



The Philosophical and Methodological Approaches Used by Sport and Business Management Student Researchers in Zimbabwe.

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Abstract

The study was conducted to assess the philosophical and methodological challenges facing sport and business management student researchers in Zimbabwe. Document analysis was used to collect data by reviewing the methodologies used by one hundred undergraduate and postgraduate students from seven Zimbabwean Institutions in their final year research projects between 2005 and 2013.

The results show that in most of the studies, the selection of research methodology was out of sync with the nature of the research problem and the use of positivist research tended to dominate. The results strongly mirror the incompatibility thesis of quantitative and qualitative purists which posits that qualitative and quantitative methods cannot be mixed. The continued emphasis on positivist approaches by Zimbabwean management researchers tends to limit their ability to discover the hidden complexities and dynamic socially constructed business and cultural contexts of the country's management environment.

Key Words: Research Philosophy, Research Paradigm Wars, Positivism, Interpretivism, Mixed Methods Research.

1.0 Introduction

Although there is a general global shift towards research problem driven approaches in business and sport management studies, Zimbabwean business and sport management students continue to inappropriately, use a "one method suits all approach" by grounding their studies on positivist methods, irrespective of the nature of the problem being investigated. This is in sharp contrast to the views of Research Methodology Gurus like Miles and Huberman (1994) who argue that knowing what to find out leads inexorably to the question of how you will get the information. This paper is therefore aimed at stimulating a paradigm shift by influencing management researchers in the country towards the realization of the fact that methodological choice should be driven by the nature of the research problem.

The study revealed that there is limited Zimbabwean literature on sport and business management. It can therefore be argued that the extensive use of positivist methods by Zimbabwean researchers when investigating subjects that are opaque and under researched is inappropriate since it limits their ability to effectively explore the hidden complexities and commercial and cultural contexts of the country's management environment. As result, the paper also seeks to encourage Zimbabwean social researchers to adopt methods that will enable them to fully explore the country's sport and business management problems by giving the subjects of their investigations the freedom to express their lived experiences with these problems in their own ways.

2.0 Literature Review

A review of the work of Miles and Huberman(1994) , Denscombe (2010) ,Easterby-Smith *et al*, (2002), Creswell *et al*, (2003) and Saunders *et al* (2008) shows that these scholars share the view that research should be problem driven, so much that it is inappropriate have a "one method fit all approach" when researching on management problems.

Research Philosophical Paradigms

Research Philosophy represents the researcher's guiding assumptions about the nature of the world (Easterby-Smith *et al*. 2002) .Although Noor (2008) identifies positivism and phenomenology (interpretivism) as the two basic methodological paradigms of research in social science, Johnson *et al*.(2004) noted a recent movement towards mixed methods approaches which combine the positivist and interpretivist paradigms.

a) Positivism

Auguste Comte (1798-1857) coined the term "positivism" in the 19th century to refer to the power science and rational thought to comprehend and manipulate the world (Fisher, 2010).It is an approach to the creation of knowledge through research which emphasizes the model of natural sciences where data is collected from diverse samples in a wider perspective, usually by means of more structured research instruments such as questionnaires with closed questions (Finch, 1986). It is aimed at producing data that can be statistically analyzed and results can be expressed numerically (Dibb *et al*.1997). The results are usually objective and reliable since they are based on large and representative samples.

Saunders *et al*. (2008) argue that a researcher should select a positivist approach if there exists extensive literature within the problem area. The limitations of positivism in social research are captured by Fisher (2010) who argues that, although scientific laws can predict market behavior, they can only predict average behavior, and not the behavior of individuals. It is therefore not suitable for extensive use in management research where the understanding individual behavior is critical to the success of the study. In addition, since positivism is only interested in the tangible, it is

unsuitable for extensive use on studies which focus on the intangible aspects of human behavior such as perceptions, feelings, attitudes, beliefs and motivation (Saunders et al.2008).

b) Interpretivism

The interpretivist philosophy arose as a reaction to positivism and is based on the belief that reality is socially constructed and that the goal of social science is to understand what meaning people give to that reality (Edwards and Skinner, 2009). It is a qualitative research paradigm which attempts to probe lived experiences of individuals who are being investigated (Saunders, 1982). Sanders (1982) suggests that those subjects that do not lend themselves to easy quantification such as perceptions, meanings, feelings, behavior, attitudes, beliefs, and value judgments are the most appropriate topics to be probed through phenomenological research. This is echoed by Saunders et al.(2008) who argue that an interpretivist perspective is highly appropriate in the case of business and management research, particularly in such fields as organizational behavior, marketing and human resources management.

