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Methods Selection in Organizational Research: A Contextual Analysis

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Abstract

Expanding limits, a multiparadigmatic profile, and methodological creativity are three developments seen in the area of organizational research. Organizational, historical, political, ethical, evidentiary, and personal aspects are therefore also impacted by goals, epistemological concerns, and standards of practice, and are often seen as obstacles to be surmounted when making a choice about research methodologies. This article contends that all of these variables form an interconnected web of impacts, and that understanding the larger environment in which a particular methodology will be used yields three important outcomes. First, it is difficult to claim that methods choice rests only on linkages to research purposes; choosing incorporates a more com- plex, interdependent collection of factors. To add to the complexity, method is not just a tool for bringing things into sharper focus; rather, it shapes how we understand and theorize about the world by framing the data windows through which we experience events. Third, research competency entails addressing in a unified fashion the contextual aspects that may include organizational, historical, political, ethical, evidential, and personal considerations.

Keywords: research methods; organization politics; research ethics; context; paradigm

Methods out of Context

Method selection is often regarded as an intermediate stage between establishing research goals and beginning fieldwork. Therefore, techniques are defined by how well they match the instrument to the study question or subject. While correct in some respects, this portrayal decontextualizes technique and so provides an insufficient foundation for describing the strategy used in a given research. This article seeks to show how a variety of organizational, historical, political, ethical, evidentiary, and personally meaningful features of the area of study influence the choice of methodology in addition to research objectives, standards of practice, and epistemological considerations. While it's true that field researchers face challenges due to things like weather and unpredictable wildlife, we argue that these things are really natural and inevitable impacts that must be accounted for when making methodological choices. This perspec-tive locates technique as an essential component of a larger, iterative, cohesive research system, impacting the social possibilities of data collection as well as the substantive nature of data gathered and the character and direction of theory development. These organizational, historical, political, ethical, evidentiary, and personal considerations are more than simply a nuisance. Essential to the analysis and interpretation of findings and the creation of theoretical and practical consequences, they are fundamental parts of the data stream that represent general and special aspects of the research context. In doing so, we present the research process in a less linear manner than is typically depicted in textbooks, arguing that our alternative characterization more effectively captures the realities of research methods decisions and that this perspective will be instructive for students and novice researchers.

There are three parts to our argument. We begin by outlining three major trends in organizational research, including the expanding scope of the subject, its multiparadigmatic character, and its innovative approach to data collection and analysis. Second, we consider the various contexts in which method selections are made. Finally, we reflect on what this viewpoint means for organizational research theory and practice.

Boundaries, Paradigms, Inventiveness

This section argues that organizational research has since its inception widened its bound- aries dramatically, has developed (as have other social sciences) a multiparadigmatic profile, and has been extraordinarily inventive with regard to the development of data collection meth- ods. A more restricted domain with a broad epistemological consensus would perhaps display less methodological creativity and present a narrower range of methods problems and choices. But the growth in popularity of mixed-methods research has problematized, if not ruptured, the relationship between epistemology and method, weakening confidence in and preoccupation with those links (Teddlie & Tashakkori, 2003). Consequently, method is increasingly located in the context of wider and more fluid intellectual currents, discouraging rigid adherence to epistemological positions, encouraging a more pragmatic “do whatever necessary” or “pick and choose” approach to methods choice.

ISSN 2454 - 5015

Multiple Paradigms

The field of organizational research is no longer dominated or constrained by positivist (or neopositivist) epistemology and its extended family of primarily quantitative hypothetico-deductive methods (Campbell & Stanley, 1966; Cook & Campbell, 1979; Shadish, Cook, & Campbell, 2001). Relatively few researchers today support the notion of a fixed hierarchy of evidence, with the double-blind randomized controlled trial as the ultimate model of proof (Tranfield, Denyer, & Smart, 2003). Nor is it possible to capture the range of epistemologi- cal positions with the distinction between variance and process theories (Langley, 1999; Mohr, 1982). Organizational research displays a variety of positivist, critical, phenomenolog- ical, constructivist, interpretative, feminist, and postmodern perspectives. Developing the work of Burrell and Morgan (1979) on paradigms, Deetz (1996, 2000) identified four research orientations based on dimensions of contrast. One dimension is local/emergent ver- sus elite/a priori based on the sources of ideas and concepts, either in dialogue with respon- dents, or established by the researcher on theoretical grounds. The second is consensus versus dissensus based on relationships between research aims and the dominant social discourse, with the aim either to confirm unity of understanding or to expose conflicts and tensions.

