

EXPLORING THE LINKAGE BETWEEN PHILOSOPHICAL ASSUMPTIONS AND METHODOLOGICAL ADAPTATIONS IN HRM RESEARCH

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Abstract *There has been an ongoing debate on the dearth of philosophical considerations in HRM research. In response, a dire need of philosophical discussions and its link to methodological adaptation has been stressed by many past eminent scholars in the recent history. The present paper aims to fulfil this important requirement as it has immense contribution for future research, making a lot of philosophical confusions clear. A critical review of literature on both HRM and philosophical strands was carried out to show how diverse philosophical assumptions/stances are linked with diverse methodological adaptations. This paper concludes highlighting the premise that methodology in any research is not researcher's free will and instead it is mainly guided by their perceptions about the nature of reality (Ontology) and the nature of knowledge (Epistemology).*

Keywords: *Research Philosophy, Research Methodology, Human Resource Management (HRM), Ontology, Epistemology*

INTRODUCTION

Fleetwood and Hesketh (2006) point out that HRM literature is “almost completely devoid of philosophical discussion” (p. 1978) although philosophical consideration has its implications to build up a clear idea of methodology to be adopted. Nevertheless, all research is underpinned by philosophy which depends on the ways in which researchers view the world. Different perspectives of the world are the starting point of research and without this there is no research (Greener, 2008). Burrell and Morgan in 1979 declared that developing a philosophical perspective requires researcher to make several core assumptions concerning two dimensions: the nature of society (regulatory or radical change) and the nature of science (subjective or objective) (Burrell & Morgan, 2005).

Understanding a vast array of philosophical assumptions and research paradigms (or traditions) is very important before proceeding with the research since research philosophy provides the foundation for adopting appropriate strategies and methods to conduct research (Greener, 2008; Saunders, Lewis, & Thornhill, 2003). Obviously, an appropriate methodology is the most important in any research as it assures the reliability of the findings.

A paradigm is a set of basic belief systems (metaphysics) or world views based on philosophical assumptions to define the nature of the world and relationships within it (Guba & Lincoln, 1994). Review of philosophies shows that at the most abstract and general level, paradigms are philosophical positions such as positivism, constructivism, realism, and pragmatism, which represent different ideas of the nature of the reality and how knowledge of the reality could be gained. However, Mkansi and Acheampong (2012) stated, “These philosophies are not entirely different. Put differently, they all share a common set of assumptions.” (p. 133). Understanding the assumptions behind these philosophical stances and the linkage towards ontology – epistemology – human nature – methodology is thus being a dire need among most researchers despite the area of research.

The purpose of this paper is to explore different philosophical assumptions and their relationship to different methodological adaptations. In this perspective, the major focus of this paper is to describe philosophical assumptions in relation to Burrell and Morgan’s interconnected framework about the nature of social science. Firstly, ontological assumptions in terms of objectivism and subjectivism have been taken into consideration. Secondly, epistemological assumptions in terms of positivism vs interpretivism and positivism vs anti-positivism have been taken into consideration. Thirdly, assumptions on human nature in terms of determinism

and voluntarism are discussed. Fourthly, methodological approaches in HRM research in relation to diverse philosophical assumptions have been discussed. Finally, the conclusion of this paper highlights different philosophical assumptions and their relationship to quantitative and qualitative methodologies.

PHILOSOPHICAL ASSUMPTIONS

According to most of the scholarly opinions, mainly there are two different assumptions as core constituents of philosophy, namely ontological assumptions and epistemological assumptions. Ontological assumptions lead to epistemological assumptions and which in turn lead to assumptions on human nature. Paradigms or philosophical positions typically consist of specific methodological strategies which are linked with these assumptions. Thus, any philosophical position has four interconnected assumptions related to ontology-epistemology-human nature - methodology and the aforementioned order reflects a logical primacy (Burrell & Morgan, 2005; Guba & Lincoln, 1994). Having considered these different philosophical assumptions, Burrell and Morgan (2005, p. 3) propose a scheme for analysing the nature of social science. The sections that follow discuss them in relation to the HRM research phenomenon.

Ontological Assumptions

As Burrell and Morgan (2005, p. 1) wrote “all social scientists approach their subject via explicit or implicit assumptions about the nature of the social world and the way in which it may be investigated.” The first part is related to ontological assumptions or ontology, which is concerned with the nature of reality. Hence, the ontological consideration is what is the form and nature of reality and, therefore, what can be known about it is “how things really are” and “how things really work” (Guba & Lincoln, 1994, p. 108). Therefore, different positions of ontological assumptions may reflect different perceptions of the characteristics of reality. According to Saunders *et al.* (2003) the main ontological debate is whether the nature of reality can be regarded either as objective entities that have a reality external to social actors (refers to objectivism) or the reality can be regarded as social constructions built up from perceptions and actions of individuals or social actors (refers to subjectivism).

