


3

Research Philosophy and Research Design

Introduction

In the introductory chapter, developing self-awareness was a key process outlined and it was stated that it is possible you have assumed that the way you view the world is the same as the way that everybody else views the world. The term 'common sense' was used in this discussion. It was stated there you could believe it is common sense that the way you look at the world is precisely the same way that others look at it. However, it was also discussed earlier that one person's common sense is not necessarily the same as another's. If we accept that there are likely to be differences between different people's view of the world, it may not come as a surprise that the way some researchers view the world, is very different from others' views.

Research philosophies

The idea that there are different views of the world, and the processes that operate within the world, is part of what is known as philosophy. Philosophy is concerned with views about how the world works and, as an academic subject, focuses primarily, on reality, knowledge and existence. Our individual view of the world is closely linked to what we perceive as reality. On a day-to-day basis outside of your academic work, it would be unusual to think frequently about the way you perceive reality and the world around you. However, in relation to your study, it is very important to realise how you perceive reality, as your perception of reality affects how you gain knowledge of the world, and how you act within it. This means that your perception of reality, and how you gain knowledge, will affect the way in which you conduct the research in your study.

■ Qualitative and quantitative paradigms

The key term relating to the way of looking at the world is ‘paradigm’. The researcher Kuhn introduced the concept of the existence of different paradigms (see Kuhn, 1970). The major reason this concept is important is that the paradigm we use to view the world, on a day-to-day basis, is very likely to influence how we conduct research. Attempting to summarise Kuhn’s ideas on paradigms, Long (2007: 196) stated:

‘a paradigm is a pre-requisite of perception itself – what you see depends on what you look at, your previous visual/conceptual experience (the way you have been taught to think) and how you look.’

As a way to start to think about what comprises the concept of a paradigm, consider the following brief example. In the early years of the 21st century, a major world bank ran a series of adverts about how it was important, when ‘doing business’, to understand cultural differences in a number of countries. One set of adverts had the meaning of what at first glance, appeared to be the same word in several different languages, to indicate cultural differences, while another set of adverts had a photograph of an insect, a relatively large cricket or grasshopper. Three of the different ways of seeing/viewing this cricket were as follows:

- A pest, (in parts of the USA, crickets are regarded as garden pests)
- A food item (crickets are eaten as snacks in some countries including Mexico)
- A pet (the Chinese and Japanese have kept them as pets for centuries).

So, the way you ‘see’ a cricket can vary greatly from country to country, culture to culture and will also depend on your individual world view.

Although each individual has a different view of the world to other individuals, it is generally accepted that there are not an infinite number of different views. In relation to research, it has become clear over the past one hundred years or so, that there are two major ways of ‘looking at the world’. One view regards the world as largely objective (there is only one truth or a limited number of universal truths) and this world is measurable in terms of the use of numbers. The other view suggests that the world is largely subjective (open to several interpretations) and numeric measurement is not always possible, or desirable and hence it is words that are able to indicate nuances more accurately. In summary, these two paradigms are usually referred to as a) the *quantitative* (the world is measurable using numbers) and b) the *qualitative* (the world is subjective and is best assessed using words) (Mason et al., 2021)

Eldabi, Irani, Paul and Love (2002) suggest that research philosophies can be grouped into two general categories, which although they are the same as those stated above, use different terms: positivism and interpretivism. Hence, the links to the differentiation above are as follows: *positivism* is usually equated with quantitative research and *interpretivism* with qualitative research. As Eldabi et al (2002) claim each philosophy represents different, if not competing, views on how to conduct research. What is particularly important in terms of you setting out on your research is the point made by Phillimore and Goodson (2004) that any research philosophy adopted in a study should fit the research problem that the researcher intends to investigate, implying researchers need to choose one or other research category.

However, we will see in a later chapter and discussed in detail, there is yet a third way to conduct research, which uses a combination of the two philosophies discussed above and perhaps not surprisingly is called mixed methods research.

It is important to be aware that the research philosophy of positivism, until fairly recently regarded as the dominant approach in tourism research (Khoo-Lattimore et al., 2019), views reality as singular and independent of the researcher (Creswell, 2018; Lincoln and Guba, 1985). It also regards reality as something which can be measured objectively, for example, by using a quantitative research instrument (Teddlie and Tashakkori, 2009). However, as noted above, the research philosophy of interpretivism rejects the idea of a single objectively measurable reality, positing instead the existence of subjective, multiple constructed realities (Creswell, 2018; Lincoln and Guba, 1985), and individuals involved in this type of research, including the researcher, those being investigated, and the reader or audience interpreting the research, are regarded as the creators of these realities (Creswell, 2018). Interpretivists contend that multiple realities can only be captured through the employment of less rigid data collection techniques than generally used in quantitative research (Creswell and Plano Clark, 2007).

The research philosophies of positivism and interpretivism also differ in their assumptions about the relationship between reality and the researcher (Creswell, 2018). For interpretivists, it is argued that to understand peoples' behaviour, researchers need to put themselves in the place of the enquiry subjects (Jennings, 2011). Therefore, interpretivist researchers try to minimise the distance between themselves and respondents (Creswell, 2018). So, the interpretivist tries to get inside the respondents' minds and see the world from their view (Jennings, 2011). Interpretivists have been described as observers 'from the inside', the term used is '*emic*' (Teddlie and Tashakkori,

2009; Phillimore and Goodson, 2004). However, positivist researchers try to provide an independent, outsider's account of the research process, known as an '*etic*' approach (Teddlie and Tashakkori, 2009; Phillimore and Goodson, 2004) to ensure that the researcher's biases are excluded (Creswell, 2018).

When comparing paradigms there are three important questions:

- What is real (ontology)?
- How can we know anything (epistemology)?
- What methods should we use to conduct research (methodology)?

■ **Ontology**

The question, 'What is real?' is concerned with the concept of ontology, and in relation to this there are two possible responses, depending on the specific paradigm. In one paradigm, the response to the question: 'Is there a single objective truth/a knowable reality affected by a consistent set of laws?' would be 'Yes'. From the perspective of the other paradigm, the answer to the question is 'No' as everything is relative, there is no such thing as one objective truth or even universal truths, but merely a number of subjective truths.

Those who believe there is a single objective truth are usually referred to as '*positivists*' (there is more discussion of this term below). Such people believe there are universal truths that are waiting to be discovered. While those who believe there is no reality other than what individuals create in their heads are known as '*constructivists*' (or '*interpretivists*'). The term constructivist has emerged as those who use this approach and who believe, in relation to research, that there is no objective reality, but that reality is constructed by each individual. Therefore, to such people reality is subjective. *Phenomenology* is the term given to the research approach of such researchers (there is more discussion of phenomenology below).

■ **Epistemology**

The response to the question 'What is real?' affects the way in which knowledge is obtained. So, following on from the question 'What is real?' is 'How do we know anything about the world?' What we perceive of as reality has an effect on our knowledge of the world. Hence, each of the two different paradigms not only has a different perception of reality, but a different perception of knowledge about the world. In other words, what we think of as real, affects the way we gain knowledge.