

# BUSINESS RESEARCH METHODS FOR CHINESE STUDENTS

A PRACTICAL GUIDE TO YOUR  
RESEARCH PROJECT

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# 3

## RESEARCH PHILOSOPHY AND APPROACHES

### 3.1 EPISTEMOLOGY AND ONTOLOGY

Research philosophy is important in designing and evaluating research. First, it is useful for researchers to clarify research design. Danermark et al. (2002) suggest that our understanding of the social world depends on our ontological and epistemological assumptions. Over the years, various authors have attempted to use metaphors to explain the relationship among research philosophy, methodology and methods. Popular ones include Saunders et al.'s (2015) research onion and Easterby-Smith et al.'s (2015) tree ring. Briefly, it is argued that the research methods and techniques adopted in a project depend on the assumptions of the methodology, and the decisions made around it, which often rely on a researcher's understanding of epistemology and ontology. There is no specific knowledge or sophisticated technique that can guarantee, by itself, that results will be reliable, valid and relevant in social research. These authors suggest that the method, object and purpose of investigation must be considered simultaneously and in relation to each other. Second, research philosophy helps researchers to understand their own roles in the research process and thus develop more robust theories and knowledge.

The primary aim of this chapter is to present an overview of the various philosophical stances that guide social research. Before we move on to discuss some of the most common perspectives, it is useful to first define two key terms that we use throughout this chapter, namely ontology (存在论) and epistemology (认识论). Ontology for social scientists is about the nature of reality and existence. Epistemology for social scientists is about the nature of knowledge.

#### KEY CONCEPTS IN CHINESE: RESEARCH PHILOSOPHY

研究哲学，是指导研究的思想方法或哲学。在研究哲学（主要是认识论和存在论）的引导下，我们才得以提出适合的研究方法 (research methodology)。

### 3.1.1 Ontology

This branch of philosophy deals with the nature of the social phenomenon under investigation. Central to the discussion of ontology is whether something (or the phenomenon that we are interested in) actually exists, regardless of whether or not we know it or have experience of it, or it is only our perception. In other words, it is about whether something is real or illusory (Johnson and Duberley, 2000). There are broadly two different views. Various authors refer to them in different terms. For example, Johnson et al. (2006) call this objective versus subjective ontology, while Easterby-Smith et al. (2015) use realist versus relativist ontology. From an objective or realist point of view, social concepts such as leadership, culture and discrimination can be seen as ‘real’ and they exist independently of our personal knowing. They guide our behaviour and have a real impact on people’s lives and work experience. Some of these concepts can be difficult to measure, and people in different societies, age groups, gender categories, and so on, may experience such social phenomena differently, but we cannot deny their existence. Neither can we change the reality of their consequences. By doing research, we are attempting to discover the truth. This stream of thinking takes ‘reality as it is’.

On the contrary, a subjective or relativist ontology assumes that what we believe to be reality is a product of what we know. Having an understanding of certain social concepts depends largely on our personal background, the society we grow up in or the social class we belong to. Leadership, for example, has been defined more than a thousand times. These definitions vary according to the context they originated in. Therefore, there is no single ‘reality’ of leadership waiting to be discovered. Rather, there can be many different perspectives depending on the observer’s position. This stream of thinking sees reality as socially constructed, and what counts for the truth can vary from place to place and from time to time (Collins, 1983). Thus, the task of doing social research should not be just about gathering facts and searching for patterns, but also about understanding how people give meaning to their experience. Some authors go even further by suggesting that what we see as social reality is no more than something we create through language and discourse (讨论). According to this perspective, so-called ‘truth’ only exists in people’s perceptions.

#### KEY CONCEPTS IN CHINESE: ONTOLOGY

西方研究哲学里讨论的两大焦点是存在论和认识论。存在论 (Ontology) 讨论的主要问题是究竟我们研究的社会现象是否有唯一的，客观存在的真相或现实。或者简单的说法是究竟客观真理是否存在。对该问题总体来说有两种相反的观点。一种观点认为有客观真理的存在，即唯物论 (objectivism)。很多社会概念没有物理的形状，但它们客观并独立地存在着。这些概念影响我们对事物的看法，规范着我们的行为。虽然不

同的人（或观察者）由于来自社会不同的阶层，有不同个人背景，但是对同一个社会现象的体会，理解却会不一样。如性别歧视，同一社会里一般女性比男性体会更深。但我们不能因为自己没经历过歧视就否认这些社会现象的存在。

相反，另一种观点认为所谓真理是主观存在的，即唯心论（subjectivism）。它认为真理会随着人的主观意识的改变而改变。正因为社会里每个人对这些现象的理解都不一样，所以现实的存在是多重的。有些学者甚至认为真理根本不存在。持不同观点的哲学家对同一个社会现象的存在论会有完全不同的观点。比如，企业文化是一个看不见也摸不着的东西。有的人认为企业文化是实在和客观存在的，因为它约束了我们在企业里的言行举止。但有的人认为企业文化是虚幻的，可能每名员工都有不同的认识，所以它只存在于我们的意识形态里。

### 3.1.2 Epistemology

While ontology is about whether truth exists, epistemology is about how to access truth. Epistemology refers to a set of assumptions about ways of understanding the world. Duberley et al. (2012) call it the ‘knowledge of knowledge’. These authors suggest that ‘epistemology is the study of the criteria by which we can know what does and does not constitute warranted or scientific knowledge’ (p. 16). Similar to the debate in ontology, there are also two opposing views about how social science research should be conducted. Again, different scholars label these views differently. Johnson et al. (2006) refer to objectivist versus subjectivist epistemology, whereas Easterby-Smith et al. (2015) use positivist versus social constructivist epistemology. An objectivist epistemology requires an objective ontology that assumes an external reality out there. It entails that the properties of social concepts can be measured through objective approaches, and that researchers can maintain a neutral position in the research process. If knowledge developed in the research process is to be significant, it should be based on externally observable evidence. Thus, this view discounts subjectively inferred evidence, such as feelings, reflections or perceptions.