Saunders et al.(2008) argue that the phenomenological research approach is useable where the subject is new and when previous studies in the area are limited. This is a function of the fact that it provides more detail on phenomena under investigation. This is summed up by Denscombe (1998) who notes that a phenomenological approach allows the researcher to scratch beneath the superficial surface of social reality and delve into phenomena in depth in order to provide descriptions that are detailed enough to reflect the complexity of the social world.

However, phenomenological research results are based on a small sample size. This will always raise questions about the representativeness of the data and how far it is justifiable to generalize from the findings (Denscombe, 1998). Denscombe (1998) cites lack of scientific rigour as one of the major disadvantages of phenomenology. This stems from the fact that phenomenology emphasizes on subjectivity, description and interpretation as opposed to the scientific emphasis on objectivity analysis and measurement. Phenomenological studies are also not good at addressing cause-effect research questions.

c) Mixed Methods Approaches

Philosophically, mixed research makes use of the pragmatic method and system of philosophy. Its logic of inquiry includes the use of induction, deduction, and abduction (Johnson and Onwuegbuzie, 2004).

Mixed Method Approaches is a hybrid approach which involves the collection or analysis of both quantitative and qualitative data in a single study in which the data are collected concurrently or sequentially, are given a priority, and involve the integration of the data at one or more stages in the process of research (Creswell et al.2003). The aim is to generate complementary insights that together create a bigger picture and enhance the validity of the study. Mixed methods research also is an attempt to legitimate the use of multiple approaches in answering research questions, rather than restricting or constraining researchers' choices (Johnson and Onwuegbuzie, 2004).

However, mixed methods research studies are labour and capital intensive since they emphasize the use of multiple methods. It is also difficult for a single researcher to have expertise in both qualitative and quantitative methods, hence the use of research teams and their associated high costs. In addition to this, mixed methods research approaches are a relatively new design and as such, some of the methodological details remain to be worked out fully by research methodologists (Masadeh, 2012).

3.0 Methodology

Document analysis was used to collect data by reviewing the methodologies used by one hundred randomly selected undergraduate and postgraduate students from seven Zimbabwean Institutions in their final year research projects between 2005 and 2013. The candidates were studying toward such programs as the Masters of Science in Marketing(5%),Masters in Business Administration(38 %),Master of Science in Human Resource Management (1 %),Master of Science in Development Studies (1 %), Bachelor of Science in Sports Administration(3 %) Bachelor of Science in Sports Science and Coaching (18 %), Bachelor of Science in Physical Education (13 %),Bachelor of Commerce in Marketing (9 %),Bachelor of Commerce in Business Management (2%),Bachelor of Science in Psychology ((1 %)and Diploma in Sports Coaching and Management(8 %).

The research process was informed by Glaser and Strauss's (1967) Grounded Theory Methodology where data was collected and analyzed concurrently. After analyzing the content of 100 dissertations, it was noted that no further new insights were emerging from the study. This stage is termed saturation and it signaled the end of data collection process. The SPSS data analysis software was used to analysis data.

4.0 Findings and Discussions

Table 3.1 summarizes the major findings of this study

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a) Research Design

The results show that the candidates whose work was reviewed in this study utilized a variety of Research Designs. This conforms to the results of a review of the works of Crotty (2007), Saunders et al.(2008) and Denscombe (2010) which shows that scholars disagree about the number and sequence of the research stages. However, it was observed that most candidates concentrated on discussing the primary research strategy, the data collection process, the sampling procedures, and the data analysis procedures. Very few studies paid attention to such important research foundations as the Research Purpose, Philosophical aspects, the Research Approach, and the Time Horizons.

b) Research Purpose

Robson (2002) identifies the exploratory, descriptive and explanatory purposes as the three possible forms of study. The reviewed dissertations covered all the three purposes of research. They were however predominantly exploratory and descriptive. The dominance of the exploratory approach complies with the views of Gray (2009) who notes that exploratory studies are particularly useful when not enough is known about a phenomenon. Most of the reviewed studies conform to this reasoning as they dealt with opaque and under-researched subjects. The use of the descriptive approach in the studies is also in line with the views of Laws and McLeod (2004) who argue that descriptive studies are useful in presenting information about areas of education where little research has been conducted as is the case with most of these studies.

c) Research Philosophy

Given the exploratory and descriptive nature of most of the reviewed studies, one would expect the researchers to lean heavily towards interpretivism in a bid to gain familiarity with subjects under review. On the contrary, the findings show that positivist methods tended to dominate in the research projects that were analysed for this study to the tune of 87 %. These results are consistent with the findings from a study by Mendenhall et al (1993) which established that from 1984 to 1990 82 % of the articles in the International Journal of Management used quantitative methods, 14 % used qualitative approaches, while just 4 % made use of mixed methods.

