

MBA Research Methodology Topics 1 and 2

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The most relevant parts of Blaxter *et al.* for these topics are chapter 1 and pp. 59-62 of chapter 3

Topic 1: Research and the MBA dissertation

“Research may be characterized as methodical investigations into a subject or problem. To “research” is to seek answers that involve understanding and explanation ...” (Williams and May, 1996: 7)

In other words, research is about answering questions, seeking answers to things we are not sure about, clearing up gaps in the breadth or certainty of our knowledge about the social world. The term ‘research’ actually implies uncertainty – re-search – look again. Research is usually not just descriptive – ie, it doesn’t just seek to provide an accurate portrayal of what is going on. Instead it tends to be explanatory – that is, it looks for reasons why particular things are happening, what are the cause and effect relationships in a specific area of the world? Or it can be exploratory - seeking insights into or asking questions about unfamiliar or complex situations, or to trying to see a situation from a different, non-traditional point of view. So analysis of research data usually produces explanations, relationships, comparisons, predictions or theories.

"Much enquiry in the real world is essentially some form of *evaluation*." (Robson, 2002: 6)

*So empirical research tends to try to understand what is going on in the ‘real world’ and why, but also to make a judgement about it. In other words, management research is often directed at solving a particular organizational problem, or improving organizational processes in specific ways: the knowledge that derives from this research is **applied** to the ‘real world’. For you as MBA (/ Marketing/ Finance) students in particular the emphasis of your dissertation may well be on identifying a management or business problem, formulating solutions and generating appropriate and acceptable recommendations for action. However, as we have stated in the introduction to these notes, it is also possible to undertake a more theoretical piece of work that focuses in detail on an issue in management thought.*

Why do we ask you to do a dissertation as part of your MBA (MSc Marketing/ MSc Finance)?

- to sharpen your information gathering, critical and analytical skills
- to enhance your subject-specific knowledge

Note that this is not just for academic reasons – in other words, we don’t believe that you should know more about specific management subjects just for knowledge’s sake. Instead we believe that better awareness of debates and issues in academic literature will assist you to underpin your management practice with solid reasoning and informed reflection, and therefore improve this practice.

- to allow you to relate academic theories and concepts to real-world data and real-world problems

In other words, a dissertation will allow you to identify the gaps between management theory and management practice and suggest why these gaps exist – is it the practice which is problematic or the theory, or a mixture of both? This may also challenge your preconceptions about effective management practice.

- to require you to identify significant issues and themes yourself

*Doing a dissertation means that you have to find, sort through and organize a large body of academic literature and empirical data to pull out what the important issues and themes are in terms of **your** research questions.*

- to develop your interpersonal/ transferable skills

These include oral/ written communication, negotiation, problem solving, time management, self-motivation and creativity.

- so that you take responsibility for the whole process

Doing a dissertation means that you make the choices from start to finish - you set the question/s, organize the process, decide on the relevant literature, consider your methodology/ gather the data and reach your own conclusions based on the analysis. The dissertation is therefore unique as regards your Master's studies, as ULMC tutors set the questions and the structure for all the other pieces of assessed work that you do.

What should a dissertation include?

- Executive summary/ abstract

This should be one side of A4 in length. It is a self-contained summary of the whole of the dissertation. It should contain information about your research questions and why these are important; the terms of reference of the dissertation (eg, how you are defining certain key concepts or the parameters of the project); information about the subject-specific literature you have used; information about how you answered your research questions (ie, your methodology and your data analysis); as well as a summary of your conclusions, recommendations and action plan (if any). See Saunders et al. (2003: 419-420) for extra advice. Even though it appears first, you should write the executive summary last of all, so that it actually represents the contents of the dissertation!

- Introduction

The introduction is effectively an extended executive summary and should include details of your research questions and why they are significant, your terms of reference, the sources of information on which the dissertation is based and how it was collected. The introduction sets the scene and puts the whole enquiry into its proper context. We suggest that you structure it as follows – begin with a clear definition and justification of the research questions you are investigating, including a statement of the management issues involved. You may also wish to acknowledge the ways in which these questions changed as the dissertation evolved, if relevant. The introduction should then provide an overview of the dissertation as a whole, chapter by chapter. Again, even though it forms an early section in the finished product, it should be written at the end, for the reasons outlined above.

- Literature review

This chapter outlines the academic context of your dissertation and suggests how your research adds to or extends what is already known about the topic. That is to say, it reviews the existing research in the area – on organizational structure, Total Quality Management, organizational culture, relationship marketing, charismatic leadership, stress, productivity, employee motivation, the efficient market hypothesis, the supply chain, auditing or whatever - identifying the key themes and debates, but also identifying the gaps and omissions in this body of work which your research will address. More details of the literature review follow in the notes on Topic 3.

- Methodology

This chapter of the dissertation gives details of your data gathering. As already suggested, empirical data can be primary – you collect it yourself, for example via questionnaire or interview. Methodological information needed here includes discussion of your ontology/ epistemology (more about these issues in the notes on Topic 2); of the research method you have chosen and why; of your sample and why you chose it; of the design of your schedule and why you did it that way; of your pilot; of your chosen channel and why you selected it; and of what happened when you actually did the data gathering (all covered in more depth in the notes on Topic 5). Empirical data can also be secondary – ie, already in existence, collected by someone else. So secondary data can come from published academic research, government surveys, organizations' personnel records, shareholder reports, newspaper articles and so on. Methodological information needed here would include discussion of your ontology/ epistemology; of your data source and why you chose it; of how you used it and why; and of any relevant issues that occurred while you were accessing and using these data. Any methodology chapter should also end by discussing the problems that you faced and whether you were able to resolve them; ie, the limitations of the methodology and their implications. You will return to these issues in your reflections section. It is also important here, as the above discussion indicates, to justify the methodological decisions that you have made throughout this chapter.

- Data analysis

This chapter should tell the examiners how you did your data analysis, what it shows us and how this relates to your research questions and the existing academic literature on the subject. More details follow in the notes on Topics 7 and 8.

- Conclusions

Your conclusions must be drawn from the body of evidence presented in the main sections of the dissertation. You may wish to delineate each conclusion using numerical sub-sections. They should all flow clearly from the preceding analysis. This chapter also needs to identify any problems or opportunities which you have discovered as a result of your analysis and which will form the basis of your recommendations. In addition, you need to provide an account of whether your dissertation has answered the research questions that you started out with.

