Review

A review of philosophical assumptions in management research

Kee Mun WONG*, Ghazali MUSA and Edward Sek Khin WONG

Faculty of Business and Accountancy, University of Malaya, 50603 Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia.

Epistemology, a branch of philosophy, examines and contributes as a theory of knowledge by considering the nature and definition of knowledge as being truth within certain limitations while ontology defines the nature of being, entities that can exist and their categories in groups, hierarchies, or divisions. The main aim of this paper is to embrace on the pre-understanding of epistemology and ontology, regardless of their schools of thought as it will provide them the proper guidance and a philosophical dualist perspective. Four domains of epistemic assumptions have been identified but one is incoherent due to the mismatch between epistemology and ontology. Though each epistemic assumption has its own interpretation in management research, there is no particular domain that can be considered right or wrong, perfect or imperfect. A proper and effective research design is the major concern in management research, where the researcher's epistemic and methodological self-directed actions or reflexivity may put an essence in it.

Key words: Philosophy, epistemology, ontology, reflexivity, management research.

INTRODUCTION

Though social science was supposed to be able to do valid research by mimicking the natural sciences using a positivist approach, modern developments have changed the view of what is warranted knowledge. Being uniquely human, it is impossible to have the same perception as another person, who determines right from wrong, truth from untruth, and the real from the imaginary. These questions are evaluated and answered by self-reflections, and there is no fixed method or processes that yield a 'correct' answer, as all that one can decide is that at a given time, place, set of 'facts,' and the given problem you may have the 'best answer.' There is no dominance and absolute conceptions in reality, particularly in human perceptions of the existence of the world but guidance may be found by the understanding of the philosophical branches of epistemology and ontology towards human existence. As it applies to social research, such as in management studies, it is important to realize the underlying reasons of a particular event or phenomenon

through an empirical study. Thus, to have a meaningful and strong management research, it is almost a necessity to accept a fundamental research resource in reflexivity, as both a knowledge resource and as a methodology (Beck, 1992; Bourdieu, 1990; Holland, 1999; Pollner, 1991; Sandywell, 1996; Steier, 1991). Appropriate reflexivity may enhance the understanding of our existence (Holland, 1999) and failing to do so may result in poor research practices (Sandywell, 1996).

Harding (1987) pointed out that reflexivity can be differentiated in two forms: 1) methodological reflexivity and 2) epistemic reflexivity. The former investigates the behavioral impact upon social settings through particular research procedures and associated field roles, in order to improve research practices. On the other hand, the epistemic reflexivity shows the researcher's beliefs over socio-historical location, incorporating new epistemic research approaches into one's thinking through excavating, articulating, evaluating, and transforming metaphysical assumptions into implementing a research structure. Through a researcher's biography (Ashmore, 1989), this may show influences in the way he/she proliferates, apprehends, and anticipates existing and new knowledge in the society. In sum, the forms of

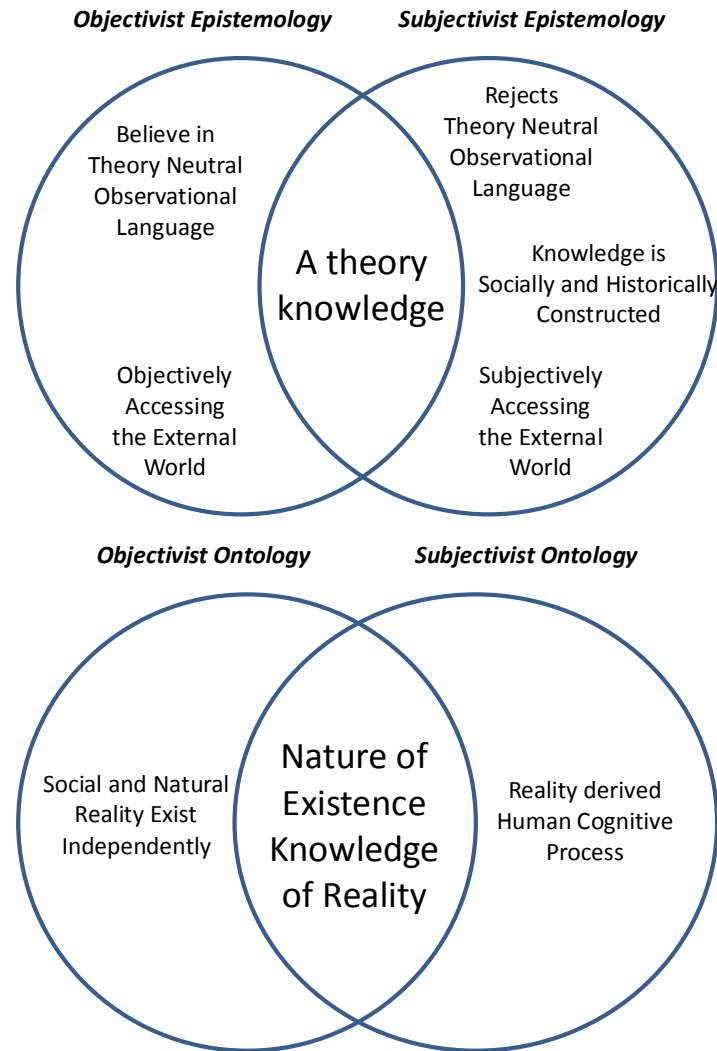*Corresponding author. E-mail: keemunw@gmail.com. Tel: +60-12-208-9791.