However, scholars like and, Jonson et al.(2004), Noor (2008), Saunders et al.(2008) and Edwards and Skinner(2009) noted a recent movement towards Interpretivism and Mixed Methods approaches in Sport and business Management Research. To highlight this shift, Edwards and Skinner (2009) describe Positivism as the most powerful intellectual framework of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, across all disciplines. They go on to observe that the grip of positivism on the scientific world has been weakening over recent decades, as scientific research methodology shifts away from the goal of absolute truth, based on claims of objectivity, generalization and prediction, and find ways to deal with uncertainty and chaos(Edwards and Skinner,2009). This view is shared by Saunders (2008) who argues that an interpretivist approach is highly appropriate in business and management research. This is a function of the fact that business situations are continuously evolving and have become unique and complex. This raises questions about the generalisability of research that seeks to explore the rich complexity of social situations. The rich insights into the complex social world are lost if such complexities are reduced to a series of law-like generalizations(Saunders et al. 2008). According to Edward and Skinner (2009), positivism in this light could be viewed as extremely narrow and inflexible and therefore unlikely to capture the hidden complexities of the sport management environment. Thus, the continued emphasis on positivist approaches by Zimbabwean management researchers tends to limit their ability to discover the unexplored complexities and dynamic socially constructed business and cultural contexts of the country's business and sport management environment.

The results strongly mirror the incompatibility thesis of quantitative and qualitative purists which posits that qualitative and quantitative methods cannot be mixed. This shows that Zimbabwean management researchers are still trapped in the paradigm wars phase. According to Johnson and Onwuegbuzie (2004), for more than a century, quantitative and qualitative purists have been engaged in paradigm wars, with sets of purists viewing their paradigm as ideal for research and vigorously advocate for the incompatibility thesis which posits that qualitative and quantitative research paradigms and their associated research methods, cannot and should not be mixed(Ibid).Increasingly, however, the opposition between the two can be seen as a false dichotomy, representing two sides of the same coin, rather than an intractable conflict (Masadeh,2012).This is captured by Saunders et al (2008) who note that it is perfectly possible to adopt some of the characteristics of positivism in your research and use largely qualitative methods.

d) Research Approach

The findings show that 55 % of the candidates used the deductive approach,45 % utilised induction and none of the candidates combined the two approaches. These results are aligned to the wrong notion of quantitative and qualitative purists who convey the impression that there are rigid divisions between deduction and induction. A review of Research methodology literature has shown that the growing consensus among researchers seems to point towards the complimentary value of these two approaches. Gray (2009) posits that the inductive and deductive process is not mutually exclusive. This is buttressed by Saunders et al.(2008) who argue that it is perfectly possible and often advantageous to combine induction and deduction within the same piece of research.

According to Gray (2009), the deductive approach moves towards hypothesis testing, after which the principle is confirmed, refuted or modified. It seeks to explain causal relationships between variables (Saunders et al, 2008).Saunders et al. (2008) argue that a topic for which there is a wealth of literature from which you can define a theoretical framework and hypothesis lends itself more readily to deduction. There is limited literature in the areas covered by the reviewed dissertations. This explains the extensive application of deduction can be viewed as being out of sync with this reasoning. Gray (2009) argues that the inductive approach starts with the collection of data, after which the data are analyzed to see if any patterns emerge that suggest relationships between variables. The results are then used to construct generalizations, relationships and even theories. The adoption of the inductive approach in 45 % of the studies is appropriate since it complies with the views of Saunders et al. (2008) who note that researchers into topics that are new, exciting much debate and on which there is little existing literature work inductively by generating data and analyzing and reflecting upon what theoretical themes the data are suggesting.

e) Primary Research Strategy

The findings show that 64 % of the respondents utilized the Survey method as their primary research strategy. The survey research strategy is basically concerned with relationships between variables and is effective in cases where researchers seek to address cause-effect research problems and are dealing with subjects that are extensively covered in the literature (Glock, 1967). It was noted that there is a scarcity of Zimbabwean literature on management issues and that only 11 % of the studies under review dealt with cause-effect questions and this renders the extensive application of the survey approach in appropriate.