- Recommendations

*Here you should suggest ways of addressing the problems or opportunities discussed in the foregoing analysis. The recommendations chapter might also include the benefits of implementing these suggestions but also the resources entailed, the action plan/ programme of work that would be needed and how long it would take. Again the recommendations should be derived from your conclusions. You need to be realistic about the extent to which the scope and approach of your research allow for firm recommendations to be made, as well as acknowledging any limitations or need for further research in this regard. Please also note that your dissertation is **not** a management report or a piece of consultancy. In other words, despite the emphasis that we have placed above on its being practically relevant, we do not want you to aim only to provide managerial advice. The dissertation should also have clear hallmarks of academic rigour, offer potentially generalizable conceptual insights and add to or extend the published academic research on the topic in question.*

- Reflections

This chapter consists of an overall evaluation of the dissertation – its strengths and weaknesses, constraints encountered during the process of putting it together and how these were dealt with if appropriate. We would also expect you to reflect further on how effective your methodological approach was and to comment on the managerial and academic competencies you have developed as a result of writing the dissertation. The following questions may be useful in structuring this chapter:

- *were the dissertation questions well defined? were they answered?*
- *did the research outcomes match your initial expectations?*
- *did you do a good job of planning and undertaking the research overall? what went well? what should you have done differently?*
- *what will you take away from the dissertation process into your management career and/ or any future studies?*

- References/ bibliography

- Appendices

Appendices include information which is necessary to the dissertation but would spoil its flow or structure if included in the main body. Examples might be a clean version of your questionnaire or interview schedule, the letter you wrote requesting research access, detailed tables of statistics or graphs relating to your data analysis and so on.

Your dissertation may not necessarily be organized like this because every project is different but for empirical dissertations all these components need to be present. Please also note the ULMC administrative requirements in your Project Guidelines for the Dissertation (also available on this Blackboard site) - eg, regarding the title page, the contents page/s, the acknowledgements, the overall format of the dissertation and so on.

A good dissertation is one that ...

- focuses on a **contemporary** topic which is of **practical relevance** and **personal interest**

Personal interest in the topic is really important because it keeps you motivated and also means that your enthusiasm shines through in the finished product.

- clearly **explains** and **defends research questions**
- **critically** reviews **as wide a range of literature as possible** and makes its **academic contribution clear**
- contains a **well defended** and **appropriate** methodology
- **clearly and coherently** presents and analyses data

More to follow on this in the notes on Topics 7 and 8, but for now it is important to state that data analysis isn't just about describing the data – ie, identifying their main themes and patterns. It also requires that you interpret your data – ie, tell the assessors what these themes and patterns suggest about your research questions and the existing literature in the subject area.

- provides conclusions that **follow from the data analysis** and **feasible** recommendations that **follow from the conclusions**
- offers **self-aware reflections**
- includes appendices which **support the main text**

Remember that really important items should be included in the main text rather than requiring frequent reference to the appendices, which can irritate readers. Appendices should also be mentioned at appropriate points in the text – and do not overdo them. The rule of thumb is, if the main text can survive without it, leave it out!

- **accurate referencing** throughout/ **full list of references**
- **well written, logically structured, carefully presented**

Leave enough time to do a thorough spell check as well as proof reading for typographical mistakes, grammatical errors, logical problems etc.

- overall **tells a story** and is **'topped and tailed'**

Your dissertation should read like an unfolding story – what are my research questions and why are they important (introduction)? what's the academic background to these questions (literature review)? how did I answer them and why did I do it this way (methodology)? what were the answers and how did I arrive at them (data analysis)? what does this say overall about my research questions, how can this be applied in the real world and in general how good a job did I do (conclusions, recommendations and reflections)? Topping and tailing refers to presenting each chapter in an introduction/ discussion/ summary format. So, in each chapter, tell us what you are going to do, do it, then remind us what you have done before going on to say what the next chapter will do.

Topic 2: Conceptualizing social science knowledge

Social science and its subset management research are contested terrains
In other words, in all of the subjects that you as management postgraduates study, you are presented with multiple, and sometimes conflicting, descriptions of social/ human phenomena: theories differ according to the causes, characteristics and consequences of actions, behaviours, interventions, organizations, institutions, markets and regulations. So the aforementioned examples of the concepts of organizational structure, Total Quality Management, organizational culture, relationship marketing,

charismatic leadership, stress, productivity, employee motivation, the efficient market hypothesis, the supply chain and auditing are all defined in various ways depending on which piece of research one consults. Indeed social science research in general is characterized by disagreement and controversy: the social sciences are a good deal more pluralist than their natural science equivalents - biology, chemistry, physics etcetera.

One key controversy is whether social scientists should mimic natural scientists in their approach to research – so ...

- can social scientists can be objective? “For example, when we study the family, education or culture, we are part of these things, for we live, think and communicate within them. Social science has to wrestle with the problem of human beings creating explanations about themselves and their society when they are part and parcel of that society.” (Smith, 1998: 7)

*Natural science is usually assumed to be an objective activity – the researcher is said to be detached or able to step back from what they are examining so that their experiences, beliefs, upbringing, biases and so on do not affect their studies or their findings. The key issue here is whether such objectivity is possible or even desirable in social science. After all, when we do natural science, we are studying non-human phenomena: we are not rocks or trees or gravity or chemical elements. But as social scientists we study human phenomena – in other words we are both subject and object, we are people studying people. So where do our experiences, beliefs, upbringing and biases fit in? Some social scientists say these will **inevitably** influence us to select and investigate topics in certain ways, and to draw specific conclusions on that basis. Others would argue that they make no difference – that we can study other human beings in an objective and detached way.*

- can we explain social reality via causal relationships?

Natural scientists typically look for cause and effect relationships – they aim to discover what causes or lies behind particular types of natural phenomena. One example of a causal relationship which is well established in natural science is that mixing a certain proportion of hydrogen with a certain proportion of oxygen produces water ($H_2 + O = H_2O$). Some social scientists believe that we can explain social phenomena in the same way – by looking for the causes behind human activities, attitudes etc. Others suggest that human phenomena are much more complex than this.

- can we generalize about social reality?

Again natural science typically studies a sample of a particular population – eg, the behaviour of a small number of animals of a specific type – and then generalizes from this sample to the wider population to suggest that if this sample behaves in this way then all animals of this kind (the population) will behave in this way. Again, social scientists disagree on whether the same kind of generalization is an appropriate aim when studying the activities of samples of human beings.

These questions and debates are *ontological* and *epistemological* questions and debates.

You may also see them referred to as philosophical questions – ie, these questions have to do with the philosophy of the social sciences.

Ontologies are theories of being or reality

The term 'ontos' is Greek and roughly translates as 'being'. The term 'logos' is also Greek and can be understood to mean 'theory' or 'account' (Johnson and Duberley, 2000: 2). So ontology refers to the study of the essence of phenomena and the nature of their existence (Johnson and Duberley, 2000: 67), to ideas about "what reality is like and the basic elements it contains" (Silverman, 2000: 77).