Objectivism

Objectivism considers the social world as strong as the physical world which is external to the perceptions of the individuals. Thus, objectivism is based on objective reality or in a very simplest form the reality is objective.

Overall, objectivism has been the foundation of social research which conducts in a natural manner, yet even within objectivism, formulation of research problems usually based on the subjective position. In sum, the basic ontological stance of an objectivist is that the ‘reality’ is external to the individual consciousness; ‘reality’ is of an objective nature; and ‘reality’ is given ‘out there’ in the world (Burrell & Morgan, 2005).

Subjectivism

Subjectivism implies an opposite view to social world which regards that individual perceptions create the reality and, social world constitutes only names, concepts and labels to understand how individuals construct reality. Subjectivists interpret the world as a construction of social actors and hence, this phenomenon is also called as constructivism. Overall, subjectivists’ basic ontological assumption is that ‘reality’ is the product of individual consciousness; ‘reality’ is the product of individual cognition; and ‘reality’ is the product of one’s mind (Burrell & Morgan, 2005). Burrell and Morgan’s framework of the nature of social science (p. 3) illustrates subjective and objective dimensions related to various philosophical assumptions characterising different approaches to social science. In relation to various philosophical stances, nominalism vs realism has been the ontological debate, in which nominalism position assumes that the social world is made up of nothing more than names, concepts, and labels which structure the reality whereas realism assumes the social world exists independently external to individual cognition and made up of hard, tangible and relatively immutable structures.

In relation to HRM research, the most pressing issue is whether the HRM-firm performance relationship really exists (how things really are) and if so, how it happens in the real world (how things really work) which are the basic ontological questions about reality. Further, many HRM researchers are interested in finding the nature of the HRM-firm performance domain explaining the underlying processes through which HRM practices affect firm performance. In this scenario, researchers tend to treat reality behind HRM-firm performance relationship as objective and external to the social actors (managers, employees, shareholders etc.) because HRM and firm performance are two remote constructs and the link between them is not short time. Further, there are a vast number of environmental factors influencing this relationship that are also beyond the control of the social actors. Thus, it is independent from the doing of members of an organisation that leads to look into this phenomenon from an objective view point, and hence conduct in a natural manner. This approach is further supported by the inconclusive empirical findings of this link to date. Therefore, Most of the HRM-Firm performance

research are based on objectivism thereby lies within the objective reality of the social world ontologically.

Epistemological Assumptions

Epistemological assumptions and epistemology on the other part is crucial for research that describes the nature of knowledge. Burrell and Morgan (2005, p. 1) describe these assumptions “about the grounds of knowledge-about how one might begin to understand the world and communicate this as knowledge to fellow human beings”. Further to their opinion, these assumptions are involved with some sort of ideas like what form of ideas can be obtained and how one can sort out what is to be regarded as true and false. The epistemological debate in social research is that whether the social world can be viewed as per the principle of natural science or not. As Guba and Lincoln (1994, p. 108) pointed out, the basic epistemological question is “what is the nature of the relationship between the knower or would-be knower and what can be known?” According to Saunders *et al.* (2003, p. 103), epistemological consideration is whether knowledge is hard, real, and in a general form or it is soft, subjective, and generated from unique individual experience. As they noted, epistemological consideration is whether the nature of knowledge is hard, real, capable of being transmitted in tangible form or softer, more subjective, spiritual or even transcendental kind, based on experience and insight of a unique and essentially personal nature. All in all, these epistemological stances lead to two competing perspectives namely, positivism and interpretivism.

Positivism and Interpretivism

These are two extreme positions that determine whether knowledge is something which can be acquired or which have to be personally experienced (Burrell & Morgan, 2005, p. 2). Positivism perspective is based on objective ontology and the reality is governed by universal laws and external to the researcher’s perception. Therefore, research findings are universal and can undergo strict scientific and value free investigations thereby employs a realistic perspective or realistic ontology.

On the contrary, interpretive is assert that the social world could be better understood by subjective ontology. This means that individual’s knowledge of reality determines what can be seen since it is assumed that the world is constructed by individuals’ cognition and influenced by self-interests.

