countries. Often, managerial implications in research are seen as important value added. These aspects can call for a positivist approach in research settings.

Positivism, a term coined by Auguste Comte (1798–1857), refers to an assumption that only legitimate knowledge can be found from experience.

According to the basic claim of positivism, research produces facts and accounts that correspond to an independent reality, is value free and prioritizes observation. Positivists believe in empiricism: the idea that observation and measurement are the essence of scientific endeavour. The key approach of the scientific method is the experiment in which the operationalization of issues that are studied is the prevailing idea: only things that are measurable can be dealt with.

There are also several directions within positivism. At first, positivism relied on empiricism as the foundationalist epistemology, but lately positivism has moved towards a non-foundationalist epistemology. Despite its several directions, positivisms in plural share some basic ideas of knowledge production, according to which the aim of research should be in finding causal explanations and regularities. Various versions of positivism find methodological unity in natural and social sciences, and sign for value-free science ideals. These elements of positivism can be found in most positivist research as the core orientation, and within qualitative and quantitative business research.

Positivism does have relevance in business research, but it is more closely related to the logic of, and ways for doing, quantitative research. Also, qualitative research can subscribe to some version of positivism, when hypothesis (or theory) testing is at the

forefront in research. Further, older versions of the grounded theory approach accept some ideas of positivism in research (for more, see Chapter 15). Other philosophical approaches have more relevance for qualitative research than positivism.

Postpositivism (also known as postempiricism) has developed through the main criticism of positivism. It argues that the knower and the known cannot be separated (as positivism claims). It also questions the idea of a shared, single reality. It suggests that, although human beings cannot perfectly understand reality, researchers can approach it with rigorous data collection and analysis. Postpositivist thinking is influential within qualitative research, as it covers philosophical positions and methodologies as different as scientific and critical realism, grounded theory (Glaser and Strauss, 1967), and symbolic interactionism (Blumer, 1969). Furthermore, the detailed ways of analyzing qualitative data devised by Miles and Huberman (1994), for example, are often called postpositivist.

Critical realism

Critical realism agrees with positivists that there is an observable world, independent of human consciousness. At the same time, it suggests that knowledge about the world is socially constructed. Critical realism is closely related to the works of Roy Bhaskar and Rom Harré (Danermark et al., 2002). Critical realists use the word ‘critical’ in a particular way. This will be discussed in detail in Chapter 18.

In business research, Johnson and Duberley (2000), Reed (2005), Contu and Willmott (2005) and Delbridge (2014) suggest that critical realism provides one alternative for those studying management and organization. Johnson and Duberley (2000) have suggested that critical realism allows you to use multi-methodological approaches, which, in turn, enhance more detailed and accurate analyses when looking for causalities in companies’ development, for example. Adoption of critical realism in business research is not, however, an easy or uncontested approach. Labeling research as ‘critical research’ does not yet cover the basic features of critical studies needed in critical research (Poutanen, 2016), as discussed in Chapter 18.

Interpretivism and constructionism

There are many forms of interpretivism and constructionism, but common to all of these is a concern with subjective and shared meanings. These philosophical positions are interested in how people, as individuals or as a group, interpret and understand social events and settings. As much of the qualitative research focuses on human action and understanding, interpretation is an important part of any analysis of qualitative materials. The philosophical base of interpretative and constructionist research is in hermeneutics and in phenomenology, which have an influence on the ideas of social construction of reality (Berger and Luckmann, 1967).

Interpretative and constructionist researchers start out with the assumption that access to shared dynamic, and changing and individually constructed reality, is only through social constructions such as language and shared meanings. This is why interpretative and constructionist research does not only focus on the content of empirical data, but also on how the content is produced through language practices. Furthermore, research done from these philosophical positions does not predefine dependent and independent variables, but focuses on the full complexity of human sense making as the situations emerge. It is also assumed that there are many possible interpretations of the same data, all of which are potentially meaningful.

Perhaps the dominant form of current interpretative research is social constructionism, which was introduced by Berger and Luckmann in their book published in 1967. Social constructionism seeks to understand how the seemingly 'objective' features, such as industries, organizations and technologies, are constituted by subjective meanings of individuals and intersubjective processes such as discourses. Since Berger and Luckmann, several versions of the social constructionism have been presented.

Vivien Burr (1995) identifies four basic assumptions of the social constructionist philosophical position. First, it takes a critical stance towards taken-for-granted knowledge, trying to open it up for discussion. It is assumed that the world does not present itself objectively to the observer, but is known through human experience, which is mediated by language. Second, the categories in language that are used to classify things around us are produced through social interaction within a group of individuals at a particular time and in a particular place. Third, knowledge is sustained by social processes and conventions of communication. Fourth, knowledge and social action go together.

