

4

Mapping Research Methods

Kevin O’Gorman and Robert MacIntosh

For no apparent reason, research philosophy tends to send dissertation students into a mild panic. The befuddlement caused by a range of new terminology relating to the philosophy of knowledge is unnecessary when all that you are trying to achieve is some clarity over the status of any knowledge claims you make in your study. Business and Management sits within the broader context of the social sciences, and this chapter offers a guide to the standard philosophical positions required to specify the particular form of research you plan to undertake. Collectively, these positions will define what we refer to as a research paradigm (see Figure 4.1: Methods Map). For us, a comprehensive articulation of a research design draws together five layers of interlocking choices that you, the researcher, should make when specifying how you plan to execute your research. There is no single ‘right’ way to undertake research, but there are distinct traditions, each of which tends to operate with its own, internally consistent, set of choices.

The Methods Map in Figure 4.1 offers a clear and structured approach that will ensure that you can identify each of the choices you are making in selecting your research design for your project. The process of developing a research design begins with the location of your proposed work within a particular research paradigm. Certain methods of data gathering and analysis tend to follow from certain paradigms, although it is important to notice that these implied pathways are not fixed. What is truly important is your ability to recognise and justify the interlocking choices which represent your own research design. Later chapters will deconstruct and explain the subsequent stages of the Map, namely those choices relating to both data gathering and data analysis. The sections that follow in this chapter relate to the starting point of the Methods Map, labelled ‘Research Paradigm.’ We