Epistemologies are theories of knowledge or science

Again 'episteme' is a Greek word which we can translate as 'knowledge' or 'science' (Johnson and Duberley, 2000: 2). So epistemology refers to the "study of the criteria by which we can know what does and does not constitute warranted, or scientific, knowledge" (Johnson and Duberley, 2000: 2-3), to debates about "the nature and status of knowledge" (Silverman, 2000: 77). Epistemological discussions focus on how we can capture or gather information about human reality and make sense of that information. So different epistemological standpoints provide different answers to questions such as:

- *what is it possible to know about human phenomena?;*
- *what represents plausible, useful knowledge about human phenomena?*
- *how can we evaluate knowledge about human phenomena?*

"[A]s one engages in the "practical" activities of generating and interpreting data to answer questions about the meaning of what others are doing or saying and then transforming that understanding into public knowledge, one inevitably takes up "theoretical" concerns about what constitutes knowledge and how it is to be justified, about the nature and aim of social theorizing and so on." (Schwandt, 2003: 295)

What Schwandt means is that in research we are making ontological and epistemological judgements even if we are not aware of this. So some form of ontological and epistemological commitment is unavoidable. Approaching management research ontologically and epistemologically (philosophically) therefore means trying to uncover the basic assumptions which researchers make about human phenomena and what we can know about them, and to assess the knowledge claims which result.

And it is important to be aware of our own and others' ontological/epistemological stances because:

1. There is no 'one best philosophical way': "there are no secure or incontestable foundations from which we can begin any consideration of our knowledge of knowledge - rather what we have are competing philosophical assumptions that lead us to engage with management and organizations in particular ways." (Johnson and Duberley, 2000: 4)

Management research is as we have noted a contested terrain (Johnson and Duberley, 2000: 9). There is no universal agreement about how to answer the

ontological and epistemological questions identified above. Instead different standpoints exist, all of which claim to offer the most plausible and credible answers to these questions. Indeed Morgan and Smircich (1980) suggest that all of these standpoints are plausible or useful in some ways – which accounts for why there are so many.

2. Methodology is therefore not an end in itself: “Mainstream scientists who just apply “approved” methods without being aware of the subjective foundations of their activities are not scientists; they are technicians.” (Gummesson, 2000: 18)

*Similarly, Tornebohm (cited in Gummesson, 2000: 20) suggests that the “greater the researcher’s awareness of his [sic] own paradigm, the better the research that he can carry out”. Many of you will not have thought about your own ontological and epistemological assumptions, even though they affect the way that you approach the world around you and your studies in particular. Gummesson compares these to our knowledge of our native tongue – he suggests that, even though we may struggle to articulate its grammar, structure and so on, we ‘just know’ how to speak it. However, closer attention to and reflection on our ontological and epistemological beliefs allows us to avoid what we might call ‘abstracted empiricism’. In other words, if we simply argue that the research methods we have used are the best ones without offering any such discussion, this pays no attention to the wider philosophical implications of the claims we are making and how others should therefore locate and evaluate the knowledge we are generating (Morgan and Smircich, 1980: 491). Instead, an emphasis on **the link between** ontology, epistemology and methodology, “between the world view to which the researcher subscribes, the type of research question posed, and the technique that is to be adopted as a basis for research” (Morgan and Smircich, 1980: 499), makes communication between researchers easier. If we fail to discuss our philosophical beliefs in this regard then the differing sets of assumptions that exist, as mentioned above, make debate difficult because researchers with very different assumptions may be trying to talk to each other without being aware that they come from such differing standpoints. Someone who reads your research may therefore assess it on the basis of their own philosophical commitments, which could be problematic if these are very different from the ones you espouse. An analogy would be someone with right wing political beliefs assessing a left wing policy suggestion without being aware that it had been made by someone with left wing beliefs.*

3. Ontological and epistemological commitments may also blind us to alternatives because they mean that we “view the world in a particular way” (Burrell and Morgan, 1979: 24)

The different philosophical paradigms represent “fundamentally different perspectives for the analysis of social phenomena” (Burrell and Morgan, 1979: 23). So belonging to one paradigm but not reflecting on this may blind you to the existence of alternatives (Burrell and Morgan, 1979: 24) and lead you to present your research as the only possible interpretation of the issues you have discussed.

4. Relatedly, ontological and epistemological commitments bring about real-world consequences

Philosophical ideas have material effects of various kinds. That is to say, they tend to bring about self-fulfilling prophecies because the way you see and understand the world dictates how you behave within it. Therefore the way we understand organizations and management influences how we behave in relation to organizing and managing. We may therefore manage or educate others in particular ways as a result. We also write according to our own philosophical beliefs, so management academics' texts always say something about how they see human reality and social science knowledge. And of course these texts may also have an impact on how managers behave because they represent effective organizations and effective management in various different ways.

Very crudely speaking, there are two philosophical 'camps' or standpoints in the social sciences. They answer the ontological and epistemological questions posed above – about objectivity, cause and effect relationships and generalization - very differently. We are presenting them to you here as a way of introducing the ideas of different theories of reality and knowledge in management research, but please do be aware that in actuality the lines cannot be drawn so easily. Social science/ management researchers are more accurately categorized as occupying a variety of different points along a continuum, with many blurrings between them, as opposed to being divided neatly into two distinct camps.

Positivism

This is the social science philosophy which is closest to the theories of reality and knowledge of natural science. As implied above, there are many internal differences between positivists – eg, some are standard positivists, others are logical positivists, others are falsificationists. But for your purposes the following basic summary of the standpoint as a whole will suffice.

Smith (1998: 75) suggests that “Positivism has been increasingly questioned since the middle of the twentieth century ... [it] is something that many social researchers would like to forget ... “

In other words, positivism has become more and more controversial over the last sixty or seventy years. Alvesson and Deetz (2000: 66) agree with Smith that there have been more than fifty years of critique of positivism. Similarly, Johnson and Duberley (2000: 7) suggest that “criticizing the expression of [Robert] Merton’s and [Max] Weber’s [positivist] views in management and organization as an establishment myth is an increasingly popular pastime”. So the term ‘positivist’ is often used as a pejorative, to criticize others’ research.

But even though it has been so widely criticized and challenged, “positivism’s assumptions remain pervasive and continue to provide the general rationale that underpins most theory and research in the social sciences ... this positivist underpinning is particularly the case in ... management and organizational research.” (Johnson and Duberley, 2000: 11)

... especially in the US

Positivism is still a very powerful set of assumptions and dominates American management research in particular. In other parts of the world - the UK and Scandinavia, for example - non-positivism is perhaps more established.

