Interpretative Research Paradigms: Points of Difference

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Abstract: This paper outlines the background to the debate surrounding positivisitic and phenomenological research and the growing consensus of a mixed methods approach. It explains the increasing popularity of interpretative methods but recognises growing concern about the lack of rigour by some researchers in using these methods. In the move from positivism to interpretivism the two main interpretive approaches are symbolic interactionism and hermeneutic phenomenolism, but these terms are not synonymous. It explains symbolic interactionism and the fact that it is context specific and dependent on the environment in which the research is taking place, recognising that humans are best understood in relation to their environment. Examples are given of currently acceptable practices that were once prohibited and vice versa. It then outlines hermeneutic phenomenology's origins and why it is so popular with marketing academics and others. The tradition of 'textual analysis' now needs to be expanded to include online and multi-media materials. This paper highlights the differences between what may be reported happened and what actually did occur. Hermeneutics, it is argued, aims to find out what happened, but this is always interpreted through the *dasein* of the researcher. Symbolic interactionism, on the other hand, focuses not on *what* happened, but *why*. The authors warn, however, that one of the most popular tools of such research, participant observation, may find itself compromised as the presence of the observer may well influence the events they are observing. In conclusion, the authors recommend that phenomenological researchers consider using a combination of hermeneutic and symbolic interactionism research in order to not only understand what actually happened in a social environment, but also what it meant to those experiencing the event. This cannot ever totally exclude the life world of the researcher from their interpretation of the events they are studying, but it should at least allow a more accurate representation of what was observed.

Key words: interpretivism, symbolic interactionism, hermeneutic phenomenology, mixed methods

1. Introduction

As academic researchers have started to take a more nuanced view of research and moved from a positivist perspective to a more intepretivist perspective, it is important to consider the two main interpretive approaches of symbolic interactionism and hermeneutic phenomenology. After clarifying the difference between quantitative and qualitative research, this paper considers the advantages of a mixed methods approach and then outlines the differences between symbolic interactionism and hermeneutic phenomenology. The paper concludes with a discussion of the implications of these various approaches for researchers active in the business and management fields.

Phenomenological research, or qualitative research as it is popularly more known, can be regarded as the opposite of positivistic research (often referred to as quantitative research). Words associated with positivistic research are quantitative, objective, scientific, experimentalist, and traditional. Proponents of the positivistic approach assert that as their results can be measured, before and after and over time (longitudinal) that their research is objective and can be proved. Cresswell (1994) drawing on a study of the literature of research methods provided a list of assumptions for each approach. A summary of his findings is:

Quantitative Research

Quantitative research is objective and singular with the researcher being independent from the subject being researched and is thus unbiased.

The researcher will use an impersonal voice, and by deduction will be able to determine cause and effect.

Results will be accurate and reliable and will be able to be validated.

The inference being that qualitative research is none of these things: it is NOT objective, and unbiased, the researcher will NOT be independent, and results will NOT be accurate or reliable. In the title of a subsequent book Cresswell added the words mixed methods alongside qualitative, and quantitative for research design, (Cresswell, 2003). In this book he is at pains to extol the virtues of a mixed methods approach thus recognising the move in research thinking away from a polarised "quant or

qual" stance. This polarity between the two approaches was nicely summarised by Smith (1983)... "in quantitative research facts act to constrain our beliefs: while in interpretative research beliefs determine what should be counted as facts." Thus research students in the past were encouraged to make an ontological assumption, whereby they had to decide whether the world is objective and external to the researcher, or socially constructed and only understood by examining the actions and perceptions of the subjects.

In short positivistic research emphasises quantification in the collection and analysis of data, has a deductive relationship between theory and research and has an objectivist conception of reality. In addition, quantitative methods generally use standardised measures with predetermined response categories (Patton, 2010). By comparison qualitative research tends to focus on words rather than numbers and has an inductive, interpretive, and constructional approach (Husserl, 1936; 1965; Ramberg & Gjesdal, 2009).