The Case Study approach was appropriately used by the candidates whose research problems were tackling ‘how’, ‘what’ and ‘why’ research questions. This conforms to the views of Yin (1994) who argues that case studies are appropriate when the study is based on how and why questions, as well as when the research focuses on contemporary events and the researcher has no control over behavioral events. Robson (2002) corroborates this by noting that the case study approach has considerable ability to generate answers to ‘why’ and ‘how’ questions as well as the ‘what’ Question. Anderson (1993) further amplifies this point where he states case studies are concerned with how and why things happen, allowing the investigation of contextual realities and the differences between what was planned and what actually occurred.

However, most of the candidates who used the Case Study approach failed to adapt to Yin’s (2003) model for comparative case studies using multiple sources. The model encourages case study researchers to collect data from all resources that yield information regarding social interaction such as semi structured interviews, document analysis, direct and participant observation, focus group discussions, archival records and surveys and increase the validity and reliability of the study. It was also baffling to note that only 3 % of the candidates selected Action Research as their Primary Research Strategy. One would have expected most Postgraduate Students who were researching on problems that affect their day to day duties at their work places to make use of this method since it allows them to identify and solve these problems during the research process.

f) Time Horizons

The longitudinal approach was only used in 10 % of the reviewed studies. Instead, a cross-sectional time horizon was observed in 90 % of the studies. This was influenced by such practical considerations as resource constraints and the time frames within which the studies were carried out. Cross-sectional studies, been criticized by Denscombe(2010) for their failure to provide an adequate understanding of social change and provide adequate cause-effect explanations in explanatory studies.

h) Data Analysis Procedures

The findings show that 92 % of the Candidates utilized quantitative methods of data analysis. 3 % of the candidates made use of manual qualitative data analysis procedures. The remaining 5 % utilized a methodological triangulation of quantitative data analysis software and manual qualitative data analysis procedures. The results show that unlike social research practitioners in other countries, Zimbabwean researchers are yet to embrace the use of such qualitative data analysis softwares as NVivo, ATLAS.ti and MAXQDA among others.

4.0 Conclusion

It can be noted that whilst there is a general global shift towards research problem driven approaches in business and sport management studies, Zimbabwean business and sport management students continue to inappropriately, use a “one method suits all approach” by grounding their studies on positivist methods, irrespective of the nature of the problem being investigated.

The use of positivist methods when investigating subjects that are opaque and under researched limits the researchers’ ability to effectively explore the hidden complexities and commercial and cultural contexts of the country’s management environment, since the methodology used does not give the subjects of their studies the freedom to express their lived experiences in their own ways.

The research findings also strongly mirror the incompatibility thesis of quantitative and qualitative purists which posits that qualitative and quantitative methods cannot be mixed.

In this light, a paradigm shift towards Mixed Research Approaches can therefore enhance the ability of Zimbabwean social researchers to effectively understand the complex and ever-evolving socially constructed processes associated with such fields of education as Business and Sports Management. An important prerequisite towards the realization of this paradigm shift is to equip academic practitioners in the country with Social Research skills since there is a general lack of appreciation of Social Research Methodologies in the country.

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Annexure

Table 3.1: the key findings of the study

RESEARCH PROCESS STAGE	SELECTION FREQUENCY PERCENTAGE				
Research Purpose	Exploratory 47 %	Descriptive 8 %	Explanatory 3 %	Exploratory and Descriptive 34 %	
	Exploratory and Explanatory 2 %		Explanatory and Descriptive 1%	Descriptive, Exploratory and Explanatory 5 %	
Research Philosophy	Positivism 87 %	Interpretivism 12 %	Mixed Methods 1 %		
Research Approach	Deductive 55 %	Inductive 45 %	Abductive 0 %		
Primary Research Strategy	Survey 64 %	Case Study 30 %	Action Research 3 %	Experimental Research 2%	Ground Theory 1 %
Sample Size	1-50 - 63 %	51-100-26 %	101-150 -7 %	151-200-3 %	201-250-1%
Time Horizons	Cross-Sectional 90 %			Longitudinal 10 %	
Data Collection Procedures	Questionnaires 73 %	Observation 3 %	Interviews 2 %	Experiments 2%	Document Analysis 1 %
	Triangulation of questionnaires and interviews 13 %	Triangulation of questionnaires and Document	Triangulation of questionnaires ,Focus Group	Triangulation of Interviews, Observation and	Triangulation of Observation and

		Analysis 2 %	Discussions and Document Analysis 2%	Document Analysis 1%	questionnaires 1 %
Data Analysis Procedures	Quantitative 92 %	Qualitative (Manual) 3 %		Both Qualitative and Quantitative 5	