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EPISTEMOLOGICAL APPROACHES TO MANAGEMENT RESEARCH

This paper seeks to offer a more integrative and conclusive conceptualization of reflexivity as a way of identifying and understanding management research. The authors discuss the theoretical grounding and underlying assumption of positivism. Each of the epistemological alternatives to positivism is examined. An overview of the principal epistemological debates in management research and an indepth focus on issues relating to the structure and the limits of knowledge and justification is provided in this paper. Different epistemological positions outlined in this paper help to clarify some of the epistemological issues and to legitimize their own distinct ways of management. This paper in particular highlights the importance of reflexivity.

Keywords: reflexivity; management research; social research.

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ЕПІСТЕМОЛОГІЧНІ ПІДХОДИ ДО ДОСЛІДЖЕНЬ У МЕНЕДЖМЕНТІ

У статті пропонується інтегрована концептуалізація рефлексії як способу розуміння досліджень у менеджменті. Представлено теоретичні основи позитивізму; оцінено його епістемологічні альтернативи. Представлено дискусії щодо питань епістемології у дослідженнях з менеджменту, акцент зроблено на структурі та границях знань. Розглянуто різні епістемологічні підходи до менеджменту, окремо підкреслюється важливість рефлексії.

Ключові слова: рефлективність; дослідження у менеджменті; соціальні дослідження.
Рис. 2. Табл. 1. Літ. 68.

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ЭПИСТЕМОЛОГИЧЕСКИЕ ПОДХОДЫ К ИССЛЕДОВАНИЯМ В МЕНЕДЖМЕНТЕ

В статье предлагается интегрированная концептуализация рефлексии как способа понимания исследований в менеджменте. Представлены теоретические основы позитивизма; оценены эпистемологические альтернативы ему. Представлены дискуссии по вопросам эпистемологии в управленческих исследованиях, акцент сделан на структуре и границах знаний. Рассмотрены различные эпистемологические подходы к менеджменту, отдельно подчеркивается важность рефлексии.

Ключевые слова: рефлексивность; исследования в менеджменте; социальные исследования.

Introduction. Our epistemology positions implicitly or explicitly influence our thinking, beliefs and justification (Alvesson and Deetz, 2000; Chia, 1995; Easterby-Smith and Malina, 1999; Gergen and Gergen, 1991; Hassard, 1993; Holland, 1990; Linstead, 1993, 1994; Newton, 1999; Palmer and Dunford, 1996; Watson, 1995). Thus, it is important for management researchers to consider their own thinking processes in order to understand themselves (Johnson and Duberley, 2003).

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To comprehend and assess the discipline of management research, one must understand the applicable epistemological standards of the time. The circularity of epistemological issues, as shown in Figure 1, is a hopeless situation. In this circularity, epistemology becomes the condition of knowledge. The problem with the circularity is that no secure foundation for knowledge is provided. Indeed, it implies that epistemological commitment cannot detach itself from philosophical derivation and reflexivity.
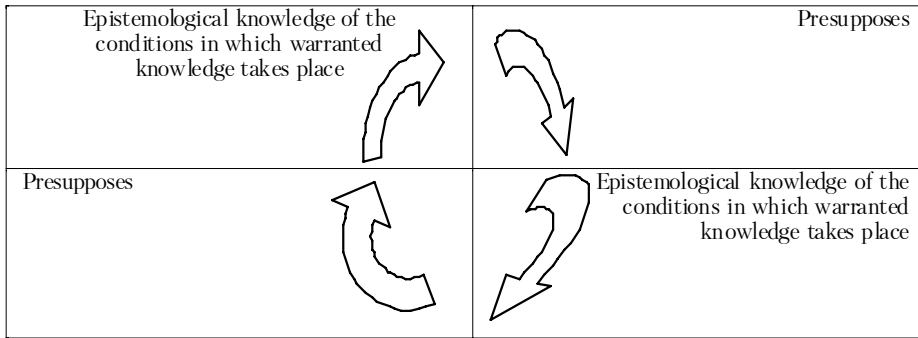

Figure 1. **The circularity of epistemology**

Source: Johnson & Duberley, 2000.

