ST3004: Research Methods

Research Design
Research Design

- You have defined your Research Question.
  - You know what you want to find out.

- You have done your Literature Review.
  - You know what is already known about what you want to find out.
  - You know the gaps you need to fill in order to answer your question.

- Now you need to figure out the best way to fill those gaps – Research Design.
The Research Onion

Source: © Mark Saunders, Philip Lewis and Adrian Thornhill 2008

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Research Philosophies

- Relates to the development of knowledge and the nature of that knowledge.

- The research philosophy you adopt contains important assumptions about the way in which you view the world.

- These assumptions will underpin your research strategy and the methods you choose as part of that strategy.
Research Philosophies

- Within the scope of business studies in particular there are four main research philosophies:
  - Positivism
  - Realism
  - Interpretivism
  - Pragmatism
What’s the difference?

Different Philosophies make different assumptions about

- **Ontology**: The researcher’s view of the nature of reality or being.

- **Epistemology**: the researcher’s view regarding what constitutes acceptable knowledge

- **Axiology**: the researcher’s view of the role of values in research
Postivism

- **Ontology**: Reality is external, objective and independent of social actors

- **Epistemology**: Only observable phenomena can provide credible data, facts. Focus on causality and law-like generalisations.

- **Axiology**: Research is undertaken in a value-free way, the researcher is independent of the data and maintains an objective stance

*Source: Saunders et al, 2008*
Positivism

- Adheres to the view that only “factual” knowledge gained through observation (the senses), including measurement, is trustworthy.

- The assumption is that the researcher is independent of and neither affects nor is affected by the subject of the research.

- Data collected is viewed as independent of researcher.

- Emphasis on quantifiable observations and statistical analysis.

- Data collection techniques most often used: Highly structured, large samples, measurement...

- Common in natural sciences.
Realism

- **Direct realism** can be described as “what you see is what you get”. In other words, direct realism portrays the world through personal human senses.

- **Critical realism**, on the other hand, argues that humans experience the real world through sensations and images and sometimes these can be deceptive.
Realism

Squares A and B appear to be different colours.

**Direct realists** would state that squares A and B have different colours, because this is what they see.

**Critical realists** recognise that our senses and other factors may get in the way between us as researchers and researched reality.

Therefore, critical realists may notice that squares A and B are actually the same colour and only look different because of neighbouring contrasting squares.
Realism

- **Ontology**: The nature of reality is objective. Exists independently of human thoughts and beliefs or knowledge of their existence (realist), but is interpreted through social conditioning (critical realist).

- **Epistemology**: Observable phenomena provide credible data, facts. Insufficient data means inaccuracies in sensations (direct realism). Alternatively, phenomena create sensations which are open to misinterpretation (critical realism). Focus on explaining within a context/s.

- **Axiology**: Research is value laden; the researcher is biased by world views, cultural experiences and upbringing. These will impact on the research.

*Source: Saunders et al, 2008*
Interpretivism

- **Ontology**: Socially constructed, subjective, may change, multiple

- **Epistemology**: Subjective meanings and social phenomena. Focus upon the details of situation, a reality behind these details, subjective meanings motivating actions

- **Axiology**: Research is value bound, the researcher is part of what is being researched, cannot be separated and so will be subjective

*Source: Saunders et al, 2008*
Interpretivism

- Incorporates role of human beings as subjects and social actors in situations

- Interpretive researchers assume that access to reality (given or socially constructed) is only through social constructions such as language, consciousness, shared meanings, and instruments.

- Particularly relevant to: organisational behaviour, sales, marketing, HR, economics

- Data collection techniques most often used: Small samples, in-depth investigations, qualitative
Pragmatism

- **Ontology**: External, multiple, view chosen to best enable answering of research question

- **Epistemology**: Either or both observable phenomena and subjective meanings can provide acceptable knowledge dependent upon the research question. Focus on practical applied research, integrating different perspectives to help interpret the data

- **Axiology**: Values play a large role in interpreting results, the researcher adopting both objective and subjective points of view

*Source: Saunders et al, 2008*
Pragmatism

- **Pragmatism** argues that the most important determinant of the research philosophy you adopt is the research question – one may be more appropriate than the other for answering particular questions.

- Data collection techniques most often used: Mixed or multiple method designs, quantitative and qualitative.

- Tashakkori and Teddlie (1998) suggest that it is more appropriate for the researcher in a particular study to think of the philosophy adopted as a continuum rather than opposite positions.
What’s your research philosophy?

- Fill out the survey
- Discuss the answers with a colleague using the questions provided as a starting point
- Diagnose each other’s research philosophy