In this view, reality is socially constructed by interconnected patterns of communication. Therefore, reality is not defined by individual acts, but by complex and organized patterns of ongoing actions. Schwandt (2001: 32) remarks that there are both weak and strong versions of social constructionism that differ in their views regarding the social construction of everything. For qualitative research, constructionist views on knowledge production are useful, as they emphasize the close relationship between researcher and researched field, interaction and understanding, as basic tenets of research. Reflexivity is one key part of constructionism.

Hermeneutics

Hermeneutics is a term that originates from Friedrich Schleiermacher (1768–1834). Also, the term 'interpretivism' is often used for hermeneutics. Hermeneutics refers to the necessary condition of interpretation and understanding as part of the research process: the inescapable action of interpretation (*verstehen*) taking place in all research. It is ontological by nature, but still, hermeneutics and interpretivism have given resonance to later epistemological developments in asserting that there

is a fundamental difference between natural science's and social science's subject matters: human intentions are crucially moulding and changing the reality. Because of this, understanding of human intentions is needed, and it is the understanding of human actions that is the foundation for all knowledge in social sciences. Much of qualitative research focuses on human actions and understanding; therefore, interpretation is indeed an important part in any qualitative research.

Postmodernism and post-structuralism

Since the 1980s, postmodernism has attracted considerable interest among qualitative researchers. In terms of the philosophy of social sciences, postmodernism is a non-foundationalist epistemology. It rejects the positivist, rational and generalizable basis for scientific research, which would explain the world from an objective standpoint. The most extreme rejection of positivism within postmodernism is post-structuralism. It is derived from the idea of deconstruction (Derrida, 1978), which holds that there are no grounds for truth outside the text. Postmodernism in philosophy signs for epistemology with a small 'e'. This means that it rejects any common or shared ground for knowing. When doing this, it also rejects the 'knower' as an authority of any knowledge.

Postmodernism has had a strong appeal, especially within organization studies, culturally-oriented marketing studies, and strategic management research, especially in the early 1990s. Knights and Morgan (1991) presented a classic analysis of corporate strategy as discourse, and Hassard and Parker (1993) edited a comprehensive collection of the postmodern research in management studies. On the other hand, Alvesson and Willmott (2003) edited a book that took critical distance from postmodern research in management studies. It now seems that the direct influence of postmodernism is on the decline in business research, but it has had influence on the way research is done, not only through the emphasis on language and its role, but also by emphasizing the heterogeneity of researched issues and the ways the knowledge is understood in heterogeneous ways. As such, if we look at the ways the knowledge is produced in business studies, we can identify both a 'rational' and a 'social' approach (Longino, 2002; Poutanen, 2007). A good overall account of the influence of postmodernism in management studies can be found, for example, in Johnson and Duberley (2000).

BASIC ASPECTS OF INQUIRY

How to bring forward knowledge about the world in research? There are two basic models of social science research, called deduction and induction, that, to a large extent, cover the different general models of science according to which scientific knowledge is achieved. In addition, some researchers prefer to describe their study

following the abduction logic. Inductive reasoning draws from observed cases more general statements or general claims about most cases of the same kind. Deductive reasoning is concerned with the formulation of hypotheses and theories from which particular phenomena can then be explained.

Even though a particular study may look like it is purely deductive (e.g. an experiment designed to test the hypothesized effects of some treatment on some outcome), most social research involves both inductive and deductive reasoning processes at some point in the same project. Therefore, it is good to keep in mind that labelling your research as deductive, inductive, or abductive does not, by itself, tell the reader exactly how your research process proceeded. Nor does it alone justify your methodological choices.

If you want to use these terms in explaining the logic of your research, you should be careful to describe in more detail how you have applied inductive or deductive reasoning in the course of your research.

Deduction

Despite divergent business disciplines, the idea of deduction in research has been by far the strongest way to build up the theoretical knowledge base. Deduction rests on the idea that theory is the first source of knowledge. On the basis of what is known about a phenomenon theoretically, the researcher is able to deduce one or more hypotheses. The hypotheses are then subjected to empirical study. The process of deduction is linear, following the logic of proceeding from theory to empirical research. The certainty in theory development is gained through hypothesis testing in empirical scrutiny. As multi-discipline approaches and differing ideas of the role and nature of theories in research have emerged, the strict deductive model of research is not considered suitable for most qualitative business research.