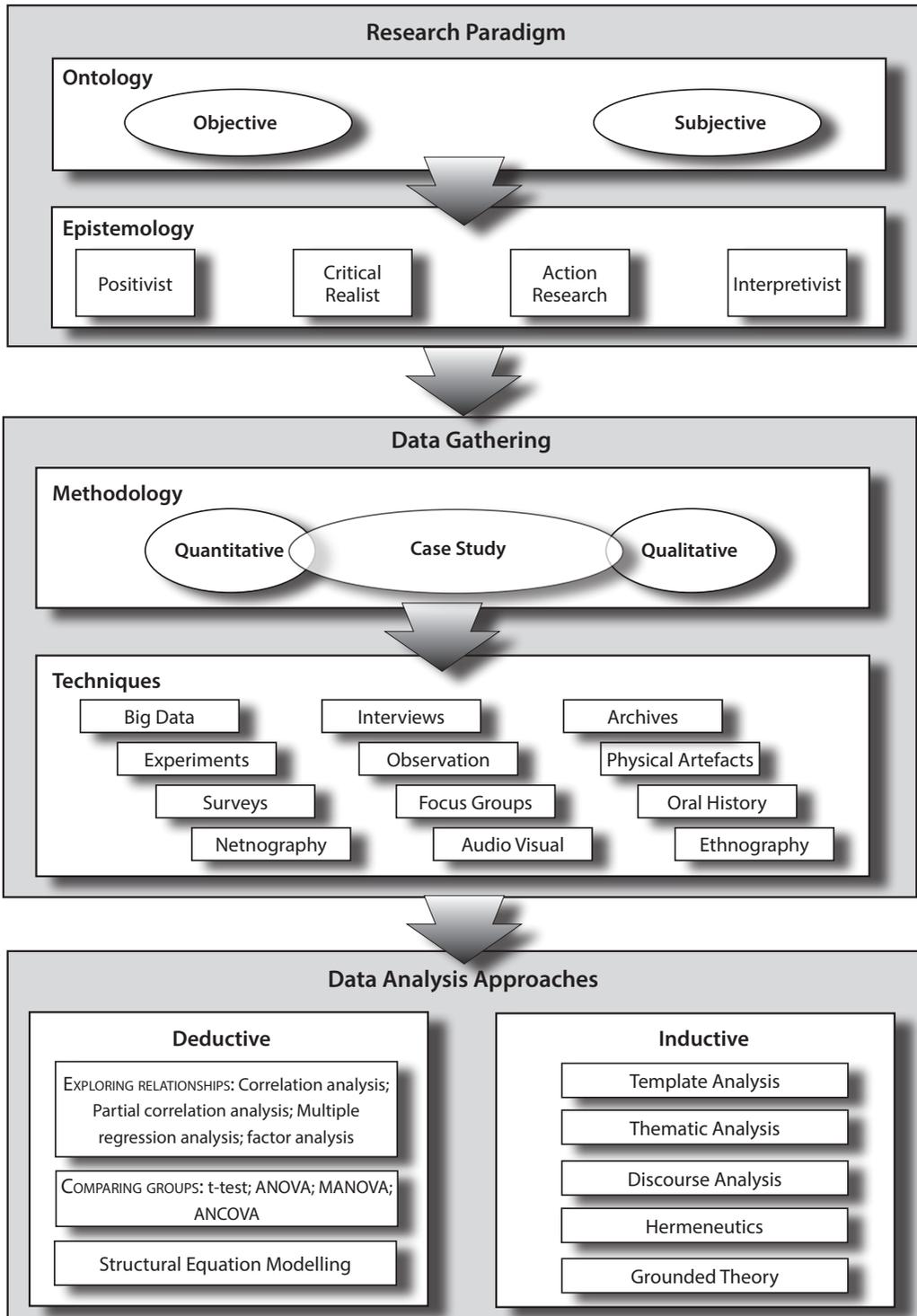


Figure 4.1: Methods Map

shall first consider the reasons for articulating a research philosophy, before exploring objective and subjective ontologies, and the epistemological positions known as positivism, critical realism, action research and interpretivism. In passing, we will also look at rhetoric (the study of persuasive language) and axiology (the study of value) as a means of rounding out your understanding of some key phrases and concepts.

Whilst these concepts emanate from philosophy, it is not necessary to have studied philosophy in order to make sense of the terminology. In essence, the purpose of setting out your research philosophy is to help signal to other researchers those claims you might make in your findings, and the basis on which you would make such claims. However, it is highly likely that the same broad research question or objective could have been approached using a very different style of research. All that you are required to do is demonstrate that you engaged in a conscientious selection and defence of what you deemed to be the most suitable approach, given your chosen topic. Historically, certain paradigms may have been used for certain topics and methods, yet it would be foolhardy to dismiss the potential for innovation to be found in combining ideas and mixing methods.

Some of the ideas that follow may at first seem challenging and difficult to work with. As a health warning, we would acknowledge that we have made some simplifying assumptions in the approach that we have set out. Those well versed in the philosophy of knowledge may take issue with some aspects of our presentation here. However, we are confident that the structured approach we are proposing will suffice for the vast majority of individuals tasked with articulating a methods statement. Let's first look at why this is important.

Articulating a research philosophy

When undertaking any research project it is considered good practice to clearly outline the basis for claiming to know what we know. Kuhn (1971) set in place the tradition that once a paradigm is chosen it is advisable for the researcher to remain within it. For the purposes of this discussion, a paradigm, as defined by Harré (1987, p. 3), is considered to be "a combination of a metaphysical theory about the nature of the objects in a certain field of interest and a consequential method which is tailor-made to acquire knowledge of those objects." At the philosophical level it could be perceived as dualistic if the researcher were to argue simultaneously that they believe

that social reality is separate and external, whilst maintaining that reality is merely a construction of the mind. Hussey and Hussey (1997) emphasise the importance of researchers recognising and understanding their philosophical orientations within the paradigm adopted for a specific project.

In 1781 Immanuel Kant published his *Critique of Pure Reason* (1780/1998) and caused a revolution in philosophy. Kant argued that there are ways of knowing about the world other than through direct observation, and that people use these all the time. This proposition provided the platform for the launch of many of the ideas associated with research philosophy. Kant's view proposes considering not how our representations may necessarily conform to objects as such, but rather how objects may necessarily conform to our representations.

Prior to this, objects were considered in isolation, separate, and unchangeable. Kant theorised that things could be considered as objects of experience: *phenomena*, rather than things in themselves (specified negatively as unknown beyond our experience): *noumena*. Therefore, if human faculties of representation are used to study these phenomena, *a priori* conceptualisations can be envisaged. An 'a priori' judgement is based on theory and argument rather than verified by experiment. For example, if we had only ever had the experience of sitting in chairs before and we saw a stool for the first time, rather than categorise it as unknown, we could conceptualise *a priori* that it would be possible to sit on a stool just like we do on a chair. Kant also showed how flawless logic can prove the existence of God and at the same time prove that there is no God at all; illustrating that opposing philosophies can be equally logical and at the same time contradictory and incomplete: a salient warning to any emergent researcher defending their philosophical stance.

The roots of research method

Gorgias, a fifth century Sophist, is remembered for his provocative aphorisms. The most notable is his treatise *On What is Not*:

"Firstly ... nothing exists;

secondly ... even if anything exists, it is incomprehensible by man;

thirdly ..., even if anything is comprehensible, it is guaranteed to be inexpressible and incommunicable to one's neighbour"

(Gorgias 500 BC, quoted in Arist. De Melisso Xenophane Gorgia 980a: 19–20)