4 Research Philosophy and Case Studies

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In this chapter ...

Research philosophy tends to send, for no apparent reason, dissertation students into a mild panic. This does not need to be the case, as all you are doing is setting out the foundations for your study and explaining to your reader the basis for your knowledge claims. This chapter aims to clarify the purpose of research philosophy and its place in your research and dissertation. It then goes on to cosider the merits of single and multiple case study research.

Why is research philosophy important?

In this book we are dealing with the human world: the social sciences. To help explain why a grasp of research philosophy is necessary to adequately present research findings that can be supported and defended, here is a scenario for you to consider: it demonstrates how an understanding of the researcher's perspective on a problem space can influence the results of a study.

Imagine you were given the simple task of judging the comfort of five different beds based on how good a night's sleep you had in each bed. Your initial thoughts would probably be to develop some measurement tools that you considered to represent comfort: the firmness of the mattress, the size of the bed, its height off the ground, the thickness and warmth of the duvet, the type of pillows, the thread count in the bed sheets used. This approach represents a scientific form of research philosophy where there are supposed truths about what constitutes comfort in a bed and these can

be objectively tested to establish which bed will provide the most comfortable night's sleep. It is fair to say that this consideration of how to measure the comfort of a bed seems entirely plausible and you would likely make conclusions that could reasonably accurately direct a friend towards a very comfortable bed if they asked for a recommendation.

Unfortunately, in social science things are not as straightforward as this because we have to engage with our research subjects in order to study them, and therefore we have an impact on our research subjects and they have an impact on us in return. Consider the bed scenario again and introduce the fact that you can only test one bed at a time, therefore the day that you had before you tested each bed and the day's activities that you knew would follow when you woke up would be different every time, meaning that every time you consider these objective elements of comfort you would be in a different mood and have a new perspective on how good a night's sleep you had: if you had a stressful day, you will have a less comfortable night's sleep. Now imagine that one of the five beds was your own bed in your bedroom; this particular bed now has significantly more meaning attached to it than the others, and you will inevitably have a degree of bias. It will be difficult to make an accurate comparison since most of us will find our own beds comfortable and are able to have a good night's sleep in them even if they do not have the best mattresses or the warmest duvets. Suddenly you find yourself involved in what social science researchers would call an interpretivist paradigm, because you realise that it is very difficult to separate your own biases and feelings from the study in which you are involved. Therefore in order to defend the conclusions you make you must be aware of the perspective from which you approached the task and be transparent about how that perspective potentially influenced the conclusions you made. This does not mean that your findings are invalid, it simply means that in social sciences we must be aware of the philosophical background to our study so that we do not fall into the trap of claiming we have established an absolute truth, rather we have revealed a trend to help us better understand a problem space.

Before exploring some philosophical concepts Table 4.1 gives the meaning of some commonly used terms.

Table 4.1: Some commonly used terms. Adapted from O'Gorman (2008)

Term	Meaning
Axiology	The branch of philosophy dealing with values, as those of ethics, aesthetics, or religion.
Deduction	a priori argument: deriving a proof or using evidence to test a hypotheses.
Epistemology	The branch of metaphysics that deals with the nature of knowledge, its presuppositions and foundations, and its extent and validity. The study of knowledge Theories of what constitutes knowledge and understanding of phenomena How we explain ourselves as knowers, how we arrive at our beliefs
Induction	a posteriori argument, deriving knowledge from empirical investigation.
Metaphysics	The branch of philosophy concerned with the ultimate nature of existence.
Ontology	The branch of metaphysics that deals with the nature of being and of reality.
Methodology	The study and application of methods.
Paradigm	Theoretical framework, within which research is conducted.
Philosophy	The academic discipline concerned with making explicit the nature and significance of ordinary and scientific beliefs, and with investigating the intelligibility of concepts by means of rational argument concerning their presuppositions, implications, and interrelationships; in particular, the rational investigation of the nature and structure of reality (metaphysics), the resources and limits of knowledge (epistemology), the principles and import of moral judgment (ethics), and the relationship between language and reality (semantics).
Reflexivity	Critical self-awareness and examination of beliefs and knowledge-claims. Need for conscious, reflexive thinking about our own thinking, and critique our pre-understandings, and their effect on our research
Rhetoric	The art or study of using language effectively and persuasively. In particular the style of speaking or writing, especially the language of a particular subject as used in the dissertation process

Research philosophy and paradigms

When undertaking any research project it is considered good practice to clearly outline the epistemological or philosophical basis for claiming to know what we know; this is commonly called the research paradigm.

Thomas Kuhn (1971) set in place the tradition that once a paradigm is chosen it is advisable for the researcher to remain within that paradigm. For the purposes of this discussion, as defined by Harré (1987, p. 3), a paradigm is considered to be "a combination of a metaphysical theory about the nature of the objects in a certain field of interest and a consequential method which is tailor-made to acquire knowledge of those objects." At the philosophical level a paradigm could be perceived as dualistic, if the researcher were to argue simultaneously that they believe that social reality is separate and external, whilst maintaining that reality is merely a construction of the mind. Hussey and Hussey (1997) emphasise the importance of researchers recognising and understanding their philosophical orientations within the paradigm adopted for their project. Creswell (2008) states that the research project must be framed within philosophical and theoretical perspectives.

In 1781 Immanuel Kant published his *Critique of Pure Reason* (1780/1998) and caused a revolution in philosophy. Kant argued that there are ways of knowing about the world other than through direct observation, and that people use these all the time. This proposition provided the platform for the launch of many of the ideas associated with research philosophy. Kant's view proposes considering not how our representations may necessarily conform to objects as such, but rather how objects may necessarily conform to our representations.

Prior to this, objects were considered independently from observation, separate and unchangeable. Kant theorised that things could be considered as objects of experience: phenomena rather than things in themselves specified negatively as unknown beyond our experience: noumena. Therefore, if human faculties of representation are used to study these phenomena, a priori conceptualisations can be envisaged. For example if we had only ever had the experience of sitting in chairs before and we saw a stool for the first time, rather than categorise it as unknown, we could conceptualise a priori that it would be possible to sit on a stool just as we do on a chair. Kant also showed how flawless logic can prove the existence of God at the same time he also showed how flawless logic proves that there is no God at all; illustrating that opposing philosophies can be equally logical and at the same time contradictory and incomplete, a salient warning to any emergent researcher defending their philosophical stance: your bed could be the most uncomfortable and the most comfortable bed in the world at the same time, depending on your philosophical stance. In Chapter 1 we