These dimensions produce four "analytic ideal types" (Deetz, 1996, p.195), or different ways of engaging in research, although Deetz (1996) observed interplay as researchers are adept at "dodging criticism by co-optation" (p. 119) of other orientations (but it is impor- tant to note that adherents to more or less extreme versions of these positions disagree fiercely). A normative (positivist) discourse assumes progressive enlightenment, rational- ization and control, with concerns for codification, with establishing covariation and causal relations through hypothesis testing, with cumulative evidence, and with nomothetic laws
(e.g., Hamel, 2000). An interpretative (constructivist, phenomenological) discourse regards sense-making individuals as engaged participants, as cocreators of social structures, using ethnographic and hermeneutic methods to establish local meanings grounded in social and organizational practices (e.g., Fincham, 2002; Huxham & Vangen, 2003). A critical (neo- Marxist) discourse views organizations as sites of political struggle. The research aim is to unmask modes of domination and distorted communication by showing how these are reproduced and to highlight how social practices and institutional structures create and sus- tain power differences, obscuring alternative perspectives (e.g., Knights & McCabe, 1998). A dialogic (postmodern, Foucauldian) discourse focuses on the role of language in the con- structed and polyvocal nature of social reality. Organizations are viewed as disjointed nar- ratives that fail to establish a coherent reality. Dialogic discourse seeks to expose the pervasive and fluid nature of power relations in contemporary society; to unpack taken-for- granted realities; and to uncover their complexities, lack of shared meaning, and hidden resistances (e.g., Collins & Rainwater, 2003). When publishing, researchers are usually encouraged, implicitly or explicitly, to locate their work on such a map, potentially strad- dling more than one quadrant.

Methodological Inventiveness

Historical Properties

The history of a research field conditions contemporary method decisions by providing an experience and evidence base, benchmarks, departure points, and traditions. Consequently, the ghosts of the Hawthorne studies continue to haunt researchers in the 21st century, having made durable contributions to research agendas, methodology, and terminology. In the natural and biomedical sciences, new research builds on previous work, rendering it obsolete. Organizational research is rarely cumulative in this respect and researchers ignore at their peril the historical record, the concepts and evidence from long-running research streams, and past contributions in their field. For example, although research into leadership traits was aban- doned in the 1950s following contradictory and inconclusive findings, similar studies still sur- face in popular, academic, and professional literature

ISSN 2454 - 5015

(Charm & Colvin, 1999; Department of Health, 2002; Kamp, 1999; Leigh & Walters, 1998). Organizational researchers may thus be advised to allow past experience, frameworks, conceptualizations, and findings to influence contemporary choices of research focus and appropriate methods.

Political Properties

Partisan conclusions. One of the dilemmas of organizational research concerns the extent to which researchers align (or are encouraged by circumstances to align) their agen- das with the interests of specific stakeholder groups. Support for managerial agendas— implicit or explicit, direct or indirect—attracts accusations of partisanship captured by the phrase *servants of power*. As management permission is typically a prerequisite for orga- nizational access, it is often difficult to avoid linking research aims explicitly to manager- ial interests in a way that could potentially damage the interests of other stakeholder groups—for example, assessing process redesign options that would reduce staffing, skill, and payment levels.