Objectivist Epistemology **Subjectivist Epistemology**

Believe in
Theory Neutral
Observational
Language

Rejects
Theory Neutral
Observational
Language

A theory
knowledge

Knowledge is
Socially and Historically
Constructed

Objectively
Accessing
the External
World

Subjectively
Accessing
the External
World

Objectivist Ontology **Subjectivist Ontology**

Social and Natural
Reality Exist
Independently

Nature of
Existence
Knowledge
of Reality

Reality derived
Human Cognitive
Process

Figure 1. Overview of epistemology and ontology.

epistemic reflexivity would enable researchers to reflect rationally and hold one's attention at either a methodological or meta-theoretical level, supporting the considered argument among different epistemological doctrines. It is the researcher's intellectual ability to interpret logically in the socio-cultural phenomenon that will fail or prevail. Thus, this review paper is paramount to provide an opinion to management researchers in considering seriously on their reflexivity importance in carrying out their research work, implicating who they are and where they belong in the philosophical root and as a scholar.

REFLEXIVITY AND MANAGEMENT RESEARCH

As the focus of management research is a socially constructed phenomenon, it is almost impossible to disengage the researcher's own biography (Ashmore, 1989). An overview of epistemology and ontology is

shown Figure 1. The researcher's ability in epistemic reflexivity affects the forms and outcomes of a research, though levels of reflexivity in different paradigms differ as shown in Figure 2. In general, objective epistemology relies on objective ontology. Thus, one who views the research realities objectively and realizes that they cannot exist independently as shown by the incoherent area 2 of Figure 2.

ANALYSIS OF AREAS

Area 1: Objectivist ontology and epistemology

Both positivism and neo-positivism generally adopt objectivism in both epistemological and ontological perspectives, though the latter are prone to subjective epistemic assumptions. This area presupposes theory of neutral observational language, by accessing reality
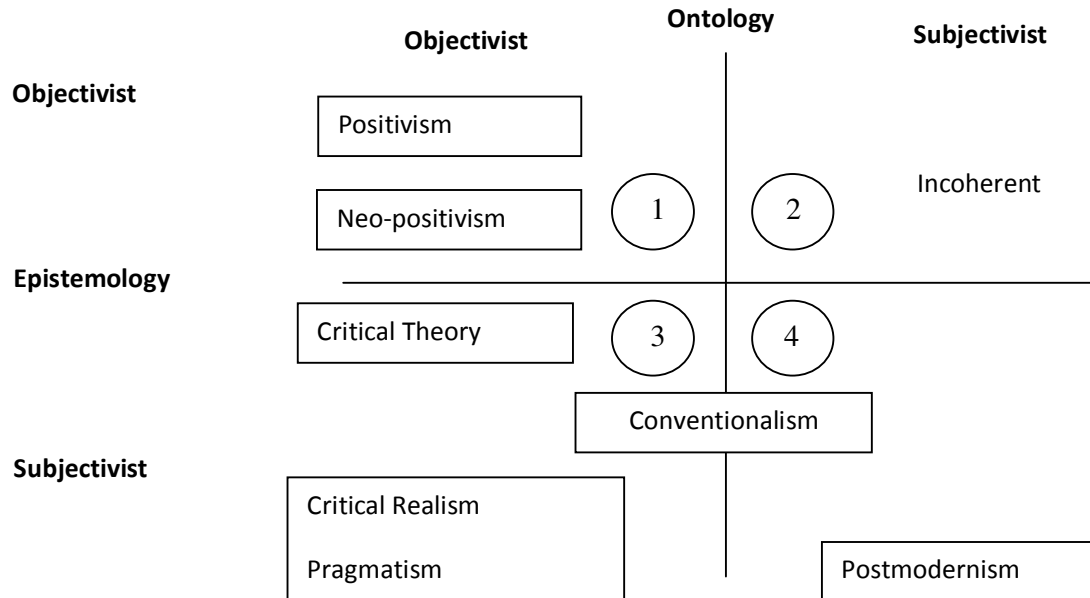
Figure 2. Reflexivity and management research.