The term 'positive' is a warning

... against attempts to go beyond what can be seen in deriving knowledge about the social world: for a positivist, any claim to know something about human behaviour should be based on evidence of tangible, observable things. So positivists want to distinguish very clearly between what IS the case and what OUGHT to be the case, and what WILL happen versus what SHOULD happen. They suggest that what OUGHT to be the case and what SHOULD happen are questions that only moral philosophers can address: the task of social science is only to describe what IS the case and what WILL happen. So there is no place for opinion, prejudice or bias in social science. The term 'positivism' was coined by French sociologist Auguste Comte (1759-1857) – he differentiated between 'positive knowledge' and superstition, dogma, uninformed assertions, speculations etc. in this regard.

Key (interconnected) positivist assumptions are therefore as follows:

- the absolute separation of reality and ideas about reality (the latter may be true or false)

*For positivists, social reality has an objective existence, it is 'out there' just as is natural reality like trees, rocks or animals. There is "an ontological reality 'out there' to be known" (Johnson and Duberley, 2000: 57). This is a **realist** ontology: social reality is said to exist independently of our cognitive structures (ie, our beliefs) and exists whether or not we can gain access to it, above and beyond our observations of and knowledge about it - which may be more or less accurate. So human phenomena like organizational structure, Total Quality Management, organizational culture, relationship marketing, charismatic leadership, stress, productivity, employee motivation, (in)efficient markets, the supply chain, auditing and so on really exist in the same way as do trees, rocks or animals. We can, with careful and scientific endeavour, capture and describe social reality – ie, develop accurate/ factual/ 'positive' knowledge about it. This is what is sometimes known as the subject (researcher)/ object (topic of the research) dualism.*

- the unification of method (also known as monism, scientism or naturalism)

Positivism argues that we should use natural science methods in social science. They therefore emphasize the statistical measurement of social phenomena like organizational structure, Total Quality Management, organizational culture, relationship marketing, charismatic leadership, stress, productivity, employee motivation, (in)efficient markets, the supply chain, auditing etc. In other words, positivists typically want to identify the extent, frequency, level and location of these phenomena, and also whether and how they alter in the presence of other phenomena. There is a focus here on quantification and comparison of relative frequency. This often means that these phenomena have to be operationalized – ie, linked to tangible indicators which suggest their presence. For example, we can't measure motivation as

such because we can't see it or sense it in any other way, but we can link it to indicators like productivity, job satisfaction or attendance, and measure it this way. Positivists, like natural scientists, also tend to be preoccupied with reliability (to do with the consistency, coherence and stability of results achieved), internal validity (to do with whether the research instrument measures what it is supposed to be measuring – eg, does the Occupational Stress Indicator actually measure **stress**? does the Myers Briggs Type Indicator actually measure **personality**?) and external validity (can the results be generalized beyond the sample from which they were taken?).

- the possibility of value-free, theory-free data

For a positivist, we can scientifically verify social facts: they have an objective existence. For example, a social fact might be 'there are 6000 homeless people in Leicester'¹. But to say that 'homelessness is the biggest social problem in Leicester' is a moral or value judgement. Positivism therefore argues that there is a neutral point at which we can stand back and observe the social world and emphasizes that we should, as social scientists, aim for this kind of objectivity. This is sometimes referred to as the correspondence theory of truth – ie, that we can produce accounts that correspond precisely to independent reality. We need, says positivism, to observe the social world, and only after observing it try to understand or theorize it. So facts become the basis for either testing existing theories about the social world or generating new theories. The argument here is that when values or moral judgements affect the process of data gathering (or indeed theorizing) we need to be more rigorous to ensure objectivity.

- data should be obtained through experience (also known as phenomenalism): "All good intellects have repeated, since Bacon's time, that there can be no real knowledge but that which is based on observed facts." (Comte, cited in Easterby-Smith et al., 2002: 28)

For positivism, if we can't directly experience something through our senses, and we can't then link it to the kind of indicators we discussed above, we can't study it. Phenomena like these (eg, God) are metaphysical (beyond our physical senses) – and only things which can be verified through sensory experience are the proper territory of social science. The study of metaphysical phenomena belongs to other disciplines – like moral philosophy. In other words, for positivism, "all ideas are ultimately to be understood in terms of what they say about the observable world" (Griseri, 2002: 108).

- the social world is characterized by empirical regularities, which can be described by means of scientific laws

In other words, the aim of positivist social science is to observe human phenomena and look for regularities, things that occur together. Do these regularities occur frequently and predictably? If so they are scientific laws. The aim is to generate causal relationships, to identify links between independent variables (causes) and dependent variables (effects). This aspect of positivism also speaks to the desire to generalize, to move from a singular statement about one's sample to a universal statement about the

¹ Please note that we don't actually know whether this is true! It's just a hypothetical example.

wider population. So positivism is characterized by the aim of explaining what is going on in the social world. For example, what causes motivation? stress? productivity? market crashes? does gender relate to earnings? does the money supply relate to inflation? Positivism therefore sees human behaviour as determined or mechanistic – as a ‘programmed’ response to certain conditions. As Morgan and Smircich (1980) argue, it tries to freeze the social world and study people as the product of deterministic forces.

- the social world needs to be broken down into its constituent parts in order to research it (also known as atomism/ reductionism)

Positivism tends to proceed by looking for the smallest observable units – eg, the individual person – to reduce a research question or issue to its simplest possible elements.

- the task of social science is to predict and control social events – to produce socially useful knowledge

Positivism originated in the late seventeenth century in Western Europe, when religion began to decline in influence so that people became less willing to accept their fate as a the result of the ‘divine’ or ‘natural’ order of things. What started to take hold instead was a growing belief in the reasoning capacities of human beings as the basis of a better world, and a resultant faith in science (both social and natural) as the grounds for such interventions. Science was seen to provide new certainties, and a new force for social cohesion and development. The Industrial Revolution is a good example of this kind of belief system. Positivism exemplifies these beliefs, and sees one of its key tasks as producing knowledge to use in order to organize society in improved ways.

To summarize, “the different versions of positivism are united by the epistemological principle that warranted knowledge about the world emanates from the scientist’s ability directly and objectively to access empirical data about social and natural reality ... warranted [ie, valid and reliable] knowledge is that which has a correspondence with reality which has been established by the scientist’s neutral and passive registration of various sensory inputs.” (Johnson and Duberley, 2000: 62)

Research methods associated with positivism:

- Experiments

These can take place in the ‘field’ – ie, in the participants’ everyday environment, like their workplace, or in the ‘laboratory’, an artificially constructed setting. The technique is borrowed straight from the natural sciences. It is intended to be highly objective, and to establish causal relationships. The experiment therefore introduces some form of variable into a human situation so that the effects of this variable on another – a particular aspect of human behaviour - can be detected. The Hawthorne Experiments are a well-known example, where researchers including Elton Mayo introduced changes to the physical working conditions (eg, more breaks) of employees at an electrical plant in Chicago in the 1920s to see if these changes affected productivity in any way.

