

11-1-2011

Methodology: who needs it?

Nirupama Akella
University of South Alabama

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholarship.shu.edu/omj>



Part of the [Organizational Behavior and Theory Commons](#), and the [Organizational Communication Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Akella, Nirupama (2011) "Methodology: who needs it?," *Organization Management Journal*: Vol. 8: Iss. 3, Article 12.

Available at: <https://scholarship.shu.edu/omj/vol8/iss3/12>



Book Review

Methodology: who needs it?

Martyn Hammersley
Sage, Thousand Oaks, CA 2011, 214pp.

Reviewed by Nirupama Akella

University of South Alabama, Mobile, Alabama,
USA

Organization Management Journal (2011)
8, 196–199. doi:10.1057/omj.2011.32



Organization
Management
Journal

Methodology is an inevitable tool of research. It is impossible to imagine the state of research without methodology. Research needs methodology to investigate, gauge, and interpret social and scientific phenomena. Methodology consists of two terms: *method* and *logy* meaning method and philosophy (Gay, 1996). Hence, methodology means using philosophy to map out a method to investigate real-life phenomena. In his book, *Methodology: Who Needs It?*, Martyn Hammersley argues that the meaning of methodology has changed in the face of new contemporary social, economic, and global transformations. The book discusses the current state of methodology in social science including historical reasons for its development and contrasts this state with the author's concept of the ideal state of methodology.

“Research is itself a practical activity. It is carried out in the world, and must be adopted to that world” (p. 118). This is the basic premise of the book, which echoes in the conclusion of every chapter. The book introduction focuses on the aim and contribution made by the author in the academic research community. Hammersley contends that the definition and meaning of research have drastically changed. In the contemporary global world, research is not value-free, but subject to various external social, cultural, and economic forces. These forces or factors shape the scope and direction of academic research. The role of external stakeholders, such as those of governments, policymakers, and academic institutional funding bodies, has become paramount in deciding who gets to do research, what is to be researched, how it is to be researched, and when, and even why it needs to be researched at all. The book, written for the politically conscious academic researcher, justifies its claim that research is a political, socio-economic activity with strong philosophical underpinnings.

The book is divided into two parts with five and three chapters, respectively, and provides a broad overview of the history of research, role of the researcher, and the epistemic value of research as an academic subject.

Chapter 1: Methodology: Who needs it?

This chapter opens with the argument that contemporary social science places too much emphasis on methodology. Hammersley calls this phenomenon, “cancer on the face of research” (p. 17).



The author traces the history of methodology beginning with the academic discipline of anthropology. He slowly weaves his way to the contemporary stage where methodology can be clearly classified into three genres: (i) technique (ii) philosophy, and (iii) autobiography. Hammersley contends that methodology is perceived as a tool of the quantitative research method. He states that students and research practitioners are not interested in understanding the value and philosophical underpinnings of methodology. They emphasize only the “method” part of methodology. This view is fiercely contested by a second stream of thought, which argues that the importance of methodology lies in its epistemological value. To arrive at a sound method of research one has to develop a holistic comprehension of knowledge. Hammersley then maps out a middle stance called the autobiography. He takes immense support from Whyte’s pioneering autobiographical research, *Streetcorner Society* (p. 25). Hammersley states that contemporary social science research is slowly embracing this genre of research, which combines elements of quantitative and qualitative methods and places equal importance on knowledge construction. The author ends the chapter on a cautionary note that though gaining in popularity the autobiographical method has inherent flaws of subjectivity and bias.

Chapter 2: On the social scientist as intellectual

This chapter maps out the role of the social scientist from the French Revolution. Hammersley clarifies the distinction between a social scientist and researcher, and an intellectual. He further states that the distinction is apparent only in the scientific community, and comments on the blurring of lines between social scientist and intellectual. He defines the role of the social scientist as that of an intellectual producing valuable and practical knowledge at the beginning of the 17th century. This role underwent a major change during the French Revolution when the social scientist donned the mantle of an intellectual as a witness to universal values. Hammersley relies on philosophers such as Benda and Nizan to argue that the social scientist saw himself/herself as the sole, unwavering witness to social events and atrocities. This role gradually progressed to that of the organic intellectual wherein the social scientist and researcher enacted a fluid role of intellectual commenting on societal happenings. The social scientist then went on to slip into the role of the

public intellectual who was heavily influenced by the popular outcries of exploitation. The public intellectual considered it a duty and responsibility to showcase exploitative stories and journeys in various works of art, music, film, and social science research. The role of the social researcher, in contemporary times, has become more restrictive. Hammersley states that the social scientist and researcher is now a specific intellectual, who realizes that not all research information ought to be made public. The specific intellectual is in favor of releasing research results only to a select few such as policymakers, social activists, and funding bodies.

Chapter 3: Should social science be critical?

Hammersley contends that social scientists tend to be confused about the role of criticism. Hammersley traces the roots of criticism as an intellectual activity to the writings of Habermas and Gramsci. He states that intellectual criticism is about criticizing the effect and implications of social policy events, activities, and decisions. On the other hand, social science research is not intellectual criticism. Social scientists and researchers are solely concerned with knowledge claims and research method. The social science academic community, thus, should limit its criticism of any research project only to the research knowledge and claims. The criticism should not extend to the competence level and attitude displayed by the researcher.