objectively. Here, new knowledge is generally generated deductively from existing knowledge, testing the constructs of empirical data; as practiced in positivism. In other words, this area of this domain is based on empiricism and rationalism in the warranting of knowledge. Since positivism is binding the social constructs within certain confines, examining cause and effects relationships with an assumption of everything else being a constant, it cannot address in-depth issues such as "why X happens?", thus it is able only to generate results within certain limitations. As well, positivism generates only cross sectional outputs that may not be applicable to long-term solutions, as it acts as a passive agent in a subject-object dualism. These limitations remain the anti-positivist's weapons in attacking positivism. In a counter-attack effort, neo-positivism emerged, and it included more subjectivist epistemological assumptions, reflecting inductive methods in an effort to understand human behaviour and explaining socio-historical background of causality through subjective interpretation, combining subject-subject dualism instead. The researcher's reflexivity acknowledges their own limitations in using a particular methodology within the positivist or neo-positivist epistemological assumptions. Methodological reflexivity has been seen as more prioritized than epistemic reflexivity in this area, making no impact of the researchers own biography to the research findings.

As Gold (1958) suggested, researchers may look into the influences of variables towards the research settings in organizational ethnography. Researchers may implement a rather subjectivist-prone methodology during data collection, in order to obtain balance between extreme conditions (Horowitz, 1986; Pollner and Emerson, 1983; Shalin, 1986), gaining access to unauthorized

organizational premises and arguments (Goffman, 1969), maintaining what Hammersley and Atkinson (1995) called 'social and intellectual distance' and 'analytical space'. As the methodological reflexivity is paramount in positivism, there are concerns on the research method instead of the underlying meta-theoretical assumptions. Each researcher has his own working method, having relative strengths and weaknesses. The aforementioned problems may be best addressed by Habermas' (1972) epistemological self-reflection that will lead to better epistemic reflexivity. Neo-positivism managed to implant some portion of self-reflexivity, maintaining epistemic reflexivity to certain extents, but 'hyper-reflexivity' occurs when a researcher manages two types of reflexivity at one time.

Area 3: Objectivist ontology and subjectivist epistemology

This area concerns subjective epistemology with objective ontology. Here, human cognition may recognise the reality, yonder, in an effort to make a valid inquiry concerning reality through a socio-historical background. The paradigms in this area generally reject the theory of a neutral observational language, emphasizing constructivism and socio-rationalism in deriving alternative realities, as Fay (1987) suggested that a human's well-being is influenced by their self-knowledge and perception towards the social situations. Habermas (1972, 1974a, b) criticized positivism epistemic assumptions as being too objective, leaving an objectivist illusionary effect, confusing the relationship between 'knowledge' and 'interest'. Instead, Habermas enunciated

constructivism in management research with the assumption of a politically driven organization instead of a democratic one. Habermas' proposal of an 'ideal speech situation' is meant for protection against any relativism associated issues, its achievable inter-subjective consensus is meant to legitimize knowledge.

