Leading Issues in Business Research Methods

Edited by

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This is the content list and the introductory section written by Professor Antony Bryant. The book can be purchase from http://academic-publishing.org/business-research.htm
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Introduction to Business and Management Research: Business and Management Research – Concepts and Issues

The Electronic Journal of Business Research Methods started publication in 2002. There was no general introduction to the journal at its inception, but Dan Remenyi’s paper in the first issue began with the observation that ‘[W]hen reflecting on what is often said by those who write about research in Business and Management Studies one is left with the feeling that there is sometimes an incomplete understanding in our community of what constitutes research processes’. In the ensuing years the papers presented in the journal have sought to offer a range of perspectives and issues ‘on topics relevant to research in the field of business and management’ with the aim of increasing levels of such understanding. (See EJBRM ‘Aims and Scope’ – http://www.ejbrm.com/page?ident=scope )

Exactly what constitutes the domain of research in the field of business and management might itself seem to be a topic for research and discussion, but rather than seek some precise characterization or definition, it is preferable to be able to point to a range of examples that are encompassed by this term. The papers constituting the eight volumes published to date go some way towards this, and it is hoped that the selection offered here provides an accessible and substantive introduction, as well as a fairly representative cross-section.

The term ‘business and management’ refers to a wide-ranging and overarching domain covering topics such as businesses as organizations, business models, management models and practices, marketing and branding, and financial models; as well as the widespread applications of ICT (information and communications technology) that provide the basis for
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commends such as knowledge management, customer relationship management, and distributed or virtual organizations. Given this spectrum it is not surprising that the methods used in ‘business and management research’ constitute a microcosm of research methods in general.

One issue for publications such as EJBRM is the extent to which they provide a showcase for research by academics in universities and research centres, but also seek to appeal to a wider, non-academic audience with interests in the ways in which business-related topics and issues might be examined and analysed through research. It is tempting to look for ‘quick wins’ in this regard, but the business of research does not lend itself to this model despite attempts to force it to do so by those who fund research and related activities. Recent developments in the UK in the context of the Research Excellence Framework [REF] exemplify the ways in which ideas about ‘research impact’ need to be enhanced to take account of a wide range of factors and a protracted time-frame (15-20 years in case of the REF). Given that EJBRM has only been in existence since 2002, choosing papers for this selection was not a case of looking for those which had had any obvious impact.

So what criteria were most suited in selecting a small number of papers from the existing volumes of the journal? I have deliberately avoided papers where the authors sought to delve too deeply into epistemological issues. Any course on research methods must certainly cover epistemological topics, differentiating between various positions such as positivism, interpretivism, constructivism, and the like. But ultimately students must be brought to a realization that research should be judged on the outputs and insights, regardless of the stated or imputed epistemological position of the researcher(s). This is not an easy position to adopt, and I will readily admit that in some of my teaching and writing on research methods, I have sometimes put too much emphasis on the former at the expense of the latter. Moreover I can point to many instances in which a student outlined a research proposal based on what I would regard as an erroneous epistemological position, but which led to a rigorous and imaginative output, and the literature is replete with many other examples of this.

Researchers and students requiring overviews and analyses of research-oriented epistemological issues can choose from a wide and impressive array of sources including key collections such as Denzin and Lincoln’s
Handbook of Qualitative Research (various editions), or Silverman’s Qualitative Research (various editions and titles); also texts such as those by Miles and Huberman (1994), Blaxter et al (2007). Those unfamiliar with this literature should be encouraged to gain some acquaintance as a matter of standard grounding in the research arena.

In thinking about and planning research, it is crucial that epistemological issues are brought into consideration, even if it is to discount ideas and arguments that run counter to one’s assumptions or predispositions. Those who favour qualitative approaches should always be able to explain why they have not favoured quantitative ones; and vice-versa. Similarly if one adopts a positivist or neo-positivist position, one should also have some understanding of the interpretivist-constructivist stance; and again the converse applies. In both cases this implies that researchers have some familiarity with assumptions, methods and techniques that they do not share, or which they do not intend to use. It is important that academic researchers have a rounded view and thus understand that there are often many ways of investigation a research question. Subsequently, in actually carrying out or performing research, it is also important that issues concerned with types and quality of data, the nature of evidence, processes of analysis, and reliability of resources and sources are understood. On the other hand when it comes to reporting on research findings and outcomes, in journals and other outlets, these issues should take something of a back seat; with the underlying processes of investigation and analysis, the findings themselves, and their potential import taking pride of place.

In the light of this, when selecting papers for this collection I looked for those which demonstrated an imaginative and insightful use of a variety of methods; contributions that will supplement the many ‘how to’ textbooks, handbooks, and papers that are now so readily available. This necessarily resulted in a slant towards papers that centre on issues of day-to-day research activities such as gaining access to research sites, gathering data, performing interviews, using the internet and Web as a research resource, performing rigorous analysis, evaluation and so on. The standard texts of necessity have to focus on the broad issues around research methods and techniques, whereas papers that report on actual projects can often shed a more detailed light on specific practices and processes themselves.
The selection encompasses preparatory issues—such as gaining access to research sites for fieldwork and case studies—as well as operational ones focusing on survey design, responder bias, and relationships between researchers and other participants. The papers cover a variety of techniques including well-established ones such as focus groups, as well as introducing innovative ones for web-based research. Given the preponderance of interpretive approaches, several of the papers were chosen for their arguments and suggestions about the validation and rigour of such methods.