Reflexivity is an essential human process (Holland, 1999). There are two forms of reflexivity: methodological and epistemic (Harding, 1987). Methodological reflexivity aims to improve research practice through monitoring researcher behavioral impacts upon the research setting to represent a more accurate reality. While epistemic reflexivity focuses on the researcher's belief system and systematically analyzing the research outcomes and challenging researcher meta-theoretical assumptions (Bourdieu, 1990). Reflexivity in management research will allow us apprehend the relationship between a researcher and an object of research. It is a continuous, intentional and systematic self-introspective process (Steier, 1991).

The matrix in Figure 2 illustrates the combinations of constitutive assumptions about ontology and epistemology. Here possible approaches to reflexivity are constituted by objective and subjective assumptions about epistemology and ontology. To paraphrase Johnson & Duberley, 'an objective view of epistemology presupposes the possibility of a theory-neutral observational language. In contrast, a subjective view of epistemology denies the possibility of a theory-neutral observational language. Meanwhile, an objective view of ontology assumes that social and natural reality has an independent existence prior to human cognition whereas a subjective ontology assumes that what we take to be reality is an output of human cognitive process (2000, p.180).

An objective epistemology must combine with objective ontology. It will be incoherence to say that one perceived external realities objectively and yet assert that the realities are dependent to human activity. On the other hand, a subjective epistemology can combine either with objective or subjective ontology. The epistemic and methodological reflexivity of these different combinations of epistemology and ontology will be explored in the following sections.
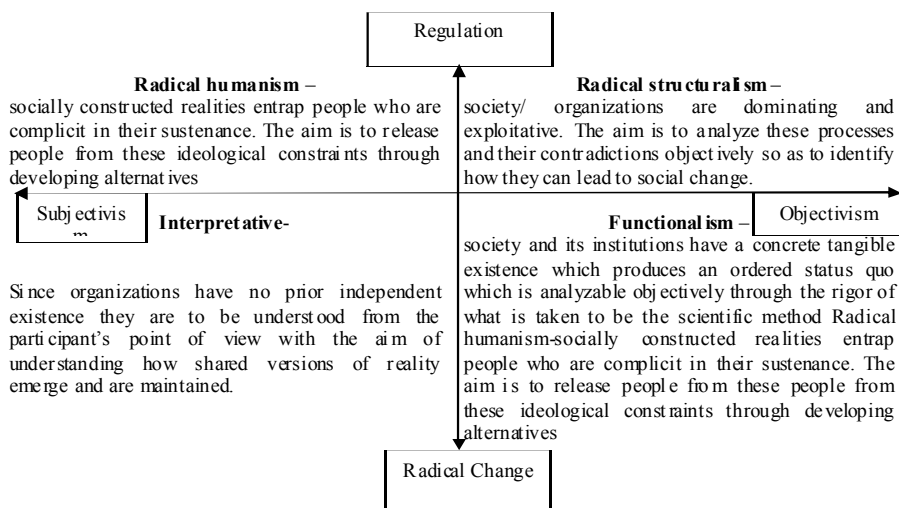
Figure 2. **4 Burrell and Morgan paradigms**

Source: Johnson & Duberley, 2000.

Objective Ontology, Objective epistemology: Positivism and Neo-positivism. The combination of objective ontology and objective epistemology has produced the dominant epistemology in management research — positivism and neo-positivism. Both presuppose the possibility of a theory-neutral observational language. They claim that knowledge is acquired by science and that metaphysical speculation has no validity (Karl Popper, 1976). The differences between these 2 approaches are their understanding of what can only be obtained through information sourced from observable experience as opposed to metaphysical considerations (Lessnoff, 1974).

Positivism is a non-metaphysical philosophy, as its sources are found in rationalism and empiricism. As an epistemology, positivism uses a model that excludes metaphysics from what is taken to be warranted knowledge and the scientific method is the best way of achieving results using this model (Comte, 1853), and its use is justified by the discovery of causal relationship between phenomena. Positivists explain human behavior in an organization via Erklaren — an apriori external reality is imposed upon human behavior in order to explain it. In contrast, neo-positivists purported that researchers should analyze human behavior in an organization from an a posteriori understanding — a process called Verstehen. Human experiences, unlike natural science, have subjective capacities and are influenced by cultural experiences as well, it is important to access the culture and experience of actors who are being studied.