- Structured interviews/ self-administered questionnaires (/ SAQs)

Again the intention here is to be objective and detached from one's respondents. Indeed with self-administered questionnaires one may never meet the people who take part in the research. These methods are usually administered to large samples. They consist of asking the same questions in the same order to every respondent. The difference is that with the structured interview the researcher asks the questions verbally, either face to face or over the phone, and records the respondent's answers. With SAQs the respondent reads the questions and fills the answers out themselves by writing or typing them on to a prepared form. These methods tend to rely mainly on closed questions – ie, questions with a fixed response set such as yes/ no/ don't know – so responses can be quantified.

- Structured observation

This method, like the experiment, involves watching people's behaviour. But it differs from the experiment because here the researcher simply observes people going about their everyday business instead of deliberately manipulating their environment in some way by introducing a new variable. It is structured because again the idea is to be objective, detached and aim for some form of quantification of behaviour. So the researcher uses a 'tick box' observation schedule where they record how many times people do something, the order in which they do it and/ or how long it takes to do it.

- Quantitative secondary data

The use of existing data, usually from large and representative samples, and expressed in numerical and/ or statistical form such as the UK Labour Force Survey or Census, performance data from company annual reports, organizations' absence records or quantitative data from existing academic publications.

NB more details about structured interviews, SAQs and structured observation will be given in the notes for Topic 5, as these are the positivist research methods which in our experience and as aforementioned most postgraduate students of management use.

So, crudely speaking, positivism would suggest that

- we can know the truth, the hard facts, about social phenomena;
- plausible, useful knowledge is based on observation and measurement;
- we should collect it using methods borrowed from the natural sciences;
- we can use it to explain, predict and control the social world; and
- we can evaluate it on the basis of its adherence to scientific criteria.

For example, whether the data produced are valid and reliable.

What then does positivist management research look like?

1. It assumes that "people and organizations exist as relatively concrete entities ... [and manifest] orderly patterns or regularities ... " (Griseri, 2002: 110)
2. It focuses on generating 'organizational' laws to improve managerial control

and effectiveness

3. It tends to use experimental or cross-sectional survey research methods, as well as quantitative secondary data

This kind of research tends to want to quantify its data and to analyse it statistically. Survey methods use structured interviews or SAQs to compare categories of people (eg, men and women; people from different occupational groups etc.).

4. Generalizability is a key concern, so representative samples seen as important

This kind of research typically tries to gather its data from large, representative samples – representative meaning that it is possible to generalize to the wider population from which the sample was taken (more on this in notes for Topic 5).

An example of positivism in published management research is Castellow *et al.* (1990) on judgements in US sexual harassment cases

The key features of this paper are as follows:

- it starts from hypotheses derived from the 'beauty is good' stereotype
Castellow et al. are interested in the extent to which judgements about guilt in US sexual harassment cases are made on the basis of the physical attractiveness of the man accused of harassment and that of his alleged victim. In other words they want to know if the 'beauty is good' stereotype is in operation in this instance. They suggest that 'beauty is good' is often used as an "implicit personality theory" (Castellow et al., 1990: 549). In other words, we tend to think that if someone has one characteristic then they must have others, so a beautiful person will also be seen as good, trustworthy, kind, warm etc. Their hypotheses then are that 1. an attractive defendant is more likely to be seen positively and 2. an attractive complainant is more likely to be believed. In other words, juries in US sexual harassment trials are more likely to say an attractive defendant is not guilty but also to judge an unattractive defendant as guilty when they are accused by an attractive plaintiff. This research is partly inspired by the fact that the 'beauty is good' stereotype has also been proved by other researchers to be at work in rape trials - and there are some similarities between rape and sexual harassment.

- the respondents were Introductory Psychology students, and a 'factorial design' was used

The sample was Introductory Psychology students at the University of East Carolina. 71 were male and 74 female. The 'factorial design' consisted of dividing them into four single sex groups of between 15 and 20. So

- *group 1 were all male, and looked at a case with an attractive defendant and an unattractive plaintiff;*
- *group 2 were all male and looked at a case with an unattractive defendant and an attractive plaintiff;*
- *group 3 were all female and looked at a case with an attractive defendant and an unattractive plaintiff; and*
- *group 4 were all female and looked at a case with an unattractive defendant and an attractive plaintiff.*

- The research schedule comprised of a mock trial transcript asking for a verdict, and personality scales

Each respondent received the same mock trial transcript – the only differences were between groups as suggested above. The document included photographs of both plaintiff and defendant. It was loosely based on real cases of harassment and there were no witnesses so as to replicate the ‘it’s her word against his’ scenario that is common in such situations. The attractiveness of each participant should also have become more significant in the respondents’ judgements as a result. The respondents were asked to read the transcript and say whether the defendant was in fact guilty of sexual harassment. They were also asked to evaluate the plaintiff and the defendant in terms of how attractive, exciting, calm, independent, sincere, warm, kind, intelligent, strong, sophisticated and happy they were, using 11 personality scales. What is also interesting here is that, although this isn’t strictly speaking an experiment since it involves asking people questions instead of watching their behaviour and there is no attempt to alter their environmental conditions, Castellow et al. use the terminology ‘experiment’ and ‘experimenter’ throughout. This seems to be more proof of this research’s positivistic philosophical commitments.

- “Although one should be cautious about any attempt to generalize from mock juror studies to the courtroom, our study offers some implications for sexual harassment jury trials.” (Castellow et al., 1990: 558)

Both hypotheses were proved correct. It is also worth noting that the attractive defendant was rated higher on all 11 personality scales as was the attractive plaintiff. Despite their reservations as expressed in the quotation above, Castellow et al. do attempt some generalization from these results to jurors in sexual harassment trials by suggesting the latter are also more likely to rate an attractive defendant as not guilty and an unattractive defendant as guilty when they are accused by an attractive plaintiff. They argue then that it is beneficial to be an attractive plaintiff or defendant and that US lawyers may want to encourage their clients to make the best of themselves when appearing in court as a result. Alternatively, they suggest another tactic; for lawyers to inform the jury that people tend to judge beautiful people more positively and urge them to avoid this, to be fair, because of additional evidence that people might overcompensate for biases like ‘beauty is good’ in an effort to be impartial. Castellow et al. suggest though that “Further research is needed to enhance our understanding of how to diminish the stereotyping effects of attractiveness without eliciting a bias in the opposite direction.” (1990: 560).