Researchers are often asked to report their findings to those who granted access as a form of quid pro quo for providing documentation and allowing staff to be interviewed, complete questionnaires, or attend focus groups, for example. Such reporting implies a tacit acceptance of managerially defined themes and problems. The consequences of failing to meet gatekeeper expectations in this respect can be damaging to the researcher's local rep- utation, may restrict publication of findings, occasionally leads to the censorship of reports, and can close that research site to other investigators. For example, O'Connor (1995) stud- ied written accounts of change authored by internal organization development groups in a high-technology manufacturing company. The texts praised the efforts of the organization development function, whose members had authored the accounts in 25 to 30–page case studies, presenting the organization development function and key individuals as pivotal in change initiation and implementation. In her conclusions, however, O'Connor observed how involvement in key decisions was limited to a small group of key managers, how dis- agreement was treated as resistance and lack of understanding rather than as involvement, and how change narratives revolved around a heroic figure with adversaries. The host orga- nization did not welcome O'Connor's interpretations. Her gatekeeper denied her account, described it as shocking, outrageous, and unacceptable, and never met with her again. Such a candid account is unusual but almost certainly reflects a relatively common organiza- tional field research experience.

Further light on this issue was shed by Herman and Egri (2002), who described the back- ground to their research on environmental leadership (Egri & Herman, 2000). In a revealing discussion about their research planning, they noted that one of the main reasons they chose to combine their qualitative approach with a survey was that they "understood that qualitative
research alone would not satisfy many mainstream academics" (Herman & Egri, 2002, p. 132). If methods flowed primarily from research questions, researchers would not feel com- pelled to employ techniques they would otherwise prefer not to use. It is apparent that the pol- itics of publishing pull investigators in directions that may be politically correct but with which they may not always feel comfortable; these observations further undermine the text- book connection between research questions and methods.

The political dimensions of organizational field research mean that claims to observer neutrality, as across the social sciences, are hollow. Researchers are often motivated by a desire to challenge management practices, to trigger intervention, and to effect change. Why investigate power if not to identify ways of addressing its consequences or to reduce power inequalities? Why study quality of working life or sexual harassment unless one wishes to improve the one and overcome the latter? Stakeholder alignment has fundamen- tal if rarely reported implications for method concerning, for example, respondent selec- tion, modes of observation, and lines of questioning, with respect to issues that are included and topics that are considered beyond the boundaries of the study.

ISSN 2454 - 5015

Ethical Properties

Organizational research has attracted an increasing level of ethical scrutiny. A number of bodies (Academy of Management, British Sociological Association, British Psychological Society, European Market Research Association, Social Research Association) have long- standing research ethics codes, and there is little or no evidence to suggest that those codes are even occasionally contravened. However, in Britain, the Department of Health (2001a, 2001b, 2001c, 2005) Research Governance Framework applies the standards for biomedical research (drug trials, new treatments) to organizational research in health and social care even when patients or clients are not implicated. This involves a protracted application process policed by local and multisite research ethics committees concerned primarily with issues of informed consent, right of withdrawal, and respondent anonymity. However, policy guidelines clearly invite ethics review committees to challenge (and reject) methods choices, stating that "research which is not of sufficient quality to contribute something use- ful to existing knowledge is unethical" (Department of Health, 2005, p. 13). In addition to traditional concerns, therefore, committees also consider aspects of method where, in their judgment, inappropriate choices may have been made. In our recent experience, an ethics review panel rejected a proposal for a study of management processes where the main data collection methods were scrutiny of documentation and observation of management com- mittee meetings. Some members of those management committees, the panel argued, could come under undue social pressure to consent to observation, which thus rendered the method unethical. In two other separate instances involving qualitative inductive multimethod case studies of service improvement initiatives, ethics committees challenged proposals for lack- ing precision with regard to sampling and questioning strategies, unimpressed by arguments concerning the need to adjust methods in a flexible manner during fieldwork in the light of emerging themes, findings, and organizational changes.