Both these approaches are located in a Cartesian dualism. Positivism resides in subject-object dualism and attempts to differentiate the knower-researcher from the known-observed. On the other hand, neo-positivism resides in subject-subject dualism, that is knower-researcher will be differentiated from his/her description of the known-observed's cultural experiences (Alveson and Deetz, 2000; Van Maanen, 1995; Hammersley, 1992). Since both dualism rest on the notion that an observer can objectively describe the external world and view scientific inquiry as a matter of inductive reference and generalization from the results of empirical observation and experiment

(Comte, 1853), the reflexivity unfolding is a methodological reflexivity. Methodological reflexivity is used to justify methodology deployed and evaluated using technical aspects of research process. It helps to nurture management researcher and sustain their objective inquiry (Mulkay, 1992).

Subjective ontology, subjective epistemology: Conventionalism and Postmodernism. As illustrated in Figure 2, postmodernism and much of conventionalism deploy subjective ontology and subjective epistemology. Indeed, conventionalism swings between subjective and objective ontology. As Holland (1999) points out, conventionalism can either adopt a subjective ontology where an incommensurability thesis is supported (Kuhn, 1970; Feyerabend, 1978), or adopt objective ontology that supports a synchronic view of social science paradigm – different incommensurable paradigms can exist simultaneously (Burrell and Morgan, 1979), with a result that is a potential variable of epistemic reflexivity.

According to Kuhn (1970) and Feyerabend (1978), different paradigms are incommensurable because they cannot be translated one into the other. Incommensurablity implies that from the perspective of one paradigm, the alternative is not simply false, but makes no sense at all. Kuhn builds his argument around untranslatability and the adoption of subjective ontology.

Burrell and Morgan (1979) have a synchronic view of social science paradigm that different incommensurable paradigms can exist simultaneously. A 2X2 matrix scheme based on 4 major paradigms as shown in Figure 3 is developed to classify existing sociological theories. Their metatheoretical assumptions are based upon the nature of social science and the nature of society. According to Morgan (1980; 1983A; 1983B; 1986; 1993), all theories of organization and management can be analyzed through an implicit metaphor. Metaphors are vital to understanding and highlighting aspects of organizations. Tsoukas (1991) further expanded this by suggesting that metaphors bridge the gap between macrolevel of a paradigm and microlevel of organizational applications. However, as Alverson (1996), Willmott (1998) and Chia (1996) observed, while metaphors are important in the development of new management knowledge, they can constrain knowledge by creating conceptual inertia.

Postmodernism is replicated the subjective themes of conventionalism. It is characterized by critical, strategic and rhetorical practices that employ concepts such as difference, repetition and simulacrum (Giddens, 1991; Foucault, 1980; Lyotard, 1984; Baudrillard,; Alvesson, 1995). It is inherently relativistic and skeptical to the positivist's universal generalizable statement and methodology, as they add ambivalence and indeterminacy. They reject boundaries and emphasize deconstruction (Parker, 1992; Best and Kellner, 1991). The fragmentation and multiplicity of postmodernism offers an alternative way to conduct research in management.

Postmodernists believe that realities are changeable social artifacts. Realities are plural and relative, knowledge is the product of sociolinguistic construction (Lyotard, 1984; Giddens, 1991; Baudrillard, 1983). Empirical work in postmodernism is focused on gaining understanding rather than providing access to universal truth. Postmodernists reject the notion that intersubjective communication implies a universal consensus. They encourage dissent and intend to end all 'totalities by presenting a relativist totality'.

Postmodernism has influenced how we judge the organization of knowledge in today's business world. The focus in postmodern societies is who decides what knowl-

edge is and who know what needs to be decided. Whether knowledge is true or false is no longer important. As Jeffcutt and Gergen observe, organization of knowledge follows the paradigm of language games. The will be no standards worthy of universal respect dictating knowledge or truth, leading to the situation that previously suppressed voices may well be heard.