Induction

Much of the (quantitative) business research follows the logic of theory testing through hypothesis scrutiny in the empirical world. However, many business study researchers find this model lacking because they see theories as outcomes of empirical research, not prior to it. Theories can also be seen as corrective modes concerning findings or even publications that come forward during the research process (Johnson and Duberley, 2000; Alvesson, Hardy and Harley, 2008). Therefore, induction in research has gained a firm foothold. When you take the relationship between theory and empirical research as inductive, you follow the logic of proceeding from empirical research to theoretical results.

In other words, the research process develops, starting from empirical materials, not from theoretical propositions.

Abduction

These two 'ideal types' of research logic or traditions, deduction and induction, seldom exist as clear-cut alternatives. Many researchers use both induction and deduction in different phases of their study, which means that you move iteratively between these two during a research process. Some research methods books offer abduction as a way to combine deduction and induction in one research project. Abduction refers to the process of moving from the everyday descriptions and meanings given by people, to categories and concepts that create the basis of an understanding or an explanation of the phenomenon described.

Abduction, as defined by philosopher Charles Sanders Peirce, can be considered as the logic of exploratory data analysis. For Peirce, abduction referred to the process of generating new ideas or hypotheses. According to his idea, deduction can be used to evaluate the hypotheses and the induction for justifying them with empirical data (Staat, 1993; Schwandt, 2001). In practice, abduction is difficult to dissect from the iterative work taking place in all empirical research. Some researchers also talk about the hermeneutic circle in much the same meaning and relate abduction closer to interpretivism. In general, no single model of scientific research is used, as the whole research process most often consists of various forms of reasoning.

This chapter has briefly illustrated the complexity of the conceptual grid of philosophy that embraces the knowledge of and about the different research methods. You do not always need to explicate your philosophical position and commitments in great detail, nor do you need to know the most advanced philosophical conceptual discussions when you write a thesis on business-related issues. However, it is most often useful to be knowledgeable of the key concepts and background assumptions of each method.

Finally, research methods and their use change and develop over time. It is important to keep in mind that, if the qualitative research approach that you choose is based on, and shows an interest in philosophical questions, there is no excuse for you to be ignorant about them.

KEY POINTS OF THE CHAPTER

The key concepts, their content and relationships between ontology, epistemology, methodology and method are not fixed, and there are different ways of understanding and relating to each other the philosophical and methodological commitments in knowledge production.

The main philosophical traditions and positions that are relevant for qualitative business research are positivism and its different forms, critical realism, interpretivism and constructionism, hermeneutics, postmodernism and post-structuralism.

The concepts of deduction, induction and abduction clarify the way and direction for arguments and knowledge claims. However, although they can seldom be found purely presented, almost all qualitative research uses all three logics.

Reflexivity is an increasingly important part of any research design and can be related to the basic premises of knowledge production, theories and methods used and to the results of the research. It valorizes the modes of knowledge production we sign for in our research.

FURTHER READING

The articles 'Reflecting on Reflexivity: Reflexive Textual Practices in Organization and Management Theory', by Alvesson, Hardy and Harley (2008), and 'Multiplicity and Reflexivity in Organizational Research', by Davison, Steyaert, Marti and Michels (2012) both discuss the ways in which researchers think about and discuss their understanding of their own research field.

Understanding Management Research by Johnson and Duberley (2000) gives a balanced overview of the different paradigmatic views and research traditions within contemporary management research.

EXERCISE 2.1

Analyzing the philosophical and methodological choices of qualitative research

The purpose of this exercise is to learn to understand the relevance of philosophical commitment in qualitative research and their connection to the overall logic of the research.

Choose one recently published doctoral thesis. Read through the thesis by focusing on its philosophical background and the logic of the research in particular.

Answer the following questions:

1. What is the philosophical background of this research? How clearly does the researcher explicate their position?
2. What is the logic of the research? How clearly does the researcher explicate the logic of the research? Does it follow inductive, deductive or abductive reasoning? In what ways?
3. Do you find the philosophical background of the study compatible with its overall logic? Why? Why not?

EXERCISE 2.2

Analyzing the relationship between the philosophical and methodological choices of qualitative research

The purpose of this exercise is to learn to recognize the connections between philosophical commitments and chosen qualitative research methods and methodology.

Choose one recently published doctoral thesis that is using qualitative methodology. Read through the thesis.

Answer the following questions:

1. How and in what ways is the philosophical positioning of the qualitative approach and methodology chosen in the research shown in the dissertation?
2. Elaborate and explicate the connections between the philosophical concepts used and the methodology chosen.