Evidential Properties

Organizational researchers often have to consider how and by whom their findings will be used before making methods choices so relevant audiences will perceive their approach as having been appropriate. Researchers thus have to take into account the poten- tially conflicting interests and expectations of their academic, managerial, and research par- ticipant audiences. Academic colleagues expect new knowledge and theoretical insight. Organization managers anticipate practical recommendations. Research participants typi- cally wish to know that their contributions have been interpreted and used in an appropri- ate manner and are presented anonymously. The process that leads from problem definition to data collection, evidence, conclusions, prescription, and subsequent changes in organi- zation practice might appear to be linear but is problematic. The relationships between evi- dence and practice in most fields (including medicine, where "evidence-based medicine" is now mandatory) are complex (Fitzgerald, Ferlie, Wood, & Hawkins, 2002), and the exter- nal validity of organizational research remains contentious. Qualitative researchers often have a limited interest in statistical generalization, emphasizing instead analytical (link to theory) and naturalistic (link to experience) generalization. Findings generated in one set- ting (acute medical care) may not generalize to others (bespoke furniture manufacture). Researchers must judge the scope conditions for their findings or derive moderatum gen- eralizations, indicating that aspects of a situation or context can be viewed as "instances of a broader recognizable set of features" (Williams, 2000, p.215). Feeding back acceptable findings in the context of a professional organization (Brock, Powell, & Hinings, 1999; Mintzberg, 1979b) such as healthcare presents challenges not commonly faced by researchers in commercial settings. Doctors and engineers, for example, schooled in the norms of biomedical and natural science research practice, are understandably suspicious of research findings based on methods that do not appear to follow those familiar protocols. Thus, evidence has to meet a receptive audience whose members have adequate organiza- tional authority for findings to transfer smoothly into practice. That combination of factors is rare. It may even be the case that the researcher has to offer to

conduct an enquiry specif- ically in a manner that gatekeepers regard as credible. For example, to secure access to a General Motors factory, Milkman (1997) agreed to conduct a survey that would provide "hard quantitative data," even though her research required a qualitative approach.

Research evidence rarely reveals clear causal links. For all but the most closely bounded topics, the field is multivariate and multilayered. For example, does total quality manage- ment improve organizational effectiveness? The main terms in this question are difficult to define with precision—they mean different things in different contexts and to different stakeholders—and the number of interacting factors involved over time at various levels of analysis (individual, team, business unit, organization, external context) defies simplis- tic attempts at theorizing (Iles & Sutherland, 2001; Øvretveit & Gustafson, 2002). Establishing cause and effect across complex, iterative, and multidimensional processes over time is challenging. Several commentators have turned to process theories to handle such phenomena (Dawson, 2003; Langley, 1999; Pettigrew, 1985; Van de Ven & Poole, 2002). Process theories tend to adopt a narrative form and to focus on local causality rather than seek to identify universal laws linking dependent and independent variables. An addi- tional complication is that different stakeholders hold contrasting views of the nature, def- inition, and significance of organizational problems. However, audiences for research findings are often interested mainly in the question "What works?" Researchers who can answer this question may find that their enterprise shares some of the attributes of the work of management consultants but without the financial rewards. The respective roles of researchers and consultants are more closely intertwined than is often acknowledged. Researchers interested in, for example, total quality management or business process re-engineering can argue that they are studying novel organizational forms, but they are also studying the nature and implications of the commercial products of management con- sulting firms. The findings from such studies may be used both by host organizations and consulting firms to influence organizational change processes.

Decisions about method may thus have to consider the nature of the evidence ultimately required to inform practice and also to assess the acceptability of different forms and sources of evidence to specific audiences responsible for implementing recommendations.

Package Deals and the Unseen: Implications for Method

This article began with the argument that the field of organizational research displays at least three significant trends. The first concerns widening the scope of the agenda and embrac- ing a growing range of themes, issues, problems, and settings. The second theme, common across the social sciences, concerns an eclectic, multiparadigmatic approach that has con- tributed to a weakening of the traditional dominance (but not necessarily the influence) of positivist orientations. Although blurred at the margins, those competing orientations gener- ate intense debate. Consequently, the field is fragmented, with little or no consensus around concepts, frameworks, theories, or practical propositions. A third trend concerns the creative approach to method in this field, which now deploys a diverse array of data collection meth- ods, with more novel techniques standing alongside and often complementing established approaches. We then sought to demonstrate that choice of research method is shaped not only by technical and theoretical considerations related to the research topic, objectives, and norms of practice but also by a number of other characteristics of organizational field research:

- attributes of the organizational research setting or context,
- the research tradition or history relevant to a particular study,
- the inevitable politicization of the organizational researcher's role,
- constraints imposed by a growing concern with research ethics,
- theoretical and audience-related issues in translating evidence into practice, and
- personal preferences and biases with regard to choice of method.

