

**Experimental versus field and  
qualitative research in  
organization behaviour**

*A discussion article*

September, 1995

Albert Fiorino, MA, PhL, MEd, PhD

**Experimental versus field and  
qualitative research in  
organization behaviour**  
*A discussion article*<sup>\*</sup>

A brief review of the debate about the relative strengths and weaknesses of the different types of research activities in the social and behavioural sciences reveals the humble acknowledgement, on the part of some practitioners in the field, that human knowledge is imperfect (Campbell and Stanley, 1963; Cook and Campbell, 1979; Kerlinger, 1979). In general, the debate about experimental versus field and qualitative research seems to be based on the false assumption that there are no parameters to human beings' capacity to know. Once the opposite assumption becomes the hypothesis to be rejected, one begins to realize that it can be falsified in a variety of ways and that each method is in its own way a vindication of human beings' unquenching thirst for knowledge and of the seldom acknowledged verity that they are able to know at all. This realization is markedly evident in Cook's and Campbell's replies to their critics.

In one of their responses, Cook and Campbell admit that the social sciences may never be successful as sciences (1, 92). They present their treatment of the nature of quasi-experimentation as a confirmation of this admission. They write: "This book [Quasi-Experimentation, Design & Analysis Issues for Field Settings] with its many categories of threats to validity and its general tone of modesty and caution in making causal inferences, supports such pessimism and underscores the equivocal nature of our conclusion" (1, 92). However, these limitations, they argue, are not the exclusive characteristics of quantitative or experimental studies. They also characterize other approaches. They point out that the regression effect is also an "observational-inferential illusion" of ordinary cognition. This does not imply, however, that sound causal findings are not possible via experimentation or quasi-experimentation in field settings. What their comments do indicate is that knowledge derived from other sources should be used to complement the findings arrived at by way of quantitative techniques. For it would be naive for the field researcher to rule out rival hypotheses solely on the basis of quantitative analysis. "Field experimentation should always include qualitative research to describe and illuminate the context and conditions under which research is conducted" (1, 93). This recommendation is equally relevant to both basic and applied research, for in both types of experimentation there is theory-testing. The more rival hypotheses the researcher is able to rule out, the easier the task of theory refinement and the greater the relevance of interventions in the field setting.

Cook and Campbell are also critical of the tendency in the social sciences to give priority to measurement without regard to its shortcomings and consequences. One of the results has been "to misinterpret quantifications as replacing rather than depending upon ordinary perception and judgment, even though quantification at its best goes beyond these factors" (1, 93).

While their acknowledgement of the value of qualitative research is commendable, they ignore considering how it is to be integrated within the corpus of quantitative research. What weights are to be ascribed to qualitative findings? What should be the criteria for inclusion or exclusion?

Moreover, Cook and Campbell make no mention of the value of conceptual and/or historical approaches to knowledge except to observe the trend of historians and anthropologists to avoid causal explanations, "aiming instead for uninterpreted description" (1, 93). Although it is widely recognized that historical and conceptual knowledge are useful to generate hypotheses, they are seldom viewed as different sources of valid knowledge in themselves. In recent years, there has been some appreciation of the historical approach, particularly of Marxist analysis. However, the appreciation quickly degenerates into hypothesis generation and in the process the potential value of the method as a unique source of knowledge in its own right is lost. What is more unfortunate is that an opportunity is thus missed to learn something very important about the very nature of empirical knowledge, namely, that it forms an integral part of a socio-historical process which has very few, if any, stable points of reference.

The implications of the above discussion for the conduct of research in the field of organizational behaviour are several. First, it is most important for the researcher in an organizational field setting to nurture an appreciation for the value of using multiple sources of knowledge, not only in the ruling out of rival hypotheses or in generating new ones, but also as distinctive avenues of knowledge about organizational reality. Second, recognition of these other multiple sources of knowledge requires that researchers in the field develop new frameworks by which to determine their integration into traditional forms of analysis. And, third, theory testing and hypothesis generation must be viewed within the much broader socio-historical context. To ignore this dimension is to conduct field research as though one were still in a laboratory setting.

In the end, what the above discussion demonstrates is that experimental and qualitative research methods complement one another. Respectively, they represent different modes of rationality seeking to achieve greater objectivity and thus better answers and solutions to the questions and problems being examined.

Experimental and quantitative methods can be viewed as 'offsprings' of what Hebert Simon calls procedural rationality (6, 133). In other words, they combine procedures and computational designs and devices aimed at holding in check subjective elements in order to achieve the highest objectivity possible.

On the other hand, qualitative research can be viewed as consisting of methods that derive their impetus and direction primarily from what Mannheim calls substantial rationality (4, 53) or rationality in the more general dictionary sense meaning "intelligent, sensible" (5, 11). Qualitative research methods reflect more of a common sense approach to doing research, inspired, as the term implies, by the ability of human intelligence to discern unifying strands of meaning in its myriad of perceptions.

In the process, both experimental and qualitative research methods can provide different and valid perspectives on human behaviour and social reality. Before that can happen, however, researchers and scholars in both fields must be willing to acknowledge the legitimacy and value of each other's enterprise.

---

\* This discussion article was first prepared in 1982 and was first published in 1995 in the *metamode release*, the official publication of the Metamode Institute on Public Policy.

### **Sources**

1. Cook, Thomas C. and Donald T. Campbell, *Quasi-Experimentation. Design & Analysis Issues for Field Settings*, Boston: Houghton Mifflin Co., 1979.
2. Campbell, Donald T., and Julian C. Stanley, *Experimental and Quasi-Experimental Designs for Research*, Boston: Houghton Mifflin Co., 1963.
3. Kerlinger, Fred N., *Behavioral Research. A Conceptual Approach*, New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1979.
4. Mannheim, Karl, *Man and Society in an Age of Reconstruction*, London: Keegan Paul, Trench, Triebner & Co. Ltd., 1946.
5. Simon, Herbert A., "Rationality as Process and as Product of Thought", in *American Economic Review*, Vol. 68 (1978), No. 2, pp. 1-16.
6. Simon, Herbert, A., "From Substantive to Procedural Rationality", in *Methods in Appraisal in Economics*, ed. by Spiro J. Latsis, London: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1976, pp. 129-148.