

MANAGEMENT RESEARCH: A THOUGHT ON VALIDITY OF POSITIVISM

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Abstract

Contestations on research paradigms in the social sciences are replete in the literature on the philosophy of knowledge. The management discipline which was recreated from the intellectual domain of the social sciences is also cut in the contestations. This paper identifies the validity of positivism, which is one of the prescribed preferences for social inquiry. The paper contends that management is an admixture of science and art, in which case, the science based phenomena with stable, predictable, controllable, and explainable characteristics in management tend to bear scientific elements. This aspect of management is skewed to ontological realism; epistemological positivism; human nature determinism; and nomothetic methodology, all corresponding to a choice in positivism based inquiry. This makes positivism a valid research paradigm in management inquiry, because of its strong validity and reliability in the progression of search for truth in management inquiry. Positivism has remained with the growing consciousness that the natural world of matter shares useful analytical precepts with social phenomenon.

Keywords: Positivism, management research, ontological realism, epistemological positivism, human nature determinism, nomothetic methodology, validity of positivism.

Introduction

The emergence of administrative sciences school of thought can be placed into historical and ideological paradigms, namely: classical organizational theory, the human relations approach, the behavioral science approach and the post-behavioral science era (Fred & Beverly, 2013 and Koontz, O'Donnell & Weihrich, 1980). The classical rational model evolved around the ideas of scientific and administrative management, including the study of administrative processes and managerial functions. The human relations “social” paradigm emerged from early seminal social science research, including experimentation and analysis of the social and psychological aspects of people in the workplace and the study of group behavior (Furman & Starratt, 2002). The behavioral science approach was spurred to settle the basic discontent between the rational-economic model and the social model.

Essentially, the contention that management is both an art and a science (Fred & Beverly, 2013, and Fisher, 2010) portrays a mixture of methodological paradigms in its inquiry. The basic characteristic of the art suggests that strict scientific model may presumptuously filter off the dynamics of the unpredictable nature of human behavior. Yet, there is the need to retain a logical scientific approach to handle most attributes of management that may obey certain laws natural principles and conditions of human behavioural existence. This mixture appears to call for but subjective and objective epistemological orientations in management inquiry (Eketu & Aguwanba, 2014; Waribugo & Eketu, 2016; and Eketu, 2006). Considerably, objective approach to inquiry on almost stable phenomena in management tends to favour positivism as an epistemological strand.

Positivism emerged as a philosophical paradigm, with the invocation of Comte's rejection of metaphysics and his assertion that only scientific knowledge can reveal the truth about reality. It was later formally established as the dominant scientific paradigm in the early part of the 20th century by some members of the Vienna Circle. The focus of this paper is to establish the validity of positivism in the administrative sciences. The paper contends that, management being a science with its objective reality, portends positivism paradigm as a valid and reliable method of inquiry for continuous expansion of the frontiers of knowledge in this intellectual domain.

The Concept and Philosophy of Positivism

Positivism is a research approach that employs empirical methods, make extensive use of nomothetic analysis or develop logical and formal explanatory theory to provide understanding of phenomena (Fox & Miller, 1998). As a philosophical paradigm, it traced to the French philosopher Auguste Comte (1798-1857), who rejected the theological and metaphysical explanations of human behaviour in favor of scientific ones (White, 1999). White (1999) argued that positivism was established in the context of the growing enlightenment era, when the faith in rationally rigorous knowledge as a means to reach truth replaced the belief in mysticism,

spiritualism, and traditionalism. The early positivists believed in three interrelated themes: the faith in science, the conception of progress driven by scientific advances, as well as the ideological vision that is consistent with the first two themes. These logically serve as the basis of the Comte's preference for science as the dominant source of knowledge.

According to Fox and Miller (1998), the early positivists believed that, there is an objective reality that "can be completely described using denotative terms that correspond to facts". For early positivists, if social progress is driven by science, perfect knowledge would be produced about human affairs. However, the most influential form of positivism on contemporary social science in general and management in particular, is not Comte's early positivism, but the logical positivism of behavioralism. In this, experiential reality is preferred to argument reality. Thus, the strength of the prescription of positivism as an intellectually righteous approach is derived from ontological realism, which holds that the social universal exists in a reality outside the mind.

Positivism in contemporary literature is seen in intellectual domain as an attempt to borrow the natural sciences' methods to explain and predict social phenomena. Lincoln and Guba (1985) contended that one of the basic elements of positivism is that social and natural sciences have the same goals and use the same methodology. Fay (1975) argued that positivism introduced the use of scientific methods of research to solve socio-economic problems as the only plausible method to eliminate arbitrary decision-making, which is based on values, selfish interests or agreement reality. The application of scientific methods of inquiry defined in positivism leads to "policy science," which in essence permits individuals to use appropriate technical knowledge to discover most efficient alternative to solve a particular problem (Fay, 1975). "This most efficient alternative is what positivism thinks to be the correct way of proceeding in human affairs" (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). In this sense, positivism could be seen as the belief in the existence of objective reality, which could be explained and controlled through causal relations and testing hypotheses that establish statistical inferences. The mechanical nature in such statistical intervention is the fear of the scholars of solipsism which they believe is not appropriate for analysis of human behavior (Waribugo & Eketu, 2015).