These attributes of organizational research have been widely acknowledged but they are typically represented as problems or difficulties, interfering with choice of method and to be avoided

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through careful planning. However, as Figure 1 illustrates, those factors, taken together, constitute instead an interrelated system of inevitable influences on research methods choices. Contextualizing methods choice in this web of influence has at least three implications. First, it is difficult to sustain a model of the researcher as neutral observer. Even the selection of an underpinning paradigm is a politically inspired act, not merely an intellectually informed choice because this can involve an implicit alignment with particu- lar stakeholder interests, overlooking or marginalizing issues that may be more important to others. Neutrality is often further compromised in feeding back to gatekeepers reports of research findings, conclusions, and practical recommendations as politically incorrect con- clusions may be omitted. Researchers claiming neutral status are often pursuing agendas that are implicitly aligned with partisan agendas. The concept of researcher as detached and disinterested has already been widely discredited (Van de Ven & Poole, 2002).

Second, it is difficult to sustain a model of the research process in which method relies solely on links to objectives, with the advantages and limitations of one approach weighed objectively against others. We have sought to show that method choices is a multicriteria deci- sion that involves a more complex, interrelated, and iterative series of considerations. Method in this perspective is part of a package deal, an integral component of a comprehensive research system where, in the pursuit of particular aims in a given setting, theoretical, epistemological, organizational, historical, political, ethical, evidential, and personal factors are combined in a coherent manner. Choice of method is not a stand-alone decision reached at an early stage in the research process but evolves as a project unfolds, as the researcher's understanding of the issues and also of the organizational research setting develops. The widely espoused view, rein- forced in methods texts and elsewhere, that the research process (sampling, data collection method, analysis) flows logically and inexorably from research questions, is an oversimplifi- cation when this range of influences on an investigation is considered (Bryman & Bell, 2003).

It is not surprising that, when Grunow (1995) conducted a content analysis of organization studies articles, he found that only 21% discussed the relationship between the research topic or problem and the methods employed in the investigation.

Third, it is difficult to sustain a concept of method as neutral technique for bringing reality into focus. Shaped by a comprehensive web of influences, decisions concerning method frame the data windows through which organizational phenomena are observed. Methods choices determine the unseen as well as the documented, thus linking organizational, historical, politi- cal, ethical, evidential, and personal factors with the development of both theoretical and prac- tical conclusions. Consequently, those factors can be considered as data rather than as features of the research setting of problematic concern. Advocates of reflexivity (Alvesson & Sköldberg, 2000; Woolgar, 1988) have advised openness and honesty with regard to the position and iden- tity of the researcher, accompanied by critical self-appraisal. The argument here suggests that reflexive appraisal should be extended to incorporate a discussion of the sweep of factors influ- encing methods choices for a given project because these in turn both influence and contribute to the evidence base on which conclusions are constructed.

It is thus important to understand more fully, and to articulate more openly, the basis of research methods choices. The factors affecting those choices could perhaps be more widely reported to support method training by providing a widely informed overview of the nature of the craft and to promote productive dialogue across a research community that seems to be increasingly fragmented by differences in orientation. Despite the web of con- straints and influences, the design of organizational research work and the choice of data collection methods remain in part a creative process. This complex package of issues can be combined and configured in a variety of different ways. It is important, therefore, to rec- ognize not only the technical skills and knowledge of the researcher but also the role of per- sonal interests, preferences, biases, prejudices, and creativity.

Competence in research method has traditionally, and narrowly, been expressed in terms of selecting methods consistent with research topic and objectives while avoiding or resolving those annoying practical fieldwork problems. We conclude that competence in method must now also

ISSN 2454 - 5015

encompass the ability to address, systematically and coherently, the organizational, historical, political, ethical, evidential, and personal influences identified in this paper.

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