Social constructivism

Social constructivism is a broad term for those researchers who do not accept the ontological and epistemological claims of positivism. Hermeneutics, phenomenology, symbolic interactionism, ethnomethodology, postmodernism, poststructuralism and many others are all variants of social constructivism. However, again, for your purposes the following basic summary of the standpoint as a whole will suffice.

Is there really an “absolute separation of reality and ideas about reality”?

Positivism, as we know, says, yes: social reality exists and social phenomena are “detectable and countable” (Benson and Hughes, 1983: 5) ...

... “independently of how they are interpreted and oriented to by social participants” (Heritage, 1984: 45)

Positivists believe we can detect and therefore measure social phenomena like organizational structure, Total Quality Management, organizational culture, relationship marketing, charismatic leadership, stress, productivity, employee motivation, (in)efficient markets, the supply chain, auditing etc. because these exist in an objective, factual and uniform way. Social reality is ‘out there’ to be known, measured, explained, predicted and controlled.

But social constructivism says no: social reality is a product of sense making, so we as researchers need to focus on how something *becomes* a phenomenon, *real-ization*

*Social constructivism on the other hand focuses on how we make sense of the social world, how we navigate through it. This philosophical standpoint argues, contrary to positivism, that we don’t grasp the social world as it is: the social world does not reflect its ‘reality’ to us. Instead **we endow it with meaning**, we create or construct its reality by thinking about it and acting towards it in particular ways. So there is no objective social reality ‘out there’ – social phenomena only mean what we construct them to mean. Reality – eg, organizational structure, Total Quality Management, organizational culture, relationship marketing, charismatic leadership, stress, productivity, employee motivation, (in)efficient markets, the supply chain, auditing etc. - exists only insofar as we think about it and act towards it in certain ways. So social constructivism focuses on how we make something real – how we **real-ize** it - through conceptualizing or recognizing it as a phenomenon.*

Suggests that ideas about reality and reality are effectively the same thing
For social constructivism, we are constantly engaged in a process of interpretation or construction of reality - not a passive reading of an objectively existing reality. We respond actively to the world around us: we don’t just react to essential characteristics in what we encounter, we actively give it a meaning and behave accordingly. For example, why do we stop a car at a red traffic light? The traffic light itself is not a physical barrier - instead we interpret it as a symbolic barrier and so draw our vehicle to a halt.

For example, when does someone die? (Silverman, 2000: 81-82)

*Another example from this school of thinking is that death is conventionally assumed to be medically defined and easily identified as taking place when our hearts stop and there is no brain activity. So we are **either** dead or alive – and we can find out about death by collecting or referring to mortality statistics. So death, in the conventional (positivist) viewpoint is real, tangible and measurable. But when John F. Kennedy arrived at a Dallas hospital in November 1963 having been shot in the head, he was not (as we ‘ordinary’ citizens may have been) designated dead on arrival. Instead, because of his status as President of the US, hospital staff worked on him for an hour, even*

though he was eventually pronounced dead. This is an example of how death might be seen to be socially constructed. Also consider debates about euthanasia, Do Not Resuscitate orders in hospitals, so-called 'living wills', abortion, life support machines and so on. Think about what counts as 'life' and what counts as 'death' in your society.

A more organizational example of this process of construction or realization would be sales revenue (Hines, 1988)

Social constructivist Ruth Hines asks us to consider the point at which an organization earns sales revenue according to accounting procedures. This is usually understood to be the 'point of sale'. But when does this take place? Is it when the good or service is ordered? Is it when the invoice is generated? Is it when the invoice has been paid? Is it when the order has been completed? Is it when the customer has taken delivery? (and so on). Hines suggests that accountants can actually present very different pictures of the same organization's finances by calculating this and other aspects of its accounts according to their particular accounting procedures (/ constructions of reality).

And "if we believe something to be real, it is real enough in its consequences for we behave as if it does exist" (Smith, 1998: 161)

This is the linchpin on which social constructivism turns – it argues that the way in which we give meaning to/ construct reality determines the way that we behave. That is to say, we behave as if phenomena really did reflect their essential meaning or significance to us, as in the red traffic light example.

This is known as the 'Thomas theorem' (Thomas, 1966: 301) and was inspired by an inmate of Dannemora Prison (in the US) who was imprisoned for murder

*The Dannemora inmate murdered people who talked to themselves because he was a paranoid schizophrenic and believed they were talking about him. So the 'reality' that they weren't talking about him didn't matter – what mattered was **his** definition of reality that they **were**. It is this latter construction which caused his murderous behaviour.*

But *not* an anti-realist argument as such - consider Laclau and Mouffe's (1987) mountain

*Social constructivism **doesn't** deny that material or physical reality exists – it **doesn't** say the social world exists only in our heads. Instead it denies that this material or physical reality has a fixed or essential meaning, and says that we attribute meaning to it, we actively make sense of our world. Laclau and Mouffe ask us to think about the mountain – does it have an innate meaning? It certainly has a physical presence, but its various **constructed** meanings, depending on your viewpoint, could be as a geographically important feature, a barrier to travel, a challenge to climb, a thing of great natural beauty, something risky, scary or dangerous, somewhere where the gods live and so on.*

Social constructivism, then, concerns the fixing of meaning – attends to *Lebenswelt* (Husserl); 'world-taken-for-granted' (Schutz); 'geometry' or 'grammar' of social life (Coser)

Social constructivism wants to understand how we make sense of things, how particular groups of people construct certain phenomena and how this influences their behaviour. They focus on the Lebenswelt or 'lifeworld', the 'recipe knowledge' that we all live by, the tacit, mundane, implicit, almost unconscious series of meanings and constructions that governs our behaviour but that we might find hard to articulate because we take it so much for granted.

Emphasis on *common sense/ intersubjectivity*: "the knowledge I share with others in the normal self-evident routines of everyday life" (Berger and Luckmann, 1967: 37)

*There is an emphasis here on the collective or **social** negotiation/ construction of reality – on the production, quite literally, of **common** sense. So our constructions of the world don't originate in us as individuals – instead we acquire **and pass meanings on** via interaction and socialization. Within the social groups where we operate, we therefore achieve a shared view of the world: "we always engage with the world via our socialized pre-understandings" (Johnson and Duberley, 2000: 66). Our engagement with the world around us is always structured by the presuppositions we have developed through being initiated into the 'knowhow' of our epoch by our parents, friends, teachers, work colleagues and the media.*

That is to say, "[s]ociety can exist by virtue of the fact that most of the time most people's definitions of the most important situations at least coincide approximately." (Berger, 1966: 111)

For example, and to return to the Hines example above, two accountants couldn't work together if they had different definitions of the point at which revenue is earned.