2. Mixed methods

There is some evidence that even in the new millennium some academics such as Bryman and Bell (2007) see interpretativism as being antipathetic to positivism. Nonetheless the current thinking as expressed by Gorard (2004) is that mixed method research can lead to "less waste of potentially useful information" (p.7). In short many researchers now view qualitative and quantitative methods as complementary rather than antipathetical (Jackson, 1991; 2000; Mingers & Gill, 1996; Thomas, 2003; Creswell, 2003; and Jack & Raturi, 2006) and that a 'mixed method' enables richness of understanding of phenomena through confirmation of result, extension of knowledge or by initiating new perspectives about the subject of research (Bazeley, 2004). The mixed methods approach uses (conjointly) both a positivistic and an interpretative approach, one feeding off the other. The use of both positivistic and interpretative methods might be in a single approach design (SAD) or multi approach design (MAD). With SAD only one analytic interest is pursued but both positivistic and interpretative is used, for example qualitative research is added to a quantitative study to give added research quality. With MAD there will be more than one analytic interest and again both methodologies will be used. For further reading on Mixed Methods see the *Journal of Mixed Methods Research* (*MMR*). MMR is a quarterly, interdisciplinary, international publication that focuses on empirical, methodological, and theoretical articles about mixed methods research across the social, behavioural, health, and human sciences. The journal gives its scope as including the delineation of where mixed methods research may be most effective, illuminating design and procedure issues, and determining the logistics of conducting mixed methods research.

A philosophical underpinning for a mixed methods approach to research is provided by Tashakkori and Teddlie (1998) who see the importance of a focussed empirical attention on the research problem in social science research and of using a pluralistic approach to derive knowledge about the research issue. Cherryholmes (1992), Murphy (1990) and Cresswell (2003) believe that mixed methods is a pragmatic approach in so far as there is no reliance on just one method of research but instead draws liberally from both positivistic and interpretative approaches. In this way it is considered that researchers have a freedom of choice of method and should look to a variety of approaches for collection and analysis of data so as to find the best understanding of the research problem. Cresswell goes onto warn that the researcher has to understand and be able to explain (the rationale) why it is necessary to mix research methods.

It is relatively easy to envisage when mixed methods might appear to be appropriate. For example a study into obesity might gather data in terms of percentage of population by sex, age, ethnicity, income, and employment to identify a segment of the population as having a high proportion of obesity. The next step could be to seek causes by comparison of diets, exercise etc. All this would be quantitative, and it might be possible to conclude that people in sedentary work, with a high fat intake and who do not regularly exercise are at risk of being obese. A positivistic study could stop at this point, on the grounds that cause and effect have been established and of course can be measured. This would be a very weak piece of research. Armed with the empirical quantitative data (without the statistics it would be hard to know where and whom should be questioned/interviewed) a qualitative approach might through questionnaires /interviews/focus groups try to establish why the obese have a poor diet and why they are not exercising. The weaknesses in such approaches are that they have simplified a complex social problem and this simplification will lead to fairly predictable conclusions and platitudinous recommendations (eat less and exercise more).

"When we speak of obesity as a complex problem (and not simply a matter of calories in and calories out), we allude to the complex interactions of a multitude of societal, psychological, and physiological variables that do not allow a ready dissection as to cause and effect (are large portion sizes leading to obesity or do obese people drive the demand for larger portions?)" (Sharma, 2010 p.1).

Thus a mixed method approach where qualitative research is built on positivistic data can lead to a simplistic conclusion. Likewise at the outset of any research, the framing of the research question will limit the scope and will lead the researcher down a very narrow and straight path although the richness and beauty of the research journey could well be along byways or even perhaps in a totally different direction. In general where a researcher in a mixed methods approach employs quantitative or empirical methods the starting point will be on what is observable and available with "researchers focusing primarily on those areas and questions that are amenable to the adherence of empirical methods of enquiry" (Laverty, 2003 p21). With the use of hypotheses and propositions the direction of the journey is even more restricted and it becomes a very black and white affair (null hypothesis, or alternative hypothesis with limited scope for a middle ground). Thus at the end of the research journey the researcher, although ostensibly a mixed method approach has been used, will have achieved a very limited result which will add little to their own, let alone the overall, body of knowledge.