Postmodernism challenges several aspects of management's positivist orthodoxy. First, they reject the notion of epistemic certainty. Second, they decentralize the subject. Third, it emphasizes the role of language and power. Foucault (1980) proposed that subjectivation is a formative power of the self, surpassing the structures of knowledge and power out of which it emerges. Human beings are able to problematize their living condition due to the power of thought.

Postmodernism argues that all knowledge is indeterminate. They challenge the positivist's objective truth and the possibility of natural certainty through observational language with a "linguistic turn". The linguistic turn emphasize the role of language, power relations and motivations (Rorty, 1979; Lyotard 1984). It involves the belief that language is never innocent. Different people will interpret realities according to their interest and intention. Indeed, realities as a social artifact are subject to change inherent to culture and experience (Derrida,1973; Rorty, 1979; Lyotard 1984; 1988; Vattino, 1992).

Two equally problematic alternatives are presented in postmodernism. Firstly, relativism might create endless reflexive loops − hyper-reflexivity. We might become passive and introspective which is unappealing in management research. Secondly, fear of relativism might drive us to commit positivist non-reflexive empiricism − silent reflexivity. The epistemic reflexivity that underlies management research is emphasizing the knowledge enhancement rather than present a more accurate reality about management (Lyotard, 1984; Gergen, 1992; Parker, 1992).

Objective ontology, subjective epistemology: critical theory, pragmatism and critical realism. To apprehend the combination of objective ontology and subjective epistemology, one should be aware that knowledge entails both a social construction and the transactions of the human knower with an independent reality (Bhaskar, 1978; Collier, 1994; Hesse, 1980; Margolis, 1986). Thus the epistemologies, critical theory, pragmatism and critical realism, that reside in this paradigm aim to emancipate human in the form of knowledge and regards epistemic reflexivity as emancipatory.

Critical theory focuses upon social sciences and humanities, as it asserts that knowledge can only be warranted through Habermas' ideal speech situation. Therefore, critical theory is a form of socio-rationalist (Gergen, 1992) and knowledge is an outcome of social consensus. Nevertheless, the ideal speech situation is difficult to sustain in a social relationship. In practice, critical theories are inclined toward a foundationalist position.

Habermas (1972; 1974a; 1974b) works resonate within the traditions of Kant through his acceptance of a phenomenalist position. He emphasizes the potential of transforming society to be more humane, just and egalitarian through the human potential for reason. It examines and criticizes society and culture issues such as exploitation, asymmetrical power relations, distorted communication and false consciousness (Alverson and Willmott, 1988). He believes that language is intertwined with social and cultural experiences. For Habermas, external reality exists independ-

ently from human subjectivity and only becomes knowledge through our interest in socio-historical contexts. Hence, Habermas (1977) adds a third form of critical science through his critique of Gadamer (1975). This form of knowledge emphasizes the emancipatory interest that seeks to enlighten people and liberate their rational capabilities.

Habermas believes that society must be understood as a mix of 3 major interests: work, interaction and power. Reality is only knowable through engagement in the operation of the interest-laden mode. McCarty (1978) remarks that Habermas was involved with relativism and rejected the notion of objectivity through tying knowledge to society, nevertheless, Habermas tried to escape from relativism. He eschewed the positivism's objective illusions and replaces empiricism with constructivism. He purports that reality can only become an object of human knowledge through identification and evaluation. For knowledge to be warranted, Habermas believes that relational inter-subjective consensus can be achieved in a required ideal-speech condition. This concept gives a role to epistemic reflexivity in critical theory, where knowledge should be accessible and includes mutual consensus of the public rather than privilege of the authorities few.

Social order naturally leads to power distribution; yet, a natural interest in being freed from domination also comes from the application of power. Power leads to distorted communication, but by becoming aware of the ideologies that dominate in society, groups can themselves be empowered to transform society. Habermas attempts to resolve the systematically distorted communication through the notion of the ideal speech situation. In ideal speech situation, everybody has equal chances to take part in a discourse. However, he acknowledges that ideal speech situation is difficult to obtain in everyday social interaction.

