

***Research
philosophy***

Why philosophy ?

- ▶ All research is based on assumptions about
 - ▶ how the world is perceived
 - ▶ how we can best come to understand it.
- ▶ Nobody really *knows* how we can best *understand* the world
- ▶ *Philosophers* have been *arguing* about it for 1000s of years,
- ▶ For us, as researchers, need to consider
 - ▶ how we know about the world around us.
 - ▶ What is our philosophical approach to knowledge?

Philosophy and Research

► What is Philosophy?

- The study of the most general and abstract features of the world and the categories with which we think. In philosophy the concepts with which we approach the world themselves become the topic of enquiry.
- investigation of the nature, causes, or principles of reality, knowledge, or values, based on logical reasoning rather than empirical methods (*American Heritage Dictionary*)
- the study of the ultimate nature of existence, reality, knowledge and goodness, as discoverable by human reasoning (*Penguin English Dictionary*)

Philosophy and Research

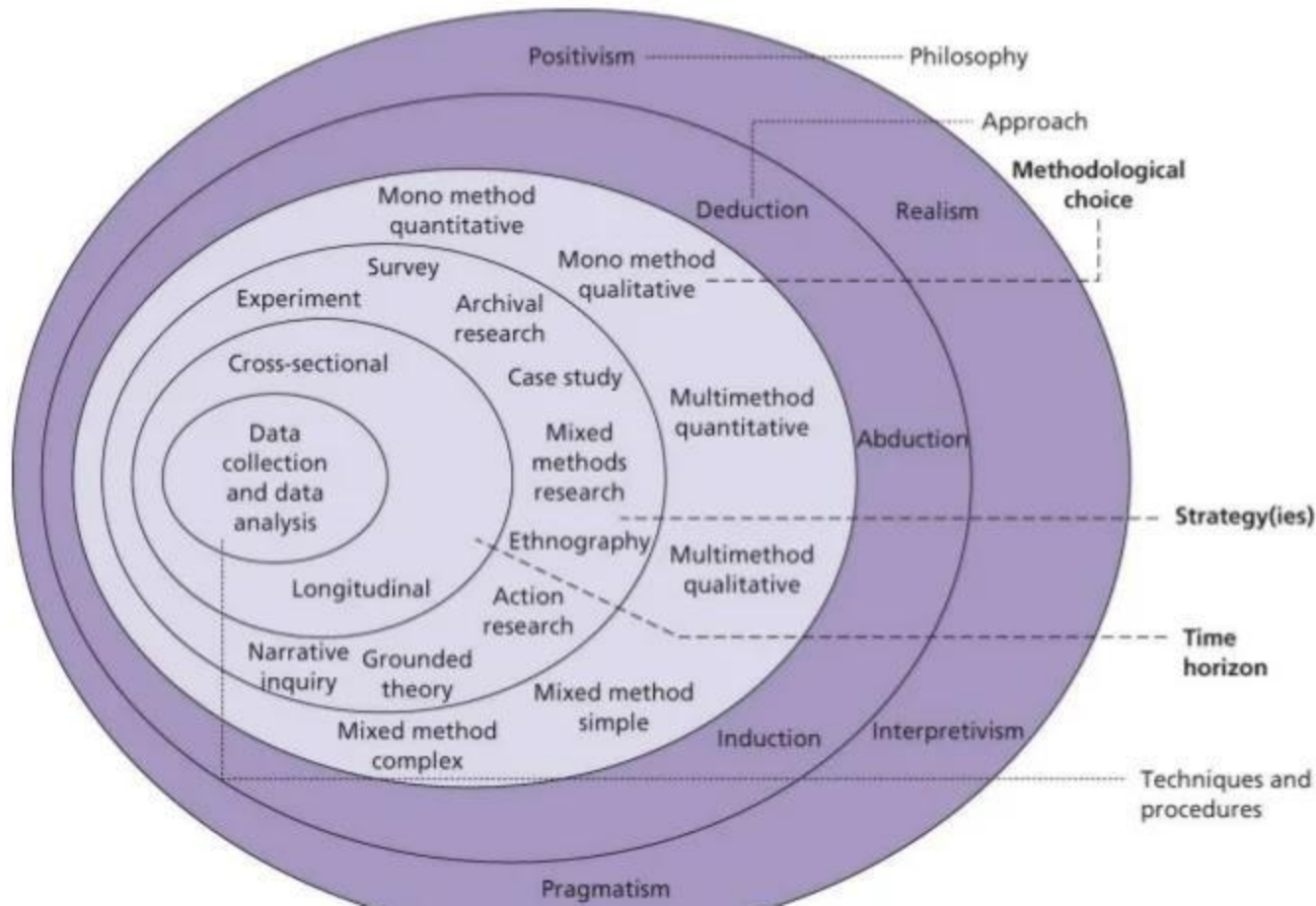
► **What is Research**

“Research is to see what everybody else has seen, and to think what nobody else has thought” (Blaikie, 2010)