3. Interpretative research

The growing popularity of interpretative research methodologies has led to concern that there is not sufficient understanding of the rigour necessary to ethically utilize them, (Laverty, 2003; Maggs-Rapport, 2001). Novice researchers often shy away from the statistical approach of positivistic research as they are frightened of "doing the maths" and see qualitative as being, for them, more easy to manage. This paper considers the difficulties associated with interpretative research, in particular with symbolic interactionism and hermeneutic-phenomenolism. Bryman and Bell (2007) claim that symbolic interactionism and the hermeneutic-phenomenological tradition have a common antipathy for positivism and both share an interpretative stance. The word antipathy is unfortunate for, as shown with the above introduction to mixed methods, interpretative and positivistic approaches can work together with one supporting the other. However, it is agreed that any interpretative approach taken in isolation will have common ground in being diametrically removed from positivism. Further it is contended that although both symbolic interactionism and the hermeneutic-phenomenological paradigms have similar approaches there are significant differences in direction and differences in difficulty of application.

4. Symbolic interactionism

Blumer (1986) coined the label symbolic interactionism to delineate thinking originated by Dewey (1925), Mead (1934) and Weber (1920). Mead and Dewey are regarded as influential founders of the pragmatist movement in sociology. Mead, a philosopher and social activist (for example he was an active supporter of the suffrage movement), believed that the true test for any theory was if it was useful in solving complex social problems (Griffin, 2006). George Henry Mead was the son of a Congregational Minister who was also a Professor of Theology. Over time Mead drifted from his strong Christian beliefs to become in his words a 'non believer' but he never lost his crusading spirit. Mead, a Harvard graduate, was a great friend of John Dewey. When Dewey gained a Chair at Chicago University he was influential in Mead being given an appointment at the University. Although Mead is regarded as an important American philosopher in sociology he never published a monograph, however he was a prolific writer of papers. His students published *'Mind Self, and Society from a standpoint of a Social Behavorist'* in 1934, plus three other volumes, from a compilation of papers, lecture notes and other unpublished papers of Mead. Mead claimed that people talking together is a significant, if not the most important, human and humanizing activity that they can engage in. He said talking was a gesture, but for a gesture to have significance it must have the same meaning for the initiator and the receiver. He gives the example of a dog barking and that another dog in the vicinity might react by barking or running away. Mead said dogs do not understand the meaning of the bark, they are merely responding to a gesture whereas if a person calls out 'don't walk' to someone on a busy street the meaning of the gesture 'don't walk' is understood by the recipient. According to Mead, "Gestures become significant symbols when they implicitly arouse in the individual making them, the same responses which they explicitly arouse or are supposed to arouse, in other individuals." (p. 47)

Blumer's seminal summary of this perspective is that people act toward things based on the meaning those things have for them; and these meanings are derived from social interaction, and conditioned by their environment. He said that the derived meanings, which are very real to those holding the

meanings will be modified through interpretation by an observer. As stated by Dewey (1925, 1934), human beings are best understood in relation to their environment.

Two key strands of Mead's work, and critical for symbolic interactionism, are the philosophy of pragmatism and social behaviourism. Mead was concerned with the stimuli of gestures and social objects with rich meanings rather than bare physical objects which psychological behaviourists considered stimuli. Mead's pragmatism as identified and summarised by Ritzer (2008) has four main tenets:

1. For the pragmatists true reality does not exist "out there" in the world, it "is actively created as we act in and toward the world".

2. People remember and base their knowledge of the world on what has been useful to them and are likely to alter what no longer "works".

3. People define the social and physical "objects" they encounter in the world according to their use for them.

4. If we want to understand why people act (the actors), we must base that understanding on what the actor actually does.

Three of these ideas are critical to symbolic interactionism:

1. The focus on the interaction between the actor and the world.

2. View both the actor and the world as dynamic processes and not static structures.

3. The ability of the actor to interpret the social world.

Thus, to Mead and other symbolic interactionists, consciousness is not separated from action and interaction, but is an integral part of both. (Ritzer, 2008 pp347 – 350).

To summarise; Mead postulated that people interact with things (events or situations) based on the meaning those things have for them; and these meanings are derived and evolve from social interaction and are modified through interpretation. He attempted to provide an understanding of the internal meanings or essences of a person's experience in their life world by description rather than seeking for explanations of causes (Van Maanen, 1983; Van Manen, 1997).

Hermeneutic-Phenomenology The word hermeneutics is derived from ancient Greece (Hermes, the messenger). The origin of hermeneutics was in the interpretation of ancient texts, originally scriptural (exegis) and later the study of ancient and classic cultures. From medieval times hermeneutics included the study of law and the interpretation of judgements in the context of when and where the judgement was made with an attempt to take into account social and cultural mores of the times. In contemporary management research, marketing academics in particular are comfortable with hermeneutic phenomenology as a research methodology and the term is used for qualitative studies in which interviews with one or a few people are analyzed and interpreted.

