

CHAPTER 2

THE SCIENTIFIC APPROACH AND ALTERNATIVE APPROACHES TO INVESTIGATION

Instructional Goals

1. To help participants comprehend that scientific research offers assurance to the manager that the results of a study can be relied upon and further action can be taken at low risk.
2. To impress on the students that business research, however rigorously conducted, cannot produce 100 percent scientific results in terms of precise solutions.
3. To sensitize participants to being watchful about observing the different cues in the environment which offer some idea of a gap in the desired and actual state of affairs.
4. To help students *understand* that applied research, though limited in generalizability, still has to be “scientific”.

Discussion Questions

The first two questions are straightforward and the answers may be extracted from the text.

- 3. One hears the word research being mentioned by several groups such as research organizations, college and university professors, doctoral students, graduate assistants working for faculty, graduate and undergraduate students doing their term papers, research departments in industries, newspaper reporters, journalists, lawyers, doctors, and**

several other professionals and nonprofessionals. In the light of what you have learned in this unit, how would you rank the aforementioned groups of people in terms of the extent to which they might be doing “scientific” investigations. Why?

To the extent that any of the above groups conforms to the hallmarks of science, they would be doing scientific investigation. It is quite possible that poor research is done by research agencies, and excellent research is conducted by a graduate assistant. The ultimate test is the rigor of the research which would lend itself to testability, replicability, accuracy and precision, generalizability, objectivity, and parsimony.

Research organizations and research departments in industries engage themselves in both basic and applied research and usually have the resources required to conduct scientific investigations using rigorous data collection methods, sampling designs, and data analysis. Most professors in colleges and universities are well trained to conduct scientific investigations, though their resources may not, in most cases, be as plentiful as that made available in research organizations and research departments. Because of restricted resources, professors may have to compromise somewhat on methodological rigor (e.g. use a small sample) which might restrict the generalizability of their findings. However, their research might otherwise be scientific. Applied researchers doing action-oriented research, are somewhat restricted in even disseminating information about their findings due to the localized nature of their inquiry which may not pass many of the criteria of the hallmarks of science. Doctoral dissertations conducted under able guidance and supervision quite frequently make valuable contributions to the body of existing knowledge. Much of this research is later published as journal articles, and some get published as books because of their contributions to knowledge.

Students' term papers are meant to be exercises in skill development for integrating materials and communicating ideas in written form. Exceptional research papers, when refined and published, could qualify for being termed as scientific investigations. Newspaper reporters and journalists may obtain extensive primary and secondary data but their investigations are confined to a narrow range of current incidents, events, or individuals, which are of passing interest with little generalizability to other times, events or individuals. Hence, they cannot

ordinarily be termed scientific investigations. Some newspaper articles, however – as for instance, economic and environmental investigations – provide data, analysis of these data, and valid conclusions drawn therefrom, which might later be used as secondary data by other researchers. These would be categorized as more scientific in contrast to articles or editorials in the paper.

Academic journals usually publish articles that are scientific and some of the practitioner-oriented articles are probably somewhat less scientific than the academic articles in terms of rigor and generalizability. To the extent that lawyers, doctors, professionals and nonprofessionals present their findings that have wide testability, replicability, generalizability, accuracy and precision, objectivity, and parsimony, they will be scientific. However, if these investigations are confined to single cases, incidents, or individuals, they cannot be called scientific investigations despite the fact that they may be found useful.

4. Explain the processes of deduction and induction, giving an example of each.

The hypothetico-deductive method of research helps the researcher to deduce or infer from the results of data analysis and hence is the deductive process. For example, if as a result of analysis of data collected, one infers that the problem of turnover can be minimized by three important factors: (i) flexible work hours; (ii) recognition of superior performance of workers through suitable merit pay raises; and (iii) enriching certain types of jobs, this is the deductive approach.

Induction is a process of drawing inferences from observed phenomena which may subsequently be put to the test through hypothetico-deductive method of research. For instance, if a manager observes that people residing at distances beyond 50 miles from the workplace remain absent more frequently than those he knows to reside close by, and infers thereby that distance is a factor in absenteeism, this is an inductive process.

5. Discuss the following statement: Good research is deductive in nature.

Whether people will agree or disagree with this statement will depend on their viewpoint on what makes good research. In

general, the positivist will agree with this statement. Constructionists will disagree. The research methods of the constructionist are often qualitative in nature. The pragmatist does not take a particular standpoint on what makes good research: They feel that research on both objective, observable phenomena and subjective meanings can produce useful knowledge, depending on the research questions of the study. The focus of pragmatism is on practical, applied research where different viewpoints on research and the subject under study are helpful in solving a (business) problem.