- Research is going beyond personal experience, thoughts, feelings and opinions
- Research is careful or diligent search about a phenomena.
- Studious inquiry or examination; *especially* :investigation or experimentation aimed at the discovery and interpretation of facts, revision of accepted theories or laws in the light of new facts, or practical application of such new or revised theories or laws

The research 'onion'

Source: © Mark Saunders, Philip Lewis and Adrian Thornhill 2006



Understanding your research philosophy

- ▶ **What you are doing when embarking on research:** developing knowledge in a particular field
- ▶ System of beliefs and assumptions about development of knowledge.
- ▶ Research philosophy is an over-arching term relating to the development of knowledge and the nature of that knowledge

(Saunders *et al*, 2009)

Understanding your research philosophy

- ▶ At every stage in research we make a number of types of assumption (Burrell and Morgan 1979).
- ▶ **These include assumption about**
 - ▶ the realities encountered in research (**Ontological assumptions**)
 - ▶ human knowledge (**Epistemological assumptions**),
 - ▶ assumptions about human Value (**Axiological assumption**)
 - ▶ **These assumptions inevitably shape how you understand your research questions, the methods you use and how you interpret your findings (Crotty 1998).**

Understanding your research philosophy

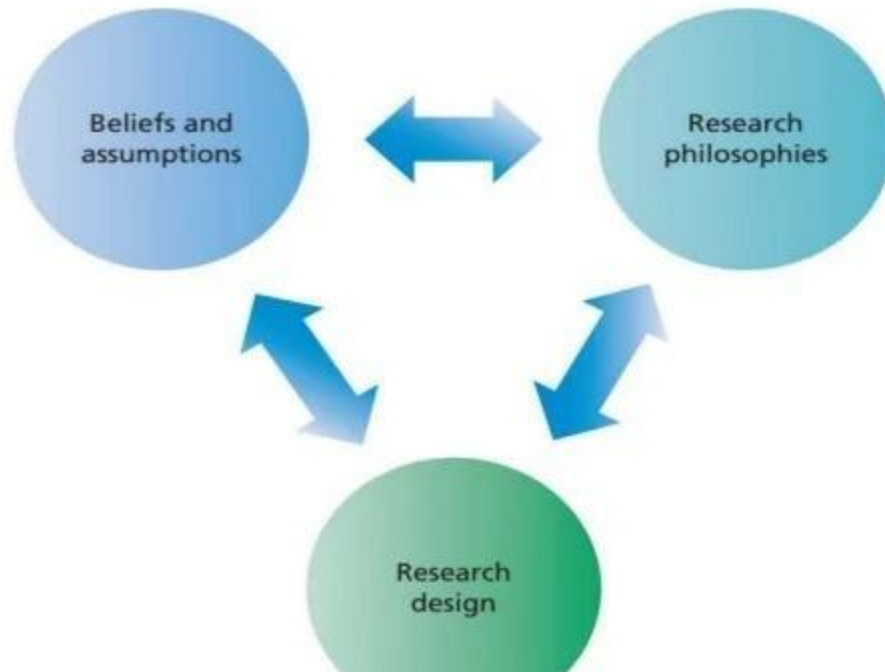
- ▶ A **well-thought-out** and **consistent** set of assumptions will constitute a **credible research philosophy**
- ▶ **This will**
 - ▶ underpin your methodological choice, research strategy and data collection techniques and analysis procedures.
 - ▶ allow you to design a coherent research project, in which all elements of research fit together.

Thinking about research philosophy

- ▶ There are **two things** that you can do to start making a more active and informed philosophical choice:
 - ▶ begin asking yourself questions about your **research beliefs** and **assumptions**
 - ▶ **familiarize** yourself with **major research philosophies**

Developing your research philosophy: a reflexive process

Source: Alexandra Bristow and Mark Saunders 2015



Ontology

- ▶ Describes our view (claims or assumptions) on the **nature of reality**
- ▶ It raise the questions of the assumptions researchers have about the way the world operates.
- ▶ Specifically **describes** that is reality an **objective reality** that really exists, or only a **subjective reality**, created in our minds.