Positivism and Anti-positivism

On the other hand, positivism vs anti-positivism has been the epistemological debate in which positivism seeks to

explain and predict what happens in the social world by searching for regularities and causal relationships between its constituents elements based upon dominant traditional approaches to natural sciences. In contrast, anti-positivism is set against the laws or underlying regularities in the world of social affairs and the social world can only be understood from individuals point of view who are directly involved with its activities. Anti-positivism treats social world as subjective and hence rejects objective knowledge of any kind (Burrell & Morgan, 2005, p. 5). According to extant literature positivism has still been an influential and widely used research paradigm in HRM research.

In relation to HRM research, RBV of the firm (Barney, 1995, 2001; Wright, Dunford, & Snell, 2001) provides the theoretical base to view the linkage between HRM practices and firm performance, which is since the long past well recognised as a predominant theoretical framework to study this link. Consequently, a great volume of empirical research has so far sought theoretical backing from the RBV (Barney & Wright, 1998; Becker & Huselid, 1998; Ismail, Omar, & Bidmeshgipour, 2010; Karami, Analoui, & Cusworth, 2004; Katou & Budhwar, 2006) since it is a good practice to view a universal phenomenon from a universal perspective. Theories in most circumstances provide a true picture of the phenomenon than individual perceptions since theories are drawn by integrating huge bulk of empirical knowledge gained through rigorous testing. Edwards (2010) pointed out that research in organisations and management pay high premium on theory since theories allow researchers to make sense of the phenomena, help to synthesize insights, and influence the numerous decisions that guide empirical research such as hypotheses, measures, and analytical methods that are employed.

However, in some cases, one particular theory would not be sufficient to support the entire story intended in an empirical research (Bong, 1996). Therefore, it is worth giving some room for induction rather than solely employing a deduction approach to view any phenomenon. Based on this ground, many researchers have contributed through conceptual and empirical works to the understanding of the HRM-firm performance relationship based upon RBV by integrating some supplementary theories to support the process of value creation between HRM practices and firm performance (Katou, 2011; Palagolla & Wickramasinghe, 2014a). It is obvious that some researchers have developed conceptual frameworks by integrating multiple theories in order to interpret the true picture of the HRM-Firm performance relationship (Katou, 2011; Palagolla & Wickramasinghe, 2014a). The reasoning behind this contention is many HRM researchers perceive that reality is governed by universal laws and not personal nature, and hence it can be better understood by objective ontology than individuals’ knowledge of reality and their perceptions and interests. Therefore, epistemologically most of the HRM research are

based on the generalisation of the positivistic perspective as against on the replication of theory.

ASSUMPTIONS ON HUMAN NATURE

Human nature is conceptually separate from ontological and epistemological assumptions, but an essential aspect of research in social science since it has been the subject and the object of any enquiry related to the relationship between human being and their environment. Researchers' point of view on human nature has therefore direct implications on the strategy and methods appropriate to investigate the subject under study. The human nature debate is another important aspect in research which revolves between voluntarism and determinism. The determinism view regards man and his activities are completely determined by the situation or environment in which he is located. On the other side, the voluntarism view regards man is completely autonomous and free willed. A great deal of HRM research is set along with the determinism view implying that employee outcomes as the process of value creation which determine the link between HRM practices and firm performance (Appelbaum, Bailey, Berg, & Kalleberg, 2000; Boselie, 2010). Further, the nature of employee outcomes is completely determined by the degree of the effectiveness of HRM, thus a product of the environment where they are employed. Therefore, higher the effectiveness of HRM, higher the positive employee outcomes could be expected and this assertion is supported by many empirical studies (Palagolla & Wickramasinghe, 2012; 2014b). The logic behind this is that employees are the direct recipients of HRM services. The nature of employees' autonomy and free will is also completely determined by the situation or environment where they are located.

METHODOLOGICAL APPROACH

According to Burrell and Morgan (2005), the ideographic vs nomothetic approaches lead to methodological debate that guides researchers towards the appropriate methodology to be used. Ideographic is a subjectivist approach to social science, which is based on the view that one can only understand the social world by getting close to the subject under investigation and exploring its detailed background and history while involving oneself in the everyday flow of life. Nomothetic is an objectivist approach to social science, which emphasizes the importance of systematic protocol and technique for understanding the subject. It therefore focuses upon rigorous process of testing hypotheses using quantitative analytical techniques (Burrell & Morgan, 2005, p. 6 & 7). Guba and Lincoln (1994, p. 108) wrote that methodological question of any research is constrained by answers already given to ontological and epistemological questions. Thus, they wrote "that is, not just *any* methodology is appropriate" to conduct research. According to the prior

assumptions on ontology, epistemology, and human nature in the extant literature, many HRM research lie within objectivist perspective ontologically, positivistic perspective epistemologically, and deterministic perspective in human nature. Further, it is obvious that research questions and objectives of any research have considerable implications for research methodology. Accordingly, research that is intended to explain causes and effects is used to deploy positivism perspective.