One way of discussing current research practice in general is to focus on the multi-faceted characteristic of ‘openness’. The research literature is replete with constant reminders that research projects should be undertaken in an open-minded manner, and that the research process itself should be open-ended; both in terms of the application of specific research techniques, and the way in which results are presented. In other words, when using research techniques or methods, the researcher should constantly be aware that the instruments themselves may obstruct the development of the research itself—the obvious example being use of a closely structured questionnaire obscuring some detailed and far more interesting issues. Similarly when reporting the outcomes, care must be taken to ensure that any claims above-and-beyond the results themselves have some firm conceptual and evidential basis. It is often justifiably claimed that the media are responsible for exaggerating or misconstruing research findings, but in far too many cases the fault lies in the research papers or reports themselves, with authors making claims that exceed the bases of the actual findings—a feature of both qualitative and quantitative research. (Anyone looking for examples would be well advised to begin by perusing Ben Goldacre’s ‘Bad Science’ website—http://www.badscience.net/)

In addition to these aspects of openness, there is the issue of open-access. Far too many research papers are available only to those with access to institutional libraries with subscriptions to the relevant journals. With the predominance of on-line publication there are strong arguments for this to be replaced with open-access, perhaps in some cases with a delayed publication model; for instance giving immediate access only on some premium basis, but general availability one month later. EJBRM is an exemplar of an open-access journal, with a swift route from submission to publication, and a wide range of different contributions and topics.
The selection that follows amounts to a total of sixteen papers, covering a range of issues, methods and techniques, with a preponderance of articles reporting on qualitative research; but this reflects the general trend in the journal itself. Many of the papers make reference to epistemological issues, but mostly simply in the form of briefly stating a position from which the specific argument then develops. My own view of this aspect of research derives from the Pragmatist position based on the work of John Dewey and William James, and the more recent writings of Richard Rorty. In essence Dewey’s view was that all forms of our knowledge are provisional, and rather than aiming at some idea of universality and truthfulness in the abstract, it would be better to judge our ideas in terms of their practical usefulness. Dewey’s argument was there are no fixed points from which to observe reality, and no appeals to ‘raw experience’; hence no universal and context-free claims to truth. All knowledge is provisional, and has to be judged in terms of its usefulness within some set of confines – Dewey termed this ‘instrumentalism’. Rorty takes this further, rejecting the view that there is any hierarchy of forms of knowledge: i.e. science or philosophical insight has no greater status than do other forms of knowledge such as common-sense or practical wisdom. Our knowledge of the world is best seen as a web or a network of statements rather than an edifice, and the value of any form of knowledge is its usefulness and applicability which may be constrained in terms of time and place and user. Rorty approvingly quotes Nietzsche’s dictum that what passes for truth—or more poignantly ‘The Truth’—is in fact ‘a mobile army of metaphors, metonyms, and anthropomorphisms’ (quoted by Rorty, 1991, p.3).

Many academic papers on research often adopt an almost apologetic stance with regard to ‘practice’, implying that the latter is somehow more valuable, insightful, or ‘relevant’. In many instances this may well be the case. Posing the question ‘So what?’ too many research reports often demonstrates this all too clearly. Yet on the other hand far too much ‘practice’ amounts to no more than simply a form of muddling-through, itself often based on some poorly understood or inadequately popularized research or model. Keynes elegantly made this point by noting that ‘Practical men, who believe themselves to be quite exempt from any intellectual influence, are usually the slaves of some defunct economist.’ (Keynes, 1936, ch. 24 ‘Concluding Notes’)

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Here again Pragmatism offers a useful feature in terms of what Dewey and others term ‘the difference principle’ – i.e. ‘given my research findings what practical differences do they make with regard to currently accepted ideas?’ This is not to imply that all research has to have an immediate and far-reaching impact, but it raises the issue for consideration, and in the context of the papers presented here this should be something that readers take into account.

A final note: Several of the papers address the ways in which research methods and techniques need to take account of the emergence of the internet and Web, but none of them actually mentions Wikipedia. Wikipedia cannot be ignored in the context of research. At its inception in 2001 it was looked upon either as a quirky novelty or as something of a ‘health hazard’, since the entries were un-moderated and so open to creation, revision or updating by anyone regardless of expertise or qualification. People compared it unfavourably to long-standing and well-respected encyclopaedias such as Britannica, pointing out that anyone visiting a Wikipedia page was in the same position as someone visiting a public convenience (i.e. washroom) where one might wonder who had used the facilities immediately beforehand! In practice Wikipedia has dispelled such scepticism, and in recent years a comparison of its entries with those in Encyclopaedia Britannica has demonstrated that not only are errors to be found in both to roughly the same extent, but that those in Wikipedia are usually corrected far more speedily.

What does need to be grasped, however, is that Wikipedia encapsulates many important issues with regard to use of resources in research – e.g. provenance of data, nature of evidence, currency of information, alternative viewpoints and interpretations. Users of Wikipedia are now clearly alerted to pages that are either insufficiently referenced, contain only partial information, appear to be the subject of antagonistic editing, or are likely to be affected by current events. So rather than warning researchers and students away from Wikipedia, it is in fact far better to direct them there with the understanding that all the warnings found at the top of various entries apply not only to Wikipedia, but to all sources of information. In this sense Wikipedia is a critical resource for research, albeit as an exemplar and starting point rather than as a sole and exclusive one.