Habermas proposed that no aspect of life is interest free. Knowledge is influenced by values and interest. The aim of Habermas' critical theory is to emancipate society from any institutionalized domination and seeks to investigate how distorted communicative actions shape the society (Grice and Humphries, 1997). The role of epistemic reflexivity in critical theory is to enable the construction of new interpretation and the achievement of consensus.

At glance, critical theorists and pragmatic-critical realists look similar, however, there are some significant differences between them. For instance, pragmatism sees no fundamental difference between practical and theoretical reason, nor any ontological difference between facts and values. The critical element of pragmatic-critical realism is emphasis on praxis and enabling emancipation through self-reflexivity.

Pragmatic-critical realism is an epistemology that seeks the meaning of practice and asserts that truth is pre-eminently to be tested by the practical consequences of belief. It entails general scepticism about reality and rejects scientific inquiry as a presumption. It presents an interrelated philosophical terrain that transcends the positivist's totalizing grand narratives and contrasts with the relativist's nihilism. It is frequently associated with Roy Bhaskar, as he combines transcendental realism and critical naturalism to describe the interface between natural and social.

Pragmatic-critical realists raise a series of questions regarding management knowledge. They are interested in how knowledge is evaluated, by whom, how successful it is in the realization of particular objectives, and the importance of praxis. Some critical theorists attempt to present an interrelated philosophical terrain that

transcends the positivist's totalizing grand narratives and contrast the relativist's nihilism (Harvey, 1989). This epistemic is known as pragmatic-critical realism, and as Bernstein remarks, pragmatic-critical realism has been caught in the Descartes' either/or dichotomy – either foundationalism or relativism (Bernstein, 1983).

In brief, this is a pragmatic-critical realism position in cognitive psychology and the sociology of knowledge. 5 key insights arise from the epistemological and ontological stance of pragmatic-critical realism. First, pragmatic-critical realism has been caught in the Descartes' either/or dichotomy – either foundationalism or relativism. Second, external reality occurs within a social culture. The world exists only in consciousness, and it could not identify the consciousness in which the world exists with our present consciousness. Thirdly, the aim of social scientific inquiry is to produce causal explanation which enable better prediction and improve social condition by dealing with practical problems. Fourthly, a reflexive political praxis is required to evaluate pragmatic-critical realism's projects. Lastly, this epistemology enables human emancipation through self-reflexivity rather than by certifying particular theoretical claims.

Conclusion. This paper provides a brief review and a synthesis of conceptualization and investigation of management epistemology. The author makes some preliminary observations about epistemological issues, which may be of value to management researchers. These diverse epistemological examinations look in detail at how knowledge is constituted, what counts as knowledge and where it resides. Different approaches to construction and evaluation knowledge are highlighted. The comparison of different epistemological approaches clearly leads us to a more informed and reflexive approach towards management research.

As the preceding sections show, different epistemological and ontological approaches encourage different kinds of reflexivity (Johnson & Duberley, 2003, Wong, 2003, 2004, Yin, 1994). Various epistemological approaches and their implications are summarized in the table1.

In sum, different epistemological approaches discussed in this paper are to sharpen our conceptual understanding of epistemology. Reflexivity according to particular combinations of constitutive assumptions about ontology and epistemology (Johnson and Durberley, 2003, Wong, 2003, 2004, Yin, 1994) is the particular focus in this paper. The authors also hope to increase awareness of various epistemological approaches and their implications for practitioners and management researchers.

Table 1. **Various epistemological approaches and their implications**

Epistemological approach	Approach towards reflexivity	Focus/ Issues
Positivism & neo-positivism	Methodological reflexivity	Improving methods and their application
Critical theory/ critical realism	Epistemic reflexivity	Exposing interest Enabling emancipation through self-reflexivity Participation of those being researched Importance of praxis
Postmodernism (1)	Hyper-reflexivity	Reflexive deconstruction of own practices Danger of relativism
Postmodernism (2)	Impossibility of reflexivity	Recognition of the impossibility of pure knowledge Conservatism/ silence.

Source: Johnson & Duberley, 2000.

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