Therefore, Habermas was able to present an in-depth epistemic reflexivity while retaining methodological reflexivity through rules and the logic of reasoning. Though Habermas argued that in democratic social realism, people are able to establish social relations, define reality, and enhance socio-rational knowledge; it may not always be the situation where consensus may be successfully obtained. The success of the Habermas 'ideal speech situation' very much depends on the strength of congruent communication. Thus, the level of the social constructed democracy would be a paramount issue in its epistemic reflexivity. However, there are two critical issues that need to be addressed in the Habermasian approach towards management research: who are the communicants in any colloquy about knowledge and how are the communicants ensuring no systematic distortion occurs when power and domination exist naturally in an organization. Critics found that it seems to be difficult for critical theory to escape from objectivist epistemology, creating a contradiction of their own critiques towards positivism.

As both critical theory and pragmatic-critical realism lie in the same area, they share a number of similar characteristics, such as a dependence upon the researcher's self-reflexivity as the epistemic reflexivity used to demonstrate its epistemic importance, creating new versions of reality, and presuming knowledge as a way of developing a more democratic knowledge and society, as shown by Friere's (1972a, b) educational work. Nevertheless, there are certain paramount differences that we need to be aware of. While a critical theorist believes that knowledge is a socially constructed phenomenon and is warned that the detachment of epistemology from ontology would result in a rejection of human contact with the external world, causing a person to return to relativism. Pragmatic-critical theorists argue that in order to refrain from relativism and objectivism, practical success or failure would be the essence of knowledge. Practical adequacy is paramount for the pragmatic-critical realist in social transformations of knowledge and practice, where failing to do so may imply a lack of self-reflexivity and feedback are generally influenced by an independent 'reality' (Zolo, 1990).

Both critical theory and pragmatic-critical realism circumvent the hyper-reflexivity that is proposed in postmodernism, as they encourage critical interrogation of the researcher's own work. Epistemic reflexivity has been viewed differently by both the critical theorist and the pragmatic-critical realist, where the former uses it to generate new interpretations and achieve consensus while the latter uses it to generate new versions of reality

in the form of practice, which encourages researcher's self-reflection, assisting the unvoiced to voice their suppressed contents (Melucci, 1996). The domains in this area would probably require the development of new forms of methodology which put more concentration on the subjects in the management dialog. Thus, epistemic reflexivity is essential to enable the development of knowledge and strategies, as a transformative effort that is practical and adequate in coping with and resolving management issues.

Area 4: Subjectivist ontology and epistemology

This area is exposed to the extremes of both subjectivist epistemology and subjectivist ontology, also known as postmodernism and certain parts of conventionalism (Holland, 1999). As opposite to positivism, this gives priority to epistemic reflexivity instead of methodological reflexivity; though both may have been used in understanding the reality as seen in conventionalism as argued by Kuhn (1970a). Commensurable view of paradigms is supported by the objectivist ontology. Both commensurability (Burrell and Morgan, 1979) and incommensurability (Morgan, 1986) may drive epistemic reflexivity. It will be rational to say that scientific theories are commensurable when we can compare them with alternatives to decide their accuracy. However, no comparison can be made, and we are unable to determine which is more accurate.

Postmodernism believes that reality is far from being accessible and unable to be explained through language, so science is just merely a 'language game' or a part of a 'form of life'. Postmodernism assigns multiple explanations of reality, suggesting management research ought to be humble in making any claims about reality of the social world. Postmodernists generate knowledge based on their own self-knowledge and reflexivity, making sense of sensual relativity. Deconstructionism is much of their practice in management research (Ashmore, 1989; Woolgar, 1988a, b), forming new bookish forms that includes 'hyper-reflexivity'. As everything is considered to be relative, it has raised the question- "what should be precise and exact knowledge". Critiques, for example, Latour (1988) have been raised for being non-practical and merely a never-ending effort causing an amount of voices to emerge, subside, and re-emerge again through endless complications of self-reflection.