On the contrary, research intended to interpret and understand facts have deployed interpretivism (anti-positivism) perspective. In that point, it was obvious that research with the major purpose of explaining the causes and effects at multiple levels related to the HRM-firm performance relationship placed within objectivism perspective. Objectivism perspective leads to the adoption of positivistic and quantitative approach to social science research (Central Institute of Technology, 2010), which in other words known as nomothetic methodology. Therefore, majority of HRM research emphasizes quantification in data collection and analysis for testing hypotheses on priori basis. Burrell and Morgan (2005) pointed out that surveys, questionnaires, personality tests, and standardised research instruments of all kinds are the prominent tools in the nomothetic methodology. In favour to this explanation, scholars have pointed out ideal methodologies in relation to different research paradigms. Accordingly, there are four different paradigms for all social science research namely, functionalist, interpretive, radical humanist, and radical structuralist (Burrell & Morgan, 2005, p. 22).

The functionalist paradigm approaches subject under investigation in an objectivist point of view and thus, its standpoint is attributed by realist, positivist, determinist and nomothetic approach. It provides rational explanations of social affairs, highly pragmatic in orientation, often problem – orientated in approach, provides practical solutions to practical problems by generating knowledge which can be put to use, and applies models and methods of the natural sciences for studying human affairs. As Burrell and Morgan (2005, p. 25) wrote, this functionalist "paradigm has provided the dominant framework for the conduct of academic sociology and the study of organisations".

According to Greener (2008), functionalist paradigm adopts a classic survey approach to issues using a questionnaire with both quantitative and qualitative questions about reality. Similarly, the radical structuralist paradigm approaches matters in objectivist standpoint and views social world from a realist, positivist, determinist, and nomothetic perspective. This paradigm concentrates upon structural relationships within a realist social world and hence suggests historical analysis of power in the organisation often by developing case studies. In contrast, interpretive paradigm and radical humanist paradigm take subjectivist approach to the analysis

of social affairs from nominalist, anti-positivist, voluntarist, and ideographic perspective. However, an interpretive paradigm suggests a qualitative research methodology, for instance using discourse analysis and unstructured interviews to investigate reality. On the other side, radical humanist paradigm also suggests a qualitative approach, but to probe much deeper social values. Thus, the most appropriate methodology for this paradigm has been grounded theory. In sum, as per the philosophical assumptions of most HRM researchers, a considerable bulk of HRM research falls within functionalist research paradigm and hence adopts quantitative approach to the research problem since it is relatively easier and clearer to explain relationships through numbers than words.

CONCLUSION

Based on these scholarly opinions, it is clear that the debate on the adoption of quantitative methodology or qualitative methodology is not just based on researcher's free will, instead it is influenced by the philosophical assumptions of the researcher. Further, literature shows that quantitative approach has been the dominant methodology for business management research in the HRM arena. Karami, Rowley, and Analoui (2006) in their analysis of methodology employed in 120 research articles published between 1991 and 2000 in top 20 business and management journals found that positivism and quantitative methodologies were dominant despite the wide range of other methodologies. In addition to all these reasoning, time constraints and access opportunities for data have also influenced the adoption of quantitative approach for any research.

However, there are some criticisms of positivistic and quantitative approach to social world. Critics argue that the social world is more complex which require more flexible approach than quantifying the social affairs (Central Institute of Technology, 2010). Yet, there is no methodology without criticism because there are no perfect methodologies to cover all sorts of aspects of a phenomenon. Therefore, those criticisms have no point to reject quantitative approach to research. In particular, HRM research based on the causal link between HRM practices and firm performance can be well quantified through an adequately covered structured questionnaire based survey since it is possible to integrate various theories and empirical findings within and across different strands to support the phenomenon. Therefore, qualitative approach with rigorous probing process to HRM - firm performance is not a must. However, an emergent hybrid type methodology mixing quantitative and qualitative data collection and analysis in a single investigation has been widely recognised by many researchers in order to avoid pitfalls whilst addressing complex issues.

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