So the particular ideas that people have about this statement will tell them a lot about their ideas of what makes good research.

6. Discuss the following statement: The hallmarks of scientific research do not/cannot apply to inductive research.

Many of the hallmarks of scientific research do and probably should apply to inductive research. For instance, the hallmarks purposiveness, replicability, objectivity, generalizability, rigour (a sound design) apply do apply to inductive research. Obviously, since one does not develop hypotheses in inductive research, testability does not apply.

7. If research in the management area cannot be 100 percent scientific, why bother to do it at all? Comment on this question.

Research in the management area dealing with human behavior cannot be 100 percent scientific. However, such research is necessary and useful for detecting problems and coming up with solutions as also to ensure that problems do not get out of control. Management research makes a valuable contribution inasmuch as it can help organizations function smoothly and effectively and help managers and individuals at all levels in organizations experience and enjoy a better quality of life.

8. What is epistemology and why is it important to know about different perspectives on research and how it should be done?

Epistemology questions the nature of knowledge or how we come to know. Knowledge of epistemology may help students to relate to and understand the research of others and the choices that were made in this research. Different researchers have different ideas about the nature of knowledge or on how we come to know. These different ideas translate into different approaches that are taken to research, into different research designs, and into different choices regarding the research methods used. Another answer to the question “Why do I need to know this?” is that students will probably have noticed that they prefer one research perspective over the other perspectives. Understanding your personal ideas on research and how it should be done allows you to determine which kinds of research questions are important to them and what methods for collecting and analyzing data will give you the best answer to these questions. It will also help students to make informed decisions during the research process, to have a clear understanding about what the findings of their study (do and do not) mean, and to understand the type of conclusions that a particular research approach allows one to draw. Like this, it helps to put research and research findings in perspective.

9. Discuss the most important differences between positivism and constructionism.

Constructionism criticizes the positivist belief that there is an objective truth. Constructionists hold the opposite view, namely that the world (as we know it!) is fundamentally mental or mentally constructed. For this reason, constructionists do not search for the objective truth. Instead, they aim to understand the rules people use to make sense of the world by investigating what happens in people’s minds. The research methods of constructionist researchers are often qualitative whereas research methods of the positivist are often quantitative in nature. Constructionists are often more concerned with understanding a specific case than with the generalization of their findings which is important for the positivist.

10. Is there a specific perspective on research that appeals to you? Why?

Answers will vary. Make sure that students provide arguments. Do they have particular ideas about whether the truth is objective or not?

11. Some people think that you should choose a particular research perspective based on the research questions of your study. Others feel that a particular research perspective “chooses” you. That is, they believe that you will have a rather

strong preference for one particular research perspective; in turn, this will have an influence on the type of questions you ask. How do you feel about this matter?

Answers will vary.

12. Critique the following research done in a service industry as to the extent to which it meets the hallmarks of scientific investigation discussed in this chapter.

The Mobile Phone Company

The Mobile Phone Company has been named as the most complained about mobile phone company, narrowly beating 3G, which has shot to the top of the table as the worst landline provider.

According to the latest figures from the regulator, Ofcom, the Mobile Phone Company was the most complained-about mobile provider – with 0.15 complaints per 1,000 – in the last three months of 2014. It saw its complaint figures rise substantially in the last quarter of 2014.

The company wanted to pinpoint the specific problems and take corrective action. Researchers were called in, and they spoke to a number of customers, noting the nature of the specific problems they faced. Because the problem had to be attended to very quickly, they developed a theoretical base, collected relevant detailed information from a sample of 100 customers, and analyzed the data. The results promise to be fairly accurate with at least an 85% chance of success in problem solving. The researchers will make recommendations to the company based on the results of data analysis.

The hallmarks of science are purposiveness, rigor, testability, replicability, precision and confidence, objectivity, generalizability, and parsimony. This study meets the basic criterion of purposiveness. It cannot be called a rigorous study inasmuch as a theoretical framework seems to have been formulated merely on the basis of conversation with a number of customers and no scientific data seem to have been collected thereafter. For this reason, the replicability and generalizability criteria also

suffer. With customer complaints mounting, an 85% confidence level may not suffice. Unless we know the theoretical base, we cannot be sure that the criterion of parsimony is met. All in all, this is a good example of a non-scientific investigation.