Chapter 4: Objectivity as an intellectual virtue

Hammersley states that social science research cannot be objective. He finds support from social science researchers such as Lincoln and Guba (1985) and Harding (1992). He argues that the concept of value-free research is not possible. Hammersley provides the instance of standpoint theory popularized by the feminists who allowed personal bias, perception, and interpretation to creep into social science research (pp. 99–100). Hammersley propounds his own view of objectivity, stating that objectivity in social science is a combination of objective values and subjective interpretations. He calls this concept “objectivism” and argues that pure social science is not objective, but objectivist in nature.

Chapter 5: Too good to be false?

This chapter deals with the research ethics of belief by stating that ethics of belief do not exist in social

science. Hammersley argues this point with the help of a psychological example, which depicts frustration–aggression theory. Hammersley states that the public continues to believe that rising cotton prices during the 1890s led to an increasing number of black lynchings. However, empirical evidence proves that there is no causal link between rising cotton prices and black lynchings (p. 105). However, this instance and resultant theory are still considered the bedrock of the discipline. Thus, ethics of belief in social science can be termed as ethics of common sense. Hammersley clarifies that social science researcher beliefs are built on an unshakeable foundation of individual perception, cultural schema, and biased interpretation.

Chapter 6: Models of research: Discovery, construction, and understanding

Hammersley begins this chapter by questioning the meaning and value of knowledge. In this regard, he discusses three models of research: (i) discovery (ii) construction, and (iii) understanding. Hammersley attempts to explore the epistemological argument underlying social science research. He cites the example of anthropology and talks about the research model of discovery. He then explains another popular research model of construction, wherein he states that knowledge is not a static entity to be “discovered” but a dynamic process of human construction. He states that humans actively construct knowledge maps or schema relying on personal and cultural perceptions. Contemporary social science research, he writes, follows the third model of research, that is, understanding. This model is a cross between the first two models, holding that humans interpret and validate knowledge with past or earlier happenings. Hammersley further explains the model with the help of the academic discipline of history. Historians understand and interpret knowledge on the basis of the past.

Chapter 7: Merely academic? A dialectic for research communities

The chapter outlines the history and progress of research report writing to the 17th century when philosopher Bacon stated that all research reports should be written for the sole purpose of knowledge creation and dissemination (pp. 138–139). This viewpoint changed with Popper and Foucault who argued that the primary aim of a research

report should be objectivity, and generalizability. In contemporary, social science research report writing follows the four maxims of quality, quantity, relevance, and manner (pp. 155–156). Hammersley explains that a research report should be concise and state only relevant information. A research report should be written in proper format in the correct language.

Chapter 8: Academic license and its limits: The case of the holocaust denial

Hammersley begins the chapter with the contention that research is not neutral, and to think that research can be value-free is a “psychological and epistemological dream.” From the 17th century and down through the Middle Ages to contemporary times, social scientists have harbored rights, duties, and responsibilities toward the creation, dissemination including investigation of knowledge. Hammersley argues that academic research is built on the concept of academic ethos which holds that all research should be purposeful, relevant, and practical. Research that advocates falsehood and is harmful to others should be discarded, and not endorsed by the academic community. Hammersley cites a famous example of “Holocaust Denial” that has captured and fascinated the public, as well as the academic research community. He believes that researchers who are holocaust deniers are propagating a “sham” and should not be allowed to function within the folds of the academic research community (pp. 172–182).

Hammersley does an excellent job of bringing together diverse views regarding social science research. He uses examples from various academic disciplines of anthropology, sociology, history, religion, management, and polity to depict a landscape view of social science research and the role of the researcher over the years. The book presents a delightful literature review with exploratory and thought-provoking issues. However, it is repetitive and misinformed about current trends in social science research. Contemporary social science research lays an equal emphasis on the objectivity and subjectivity of research. The book disregards contemporary methodological applications of mixed research methods and triangulation, which embody the quantitative and qualitative aspect of the application, as well as the epistemological value of knowledge. Unfortunately, it does not seem that it adds anything new, or suggests a novel approach or attitude toward methodology.



References

- Gay, L.R. (1996). *Educational research: Competencies for analysis and application*, 5th edn. New Jersey: Sage Publications.
- Harding, S. (1992). After the neutrality ideal: Science, politics, and "strong objectivity". *Social Research*, 59(3): 568–587.
- Johnson, B. & Christensen, L. (2000). *Educational research: Quantitative and qualitative research*. New York: Allyn & Bacon, Pearson Educational Media.
- Lincoln, Y. & Guba, E.G. (1985). *Naturalistic inquiry*. Beverly Hills, CA: Sage.

About the author

Nirupama Akella is a doctoral student in Instructional Design and Development at the University of South Alabama, Mobile. Her research interests include e-learning, and multiculturalism. She has served as a reviewer for many conferences, and is a published journal author. She can be reached at nakella2008@hotmail.com.