Time, for example ...

We often assume that time is an empirical fact, that years, months, days, hours, minutes and seconds really exist in some objective way. We see our lives as temporally structured around significant events like birthdays, starting school, graduating, starting our first job, getting married etc. Also, the first thing we do when we wake up is look at the clock to orient ourselves. If we don't know the time it's disorienting. Time links us to the wider cultural context as well – eg, one of the authors of these notes was born in the year of the first moon landings and her birthday is VE Day, when Europe commemorates the end of the Second World War. So we often forget that the clock and the calendar are human constructions. Indeed from the social constructivism viewpoint, time itself is a social construction – we have decided that time exists and that we should measure it in a particular way.

... and the London calendar riots

To illustrate both the social construction of time argument, and how powerful time is as a social construction, we can consider the London calendar riots of 1752. Let us go back to 446 BC, when the 'Julian calendar' (named after Julius Caesar who commissioned it) was introduced in the West. Until 446 BC the Western year had been divided into ten months of thirty days each. This is where September, October, November and December get their names,

because they were originally the seventh (sept), eighth (oct), ninth (nov) and tenth (dec) months respectively. The Julian calendar added two extra months - July (after Julius Caesar himself) and August (after the first Roman emperor Augustus Caesar). It extended the year to 365 days, based on the estimate that it takes the earth 365.25 days to move round the sun and that the calendar should reflect this. The Julian calendar also added leap years to compensate for the extra quarter day which was 'accumulated' every year. In other words, an extra day (February 29th) was added to the calendar every four years to bring the calendar date back into line with the 'star date' – the position of the earth relative to the sun. But the 365.25 estimate apparently was not accurate either – it was out by about 5 minutes and 37 seconds. By 1582 the Julian calendar was therefore 10 days behind the star date. Pope Gregory took steps to correct this, introducing the Gregorian calendar such that the 5th October 1582 became the 15th October. Gregory also ordained that leap years have to be multiples of 400 to qualify, in order to prevent the calendar date falling behind the star date in future. This calendar is still used worldwide but it was not introduced everywhere at the same time. The UK for example didn't introduce it until September 1752 – and by this time the calendar date was twelve days behind the star date. The introduction of the Gregorian calendar actually led to riots in London because people thought they had lost twelve days of their lives. Think about it! (and also think about the emphasis we have placed – in the West at least – on the length of a year being the length of time it takes for the earth to move round the sun. Social constructivism would argue that this is nothing more than an arbitrary human decision).

Social constructivism also emphasizes inter- and intra-cultural variations in meaning: Geertz's (1973) 'local knowledges'
Social constructivism suggests that our collectively developed "meanings and interpretations are the product of the 'pragmatic concerns' of practical problems and purposes of social life" (Smith, 1998: 162). In other words, meanings and construction emerge from collective learning processes in specific locales. This is Clifford Geertz's concept of 'local knowledges', ideas and interpretations which are specific to the conditions in which particular communities live and which are concrete and pragmatic, helping members of those communities to live their lives successfully in that milieu. We also have understandings of other cultural contexts but these are less and less detailed as these contexts are more and more distant from our immediate lives². What it also means is that there are inevitable cultural variations in the way that we define reality. An interesting example is cross-cultural variations in the meaning of gestures. For instance, the OK signal in the US (formed by placing the tips of the thumb and forefinger together in a O shape and keeping the other three fingers straight) has been said to mean 'zero' or 'worthless' in Southern France, money in Japan, male homosexual in Malta and a rather

² This might be changing in the contemporary climate of the Internet and 24 hour international news stations like CNN and BBC News 24.

*delicate part of the anatomy in Brazil.*³ Social constructivism also notes **intra-cultural relativity** – that is to say, differing constructions and interpretations which exist **within** societies but between different social arenas. So workplaces, educational environments, private homes, sites of leisure like bars and restaurants, places of worship and so on will tend to be ‘governed’ by different ‘ground rules’ in terms of how it is appropriate to dress, speak, behave and interact with others, even within one society.

SC is also nominalist – it identifies the need for a distinctive, interpretivist approach to the study of human beings, not one borrowed from the natural sciences

*For social constructivism, **because** social reality is constructed and emergent, because it is effectively a projection of human consciousness, because people interpret the world around them and attribute meanings to it whereas natural phenomena do not, we need to know what people understand about their worlds in order to understand their behaviour. We need to ‘see the world through their eyes’: how do they experience it? From a this standpoint, “Persons are distinguished from things in that persons experience the world, whereas things behave in the world.” (Laing, cited in Johnson and Duberley, 2000: 34). Therefore, although we can study natural phenomena like trees, rocks and animals just by watching them, we need to understand people’s internal, non-observable logic, their interpretations, intentions and meanings, to get any sense of why they behave in specific ways. So social constructivism argues that we as researchers need to try and access others’ lives as they are lived, to capture participants’ definitions of the world, their language and their constructions, as opposed to imposing our structure and assumptions on them. It recommends the use of open questions – which can be answered in any way the respondent likes, they don’t have fixed response sets - and flexible research formats to facilitate this. This should help to ensure, social constructivism suggests, that what is done, discussed and/ or recorded in a research setting is dictated by the respondent more than it is by the researcher. As Sanger (1996: 15) argues, for social constructivism, “Over-structured approaches to unfamiliar settings fall foul of the language, customs and behaviours implicit in them”. Instead the idea is to gather rich, qualitative, complex data, to give a feel for the beliefs or experiences under examination and to allow both researcher and reader some sense of what it is like to inhabit the lifeworlds of respondents.*

Research methods associated with social constructivism:

- Ethnography/ non-structured observation

As suggested above, social constructivism wants to try and understand the constructions and interpretations of others in order to understand their behaviours. It wants to some extent to ‘immerse’ itself in the lifeworlds of others. So ethnography is the ‘classic’ social constructivist research method, just as the experiment is the ‘classic’ positivistic technique. Ethnography in its

³ As DL students you are better placed than ULMC staff to say whether or not these claims are accurate! However, the point remains the same – that meanings and constructions vary across social contexts.

strictest sense means participant observation – ie, actually living or working amongst the people in whom you are interested and taking a full part in their activities. But other forms of observation are also associated with social constructivism – such as passive or non-participant observation, where the researcher simply watches naturally occurring activity with the aim of understanding it in ‘the round’, in all its complexity, as opposed to the attempt to focus on a specific behaviour and to quantify it as in structured observation.