CONCLUSION

Philosophies vary by different approaches to epistemology and reflexivity. Objectivist ontology would prioritize methodological reflexivity, highlight empirical evidence to warrant knowledge while subjectivist ontology is sewn to epistemic reflexivity in explaining the well-being of the nature. Positivism concentrates on upgrading methodologies and their applications while postmodernism

suggests the impossibility of neutral observational language, portraying science as merely a 'language game'. Nevertheless, both have paramount aspects in research, contributing to strong methodologies while creating meaningful knowledge. On the other hand, critical theorists and pragmatic-critical realists view values and interests as important elements in shaping knowledge. Having said so, it leaves a problematic definition of reflexivity as to which is more important. Constructivists suggest that method is not so paramount, as long as it creates new valuable and practical knowledge. On the other hand, positivists put much effort to legitimize knowledge by sound method. Each paradigm has its own valid approaches, making it difficult to justify the right paradigm to follow.

In any case, any type of research requires a philosophical domain to interpret issues and events, as well as, the ability to understand the socio and historical background of knowledge is a major task for a researcher. In management research, the researcher's ability to understand the epistemological and ontological assumptions may lead the researcher to the right paradigm in carrying out their research, overseeing issues in appropriate manners, this from identifying the location of current problems that may exist. The researcher needs to analyze the environments of the research intellectually, supported by the associated philosophy and verifying the knowledge through empirical investigations. Researchers are meant to be able to put effort on both methodological and epistemic reflexivity within the research process, in order to ensure a successful and meaningful study. Constructive criticism should be welcomed in order to elevate knowledge of a particular social scientist, contributing to the body of knowledge in general.

REFERENCES

Ashmore M (1989). The Reflexive Thesis: Wrighting the Sociology of Scientific Knowledge. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Beck U (1992). The Risk Society: Towards a New Modernity. Cambridge: Polity Press.

Bourdieu P (1990). The Logic of Practice. Cambridge: Polity Press.

Burrell G, Morgan G (1979). Sociological Paradigms and Organizational Analysis. London: Heinemann.

Friere P (1972a). Pedagogy of the Oppressed. Harmondsworth: Penguin.

Friere P (1972b). Cultural Action for Freedom. Harmondsworth: Penguin.

Goffman E (1969). The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life. Harmondsworth: Penguin.

Gold RL (1958). Roles in sociological fieldwork, Soc. Forces, 36 (3): 217-223.

Habermas J (1972). Knowledge and Human Interest. London: Heinemann Educational Books.

Habermas J (1974a). Theory and Practice. London: Heinemann Educational Books.

Habermas J (1974b). Rationalism divided in two: a reply to Albert, in A. Giddens (ed.), Positivism and Sociology. London: Heinemann Educational Books.

Hammersley M, Atkinson P (1995). Ethnography: Principles in Practice (2nd edn). London: Routledge.

Harding S (1987). Is there a feminist method?, in S. Harding, Feminist Methodology. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.

Holland R (1999). Reflexivity, Hum. Relat., 52 (4): 463-483.

Horowitz R (1986). Remaining an outsider: membership as a threat to research rapport, Urban Life, 14: 409-430.

Kuhn T (1970a). The Structure of Scientific Revolutions (2nd edn.). Chicago: Chicago University Press.

Latour B (1988). The politics of explanation: an alternative, in S. Woolgar (ed.), Knowledge and Reflexivity: New Frontiers in the Sociology of Knowledge. London: Sage.

Melucci A (1996). Challenging Codes: Collective Action for the Information Age. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Morgan G (1986). Images of Organization. London: Sage.

Pollner M (1991). Left of ethnomethodology; the rise and decline of radical reflexivity, Am. Sociol. Rev., 56: 370-380.

Pollner M, Emerson RM (1983). The dynamics of inclusion and distance in fieldwork Relations, in R.M. Emerson (ed.), Contemporary Field Research. Boston: Little, Brown.

Sandywell B (1996). Reflexivity and the Crisis of Western Reason: Logological Investigations London: Routledge, Vol. 1.

Shalin DN (1986). Pragmatism and social interaction, Am. Sociol. Rev., 51 (1): 9-29.

Steier F (1991). Research and Reflexivity. London: Sage.

Woolgar S (1988a). Science: the Very Idea. Sussex: Ellis Horwood.

Woolgar S (1988b). Knowledge and Reflexivity: New Frontiers in the Sociology of Knowledge. London: Sage.

Zolo D (1990). Reflexive epistemology and social complexity: the philosophical legacy of Otto Neurath. Philos. Soc. Sci., 20(2): 149-169.