The cardinal interest of the positivist approach is to explain the current conditions and predict any change of the future conditions to control them (Fay, 1975; Lincoln & Guba, 1985; White, 1999). Prediction is a very critical feature of this approach because "explanation is not complete unless **it** could have functioned as a prediction" (Fay, 1975). Such usefulness of prediction is the capacity to control human behavior in management thought and practice. Fay (1975) contended that the main assumptions that positivism is based on such, as the distinction between validation and discovery, the belief in neutral observation as foundation of knowledge, value-free ideal for scientific knowledge, and the belief in the methodological unity of behavioural sciences is the strength of its choice. Lincoln and Guba (1985) agreed on the basic elements of positivism, the goal is to discover laws that lead to explanations and predictions, and that concepts should be

defined by empirical categories. Again, such categories are only useful, if it can be used to control behavior. White (1999) asserted that the theory building of positivism requires the development of a collection of related and testable law-like statements that express causal relationships among relevant variables. This is where the social and the natural science share in the use of testable research hypothesis. White (1999) and Fay (1975) argued that the logic of positivism research uses two models to reach explanations and predictions. There are deductive and inductive approaches. First, the deductive model which focuses on the causal relationship between variables, X and Y. when X causes Y under the assumption that X is a necessary condition of Y, the conclusion is that Y is likely to occur when X occurs. The deductive model, which is the ideal model of explanatory social science according to White (1999), is conducted through experimental and quasi-experimental research designs. The approach enables inferences to be drawn for and existing body of knowledge from which new findings are linked. Secondly, the inductive model employs the laws of statistical probability. This model works “under certain conditions, which constitute the performance of a random experiment, a certain kind of outcome will occur in a specific (usually high) percentage of cases” (Fay, 1975). White (1999) contended that this model moves “from observations of actual events to inference about the probability that the same or similar events will occur in the future, given certain conditions”. The implication therefore, is the length of time it takes and the perseverance of the researcher to follow events in their natural occurrences.

Researchers under this approach have an objective role that detaches them from the subjects under study. The validity of both inductive and deductive models is determined by following acceptable methodological standards and rules. The usefulness of both approaches needs to be approved by an evaluation of peers or research surrogates (White, 1999). This validity gives the scientific approach its ability to generalize the findings to other similar conditions.

The Case for Positivism

Positivism has remained with the growing consciousness that the natural world of matter shares useful analytical precepts with social phenomenon. Thus, there are two important principles of positivism: to isolate, analyze and understand the causes of human behaviour. For Babbie (2011) the basic thought is that behaviour is caused (initiated) by something, which if understood, could be applied to explain and predict human behaviour. The second principle is concerned with objectivity. Denzin and Lincoln (2011) firmly believe that for the positivist, there would be an emphasis on methodology to facilitate replication and quantifiable observations for statistical analysis. Here, the researcher is independent of and neither affects nor is affected by the subject of the research. Babbie (2011) clearly stated that the positivist research paradigm underlies the natural scientific method in human behavioural research and holds that research should be limited to what can be observed and measured objectively. In relation to the current study, this implies that the generation of data should be independent of human opinions and judgment.

It is the contention in Eketu and Agwuamba (2014) that the adoption of positivism as paradigm of social inquiry as applied in management is to demonstrate science skewed bias in the philosophical assumptions. These assumptions would be ontological realism; epistemological positivism; human nature determinism; and nomothetic methodology, which are only possibly treated through scientific precepts of inquiry.

The beauty of this approach is that the phenomena of study are handled within testable, measurable, controllable, observable, predictable and replicable, perimeters to connect all regularities together in the universe of human behavior. This enshrines continuity, logical disagreement and growth in human experience, where learning is based on experiential reality than agreement reality. The former occurs outside the will of the mind and pertains to enduring knowledge of phenomena, while the later appears to weaver with the dynamic of the minds.

Conclusion

In conclusion, management requires a rich diversity of methods that can help to reach deep understanding of social problems. According to White (1999), researchers in administrative sciences in developing theories mix facts and values to establish theories, and those values can be just as rational as facts. Researches in administrative sciences should pay more attention to the stories managers tell, which is a valid approach to produce knowledge, instead of maintaining the objectivity of hard sciences. Hummel (1991) opines that the use of scientific standards, which the positivist approach asserts, is not an appropriate research tool for studying subject matters in administrative practice.

The appropriateness of positivism derives its justification from the fact that the human behavior although existing within the context of mindedness, but such mindedness is a mere response to environmental dictates, which bear objective or real patterns of manifestations. Such real patterns studied with statistical precision. Also, the quantitative aspect of management which emerged from the operation research epoch that led to the development of management science is purely rooted in nomothetic methodology of inquiry. This part of management can only advance to a sub knowledge domain through empiricism, defined in positivism. To discard positivism from management inquiry to have a narrow view of development of management thought and practice.

Because of the expansion of the frontier of knowledge in management, a dominant part of the intellectual domain of the discipline transcends behavior to its ultimate objective value. Research to improve the efficiency and effectiveness of management cannot in the final analysis escape quantitative analysis, which is the bedrock of positivism as a scientific explanation of social phenomena.

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