- **Semi/ unstructured interviews**

These are face to face interactions between researcher and respondent during which the researcher wants to cover particular topics and ask specific questions, but where the order in which the questions are asked and the wording used is dependent on the respondent. For example, the respondent might highlight issues in answering one question which aren't due to be covered until later in the schedule, but here the researcher would move straight to asking about these issues as this follows the respondent's logic. So the interview is effectively led by the respondent as opposed to being led by the researcher, as in the structured interview scenario. Open questions are typically used and there is usually no particular emphasis by the researcher on objectivity or detachment – instead they aim to build up a rapport with their respondents, to really get to know them during the interview process.

- **Qualitative secondary data**

The use of existing data, in descriptive/ narrative form, such as minutes of meetings, newspaper articles, court reports, qualitative data from academic publications etc.

NB more details about participant/ non-structured observation and semi- and unstructured interviews will be given in the notes for Topic 5, as these are the social constructivist research methods which in our experience and as aforementioned most postgraduate students of management use.

So social constructivism would suggest that

- we can only know how human beings construct the phenomena around them

There are no hard facts, absolute characteristics, truth or essence of/ about social phenomena: the only meanings they have are what we have ascribed to them.

- plausible, useful knowledge is based on getting an insight into someone else's reality
- we should collect it using qualitative, 'non-scientific' methods
- we should use it to understand others' behaviour whilst recognizing that it is essentially subjective

*Understanding others' frames of reference helps us to understand how they see the world and therefore how they behave – but even then our accounts of their constructions and their behaviours will only ever be **our** accounts, because we filter and understand them through our own constructions of the world.*

- we can evaluate it according to its 'trustworthiness'

So for example, according to Guba and Lincoln (cited in Bryman and Bell, 2003: 288-299), we might evaluate social constructivist research according to its

credibility – has the researcher validated their findings with the respondents?, or its transferability – has the researcher provided enough detail about their data for others to see whether the findings might also apply elsewhere? As Buchanan (cited in Silverman, 2000: 289) points out, quality in this type of research “cannot be determined by following prescribed [scientific] formulas. Rather its quality lies in the power of its language to display a picture of the world in which we discover something about ourselves and our common humanity.” In other words, social constructivist research might be judged on the basis of whether it tells a story that readers can believe in, whether it resonates with them, whether it is convincing.

What then does social constructivist management research look like?

1. It has a general interest in flux, process and change

For social constructivism, the positivist focus on causality and scientific laws over-simplifies human behaviour. It ignores the way in which human beings can reflect on their behaviour and therefore change it. It also neglects our increasing exposure to people from very different parts of the world through globalization, and the fact that we may be changing our behaviour ever more frequently as a result as we learn about other ways of doing things. Social constructivism therefore emphasizes social processes – “how events and patterns unfold over time” (Bryman and Bell, 2003: 296). It suggests that there are far fewer stable properties in the social world than there are in the natural world, and thus that looking for cause and effect relationships is misguided. (Marshall and Rossman, cited in Silverman, 2000: 10).

2. It focuses on the concrete and the specific

Social constructivism as we have seen is not convinced that social laws exist or that generalization/ prediction is possible. Instead it sees the social world as very diverse and heterogeneous and thus argues that as researchers we should focus on understanding what is going on in a particular setting as opposed to aiming to produce generalizable theory. Social constructivism would therefore challenge the idea that there is one version or form of organizational structure, Total Quality Management, organizational culture, relationship marketing, charismatic leadership, stress, productivity, employee motivation, (in)efficient markets, the supply chain, auditing etc. existing across all organizations in all cultural contexts. As Griseri (2002: 115) argues, “Human behaviour brings a multitude of factors into play”: we have countless possible responses to situations because of the fact that we interpret them, unlike natural phenomena. So “Rather than observing people and objects as samples of larger groups in some presupposed classificatory system such as the common one for example, used to denote teaching style – didactic, child-centred, resource-based etc – [we should] examine them in their complex singularity.” (Sanger, 1996: 20). What Gummesson (2000: 183) calls substantive (specific, limited, grounded) theory is the focus here.

3. It emphasizes lived organizational experience

The emphasis in social constructivism is on understanding the organizational world from the point of view of those living in it. Organizations, it suggests, are constructed and experienced in many different ways by those who inhabit

them, leading to different forms of behaviour and reactions to these environments. So social constructivism tries to 'get inside' the actors' (managers, employees, shareholders etc.) world and see reality as they see it.

4. It sees the researcher as always and already **subjective**: "Any conclusions about external reality cannot be separated from the cognitive, social and emotional processes that have led [the researcher] to those conclusions in which language is regarded as a vehicle for creating rather than reflecting reality." (Johnson and Duberley, 2000: 67)

As suggested above, for social constructivism, in investigating the social world we are also active in constructing it. We construct phenomena such as organizational structure, Total Quality Management, organizational culture, relationship marketing, charismatic leadership, stress, productivity, employee motivation, (in)efficient markets, the supply chain and auditing by studying them. Our pre-existing theories and beliefs influence what we see before we see it – so we do not have access to some form of objective reality. Instead we make sense of/ real-ize the data we gather just as do those whom we study. Consequently one management researcher won't see, investigate or conclude about a topic in the same way as another.

An example of social constructivism in published management research is Coffey (1994) on the socialization of graduate trainee accountants as regards time management

You can now complete an exercise based on your understanding of this article. This is called 'Topic 2 exercise' and is available elsewhere on the Additional Notes section of this Blackboard site. The article itself is also available in the same section of the site. Please note that the test feedback only provides details of the questions asked, your answers and our 'model'/ correct answers – because it is discursive in nature it cannot be scored using the available software.

To conclude, "Perhaps the most we can hope for in considering [ontology and] epistemology is that we become more consciously reflexive." (Johnson and Duberley, 2000: 4)

Examining how your own philosophical preconceptions affect how you see the world, and considering alternatives, is helpful in making informed decisions about your research and other people's. This is especially important given the dominance of positivism in management research, and the need to be aware that there are other ways to understand social reality and knowledge about that reality.

It is crucial to see "social research as a diverse set of options rather than one appropriate way to study the social world" (Smith, 1998: 9)

Summary of topics 1 and 2

1. Research basically consists of asking questions, and methodology as understood here consists of an empirical action plan to enable us to answer those questions

It therefore encompasses the selection of research methods, the design of data gathering instruments, gaining access to the research site, sampling, research ethics and data analysis.

2. There are several reasons why we require that you do a dissertation (an independent research project) as MBA (MSc Marketing/ MSc Finance) students

3. Dissertations need to contain certain components and good dissertations have certain characteristics

4. Our ontological and epistemological assumptions will impact on the research questions that we choose to pose and how we go about answering them ...

5. ... as our brief excursion through positivism and social constructivism showed.

Now please continue by reading the notes for Topics 3 and 4.

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