Philosophers whose inspiration is more ontological, such as Heidegger, emphasize the uncovering of Being from the perspective of the experiencing human being, and how the world is revealed to this experiencing entity within a realm of things whereas the pragmatist school as epitomized by Mead concentrate on the development of the self and the objectivity of the world within the social realm, "the individual mind can exist only in relation to other minds with shared meanings" (Mead, 1934 p 5).

Heidegger's philosophical hermeneutics shifted the focus from interpretation to existential understanding, which was treated more as a direct, non-mediated, way of being in the world than simply as a way of knowing (Heidegger, 1927). For example, Heidegger called for a "special hermeneutic of empathy" to dissolve the classic philosophic issue of "other minds" by putting the issue in the context of the being-with of human relatedness. Heidegger used the word texts to cover written and spoken expression and suggested it is a tautology that the written or spoken word cannot be studied using positivistic numerical methods. In the 21st century 'texts' has expanded to include all forms of multi-media including the people who produce them. As texts are expressions of the experience of the author, in the Heidegger tradition interpretation of a text will reveal something about the social context in which it

was formed, and more significantly, provide the reader with a means to share the experiences of the author. The reciprocity between text and context is part of what Heidegger called the hermeneutic circle (Weber, 1920; Heidegger 1927; Agosta, 2010). Gadamer, a celebrated student of Heidegger, goes further to assert that methodical contemplation and reflection is the opposite of experience on its own and that truth comes from understanding and mastering our experience. Gadamer claims experience is not static but is always changing with hints of further changes. He sees the growth of individual comprehension as being important. With continued improved, and hopefully enlightened, comprehension prejudice is a non fixed reflection of our growing comprehension. There are obvious examples of changes in prejudice over the last 50 years (e.g. legalisation of same sex marriages). Gadamer sees that being alien to a particular tradition is a condition of understanding and he further asserts that we can never step outside of our tradition; all we can do is try to understand it. This further elaborates the continuous nature of the hermeneutic circle (Gadamer 1960; Agosta, 2010)

Heidegger's hermeneutics is not just a matter of understanding linguistic communication. Nor is it about providing a methodological basis for research. As far as Heidegger is concerned, hermeneutics is ontology; it is about the most fundamental conditions of man's being in the world. The hermeneutics of "facticity", as he called it, is primarily what philosophy is all about (Heidegger, 1927).

This reflects back on Heidegger's definition of terms such as understanding, interpretation, and assertion. Understanding, in Heidegger's account, is neither a method of reading nor the outcome of a carefully conducted procedure of critical reflection. It is not something we consciously do or fail to do, but something we are. Understanding is a mode of being, and as such it is characteristic of human being, of *Dasein*. We have a pragmatic basic intuitive understanding of the world as we see it. This understanding of our life world is limited by the manner in which we, without consciously thinking and without theoretical considerations, orient ourselves in the world. Heidegger argues, we do not understand the world by gathering a collection of neutral facts by which we may reach a set of universal propositions, laws, or judgments that, to a greater or lesser extent, corresponds to the world as it is, ergo life world is only our conception of the world. Through the synthesizing activity of understanding, the world is disclosed as a totality of meaning, a space in which Dasein is at home. Dasein is distinguished by its self-interpretatory endeavors. Dasein is a being whose being is the issue. Fundamentally Dasein is embedded in the world and therefore it is not possible to understand ourselves or others without knowing the world, and the world cannot be understood if Dasein is ignored (Heidegger 1927, Gadamer 1960, Agosta 2010).