Ontology

- ▶ Two aspects of ontology are
 - ▶ **Objectivism:** This portrays the position that social entities exist in reality external to social actors concerned with their existence.
 - ▶ **Subjectivism:** holds that social phenomena are created from the perceptions and consequent actions of those social actors concerned with their existence

Epistemology

- ▶ Concerns what constitutes acceptable knowledge in a field of study.
- ▶ What is knowledge and what are the **sources and limits of knowledge**
(Eriksson and Kovalainen, 2008).
- ▶ Epistemology is ‘**how and what it is possible to know**’ and the need to reflect on methods and standards through which reliable and verifiable knowledge is produced Chia (2002)
- ▶ Epistemology as ‘**knowing how you can know**’ (Hatch and Cunliffe, 2006)
- ▶ Questions of epistemology begin to consider the research method.

Axiology

- ▶ Axiology is a branch of philosophy that studies **judgments about value**.
- ▶ The role that your own values play, in all stages of the research process, is of great importance for your research results to be credible.
- ▶ Choosing one topic rather than another suggests that you think one of the topics is more important.
- ▶ Your choice of philosophical approach is a reflection of your values as is your choice of data collection techniques.

Understanding your research philosophy

FOUR MAJOR ASPECTS OF PHILOSOPHY

- ▶ **Positivism** – the stance of the natural scientist
- ▶ **Realism** – direct and critical realism
- ▶ **Interpretivism** – researchers as ‘social actors’
- ▶ **Pragmatism** – studies judgements about value

Positivism

- ▶ Positivism can be defined as “research approaches that **employ empirical methods**, make extensive **use of quantitative analysis**, or develop logical calculi to build **formal explanatory theory**”

Positivism

- ▶ **Research philosophy used by the natural sciences**
- ▶ The researcher is an objective analyst of the external world; the end product of the research are law-like generalizations
- ▶ Makes detached interpretations about the data that have been collected in an objective manner
 - ▶ **the researcher is independent of the subject of the research:**
 - ▶ the researcher does not affect the subject of the research
 - ▶ the researcher is not affected by the subject of the research
- ▶ **Focus on**
 - ▶ highly structured methodology and methods (e.g., questionnaires) to facilitate replication
 - ▶ observations can be quantified; this permits statistical analysis

Realism

- ▶ A philosophical position which relates to **scientific enquiry**.
- ▶ The essence of realism is that **what the senses show us as reality is the truth**; that objects have an existence independent of the human mind.
- ▶ In this sense, realism is opposed to idealism, the theory that only the mind and its contents exist

Realism

- ▶ **Shares two features with Positivism:**
 - ▶ A belief that the natural and social sciences should apply the same kind of approach to the collection of data and to explanation
- ▶ Realism is an **attempt** by some researchers in social sciences to **adjust Positivism to studies of social phenomena**
 - ▶ realism accepts the **existence of reality independent of human beliefs and behavior.**
 - ▶ In the realists' view, there are social processes and forces beyond the control of humans, which affect their beliefs and behavior (Saunders et al., 2009:114).

Direct realism and critical realism

- ▶ **Direct realism:** what we experience through our senses presents the world accurately.
- ▶ **critical realism:** critical realists argue that we experience sensations, the images of the things in the real world, not the things directly.
 - ▶ Critical realists point out how often our senses deceive us.

Interpretivism

- ▶ The interpretive paradigm is also called the **phenomenological** approach.
- ▶ This is an approach that aims to understand people (Babbie & Mouton, 2008).
- ▶ It concerns with the meanings that people attach to norms, rules, and values that regulate their interactions.
 - ▶ **The purpose of research is understanding and interpreting everyday happenings (events), experiences and social structures-as well as the values people attach to these phenomena** (Collis & Hussey, 2009).
- ▶ This emphasizes the differences between conducting research among people rather than objects such as machines and computers.

Interpretivism

- ▶ **Opposite to Positivism**
- ▶ Argues that the social world is too complex and unique for the traditional natural sciences approaches
 - ▶ Therefore, it **cannot be generalized**; it depends on **particular sets of circumstances and individuals**
- ▶ **Care is taken to understand people's beliefs and actions from their point of view**
- ▶ Interpretivists seeks to understand the **subjective reality** of those that they study to understand their motives, actions, and intentions

Pragmatism

- ▶ Pragmatism holds that the **most important determinant** of the epistemology, ontology, axiology adopted is the **research question**.
- ▶ For a pragmatist, **research starts with a problem**, and aims to contribute practical solutions that inform future practice.
- ▶ Reality matters to pragmatists as practical effects of ideas, and knowledge is valued for enabling actions to be carried out successfully.

Summary

Research philosophy

- ▶ relates to the development of knowledge and the nature of that knowledge contains important assumptions about the way in which we view the world

Three major ways of thinking about research philosophy

- ▶ Epistemology-concerns assumptions about knowledge
- ▶ Ontology – concerns researchers' assumptions about the nature of the world and reality (objectivism and subjectivism)
- ▶ Axiology-refers to the role of values and ethics within the research process