5. Implications for business and management research

Contemporary use of the hermeneutic approach has broadened to include business research and is in particular well accepted as a research methodology by marketing academics. The approach is to interpret text including oral and written (now expanded to include multi media) and to attempt to relate text to context. Relating text to context requires a further degree of interpretation which will be limited by the observer's understanding of the context. Hermeneutics is looking for what has been reported as having occurred and to refine what has been reported to what might have really occurred in the context of the occurrence. Thus there are several levels of interpretation; the interpretation of the meaning of what has been said, and this interpretation is from the observer's interpretation of what the originator of the text was meaning to communicate limited by the observer's interpretation of the originator's life world bounded by the originator's own life world. Hermeneutics is not looking for the reason why but is looking for what. The weakness in looking for what happened is that the observer, no matter how hard they attempt to be unbiased, is limited by their own life world (bounded rationality) and by their ability to understand the life world of those being observed, and the difficulty they will have of putting aside and ignoring own experiences and prejudices which invariably will have led to preconceptions resulting in subconscious bias. One should also bear in mind that the ultimate goal for any research is to publish findings, and those that read the findings will themselves be interpreting from their own life world and additionally will have their own preconceptions and biases. The researcher, in publishing for this audience, will also be mindful of those who will be judging the efficacy of their report and will be attempting to interpret what will satisfy the judges. This is of particular concern in the examination of a PhD thesis, where the supervisor will steer the student in a particular direction based on their own understanding, and who will approach or nominate examiners who they interpret will be of a similar persuasion to themselves!

Symbolic interaction as an approach to research is used by sociologists in the form of participant observation to study social interaction and individual actions. By looking for symbols and meanings the

objective is more than just relating what has happened to determining causes of phenomenon. Simplistically this might be seen as Hermeneutics taken one step further with Hermeneutics being used to interpret what has happened and Symbolic Interaction to interpret the reason why.

Symbols includes the meaning of words. For example the word gay today has a very different meaning from that of just fifty years ago when a popular colloquialism of the day for a heterosexual unmarried male was 'a bachelor gay' which in turn was derived from the song "A Bachelor Gay" which featured in the 1st World War operetta "Maid of the Mountains". In interpretation of symbols it is important to establish the context of the time when the symbol was being used. This requires two conditions; knowing the meaning ascribed to the symbol at the time it was used and knowing the context in which it was used. When the time the symbol was used and observed is not historical but here and now the context will be apparent but the meaning might be taken for granted. Take for example a large and obviously valuable diamond engagement ring. Seen from different perspectives the recipient might see that it symbolise a life-long engagement and that the size of the diamond symbolises that her betrothed loves her dearly, for her jealous friend the size of the ring is a flashy symbol of ostentation, and for the suitor it might symbolise financial extravagance. When interpreting the symbolic meaning of words written or spoken in the here and now a literal approach might appear to be safe. But, the problem with literal interpretation is that no matter how careful the writer is in trying to convey a precise meaning such as may be found in a legal contract drafted by a firm of solicitors to cover any contingency, the intended precise meaning can be argued by an opposing member of the same legal fraternity. In short every symbol will have several meanings and it is possible, indeed most likely, for every symbol to be interpreted by different people in different ways.

The majority of interpretative research involves participant observation. Participant observation is intended to allow the researcher to access symbols and meanings. It can be argued that close contact and immersion in the everyday activities of the participants is necessary for understanding the meaning of actions and for defining situations and context. However as seen with Elton Mayo and the Hawthorn experiments, the interaction of Mayo constructed the situation and influenced the behaviour of participants. In any interaction research with close contact, interactions cannot remain completely liberated of value commitments. In most cases researchers make use of their values in choosing what to study and their own values are predetermined by their life world. Life world boundaries will always be present no matter how hard they seek to be objective in how they conduct the research. Findings of the research, if relying purely on qualitative methods, will be limited by what is deduced from interpretation of symbols, and by interpretation of context. Bear in mind also that as found by Gadamer comprehension is not static, and the hermeneutic circle involves a continuous re-evaluation of what we think we have comprehended. A combination of the Hermeneutic approach and Symbolic Interaction, will provide a prima facie understanding of what happened and the context of what happened, and will indicate causes for what happened. Knowing the causes should lead to recommendations as to what actions would be better in future. The reservation remains however that any conclusion or recommendation will be based on interpretation of texts and symbols and the researcher's own life world. If any action is taken to carry through a recommendation, The action taken will also be limited to an interpretation of the meaning of the recommendation. Interpretation of the recommendation by the actor will invariably be limited by the actor's own life world.

This paper set out to consider some of the different options available to researchers within interpretivism. In particular, it has considered the differences between symbolic interactionism and hermeneutic phenomenology. We suggest that a more nuanced understanding of the situations they are studying will come from a combination of both methods.

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