By contrast, a subjectivist view of epistemology presupposes people’s experience as legitimate evidence. Authors of this tradition focus on the ways people make sense of the world and how they communicate and interact with each other. The purpose of social science is to appreciate the different experiences that people have, rather than merely discovering external causes or patterns of behaviour. Moreover, a subjectivist epistemology recognises that researchers are actively engaging in the research process, thus bring in their personal understandings and feelings. This is in stark contrast to an objectivist view that researchers can play neutral and detached roles. A strong version of subjectivist or constructivist epistemology believes that knowledge is created through intersubjectivity, that is, meanings are co-constructed in the research process between the researcher and the researched.



## KEY CONCEPTS IN CHINESE: EPISTEMOLOGY

存在论探讨的是现实是否客观存在，而认识论探讨的是如何能认知现实，不管是单一的还是多重的现实。在社会科学里，认识论主要研究的三个问题是：第一，提出新的理论需要有科学的证据，那什么才算科学的证据；第二，为什么这些证据是有效的；第三，研究者在这过程中能否保持中立的状态。正如存在论有客观和主观两种观点，认识论也有客，主两种观点。客观论者认为社会的概念是可以从外部观察和测量的。研究者在科研的过程中应该是客观中立的。只有通过系统的，大规模的收集数据才能发现社会中人的行为的规律。这样发展的知识才是质量有保证的。而主观论者则认为社会现象是由人而产生，这些现象大多不能从外部观察，因为这涉及到人的内在的情感、认知和对事物的喜好，以及人与人之间的交流和交往。但这正是社会科学需要研究的重点。而且，研究者做为社会里的一员，自己本身对某项事物肯定带有一定认识和偏向，所以研究者很难保持中立或绝对的客观。

Ontological and epistemological positions may be culturally bound. Reflecting on their experience of a UK–China collaborative research project, Easterby-Smith and Malina (1999) note that Chinese researchers are interested in obtaining accurate data and factual information in interviews, whereas their UK counterparts place a greater emphasis on people’s perception and interpretation of events. These scholars also observe that Chinese researchers expect an agreed-upon answer to each question and look for similarities and patterns between cases, while British researchers’ interests lie in exploring the different accounts of various informants in the same company. Thus, they suggest that Chinese researchers are more likely to take a realist stance, while British researchers hold a constructionist view.

## 3.2 PHILOSOPHICAL PERSPECTIVES

The ontological and epistemological assumptions we discussed above provide foundations for the philosophical perspectives we shall explore below. Here we focus on the four positions that students are most familiar with: positivism, realism, interpretivism and pragmatism.

### 3.2.1 Positivism (实证主义)

Positivism in social science adopts the philosophical stance of the natural scientists. It relies heavily on Popper’s (1959) falsificationism (证伪论), which emphasises objective data collection to test hypotheses. It also proposes that researchers should, by all means, act against their personal feelings and attachments in order to develop unbiased theories. Positivists commit to an objectivist epistemology, which assumes that there is a neutral point at which an observer can stand back and observe

the external world objectively (Johnson and Duberley, 2000). In the research process, knowledge of the external social and natural world can be transferred from a passive knower (the subject) to an independent researcher. Positivists also accept a realist ontological position which entails that there is an objective world out there beyond our senses, and that the job of the researcher is to ‘pursue truth’, or to fit our theories closer and closer to the one objective reality that we presume (Mitroff and Pondy, 1978). Positivist research entails the evaluation of an underlying commitment to a correspondence of truth. The aim is to ensure a distance between the researcher and the researched, so that the research process and findings can be value-free (Johnson et al., 2006). Positivism has been influential in business and management research and becomes the guiding principle of most quantitative research. Johnson et al. (2006) comment on key steps in quantitative research, which include (1) selecting a sample (often large) to participate in a survey or an experiment; (2) using valid and reliable measurements for each variable; (3) testing hypotheses; and (4) generalising findings to a wider population. In so doing, positivist researchers would be able to produce rational, reliable, theoretically derived and generalisable knowledge.

Yet, some researchers use positivism to guide qualitative research too. Neo-empiricism (新经验主义) is sometimes called ‘qualitative positivism’, as researchers who subscribe to this school use non-quantitative methods within largely positivistic assumptions (Prasad and Prasad, 2002). Neo-empiricists also adopt an objectivist epistemology and assume the possibility of the unbiased and objective collection of qualitative empirical data. But they reject falsificationism in favour of induction. Often, neo-empiricists are interested in the subjective meanings that people use to make sense of their everyday worlds and rely on qualitative methods to investigate the implications of those interpretations for social interaction (Johnson et al., 2006). While adopting an interpretive stance, neo-empiricists emphasise the neutrality of the researcher and maintain the idea that there is a world out there to be discovered and explored by an objective means. Because the quality of research can only depend on the researchers’ own objective judgement in the process, a key task for the researcher(s) is to establish the credibility of their own behaviours, so as to justify the findings. This can be done through methodological reflexivity (Alvesson and Sköldbberg, 2000). That means minimising bias by deploying strategies such as multiple researchers, multiple sources of data collection, cross-referencing and mixed methods.

### KEY CONCEPTS IN CHINESE: POSITIVISM

实证主义来源于珀朴的证伪论，即任何理论可以当作是真的直到被证实是假科学为止。如一千多年来人们一直以为地球是平的，直到有人用实例证明地球是圆的。地圆论证明了地平论是假科学。珀朴认为科学研究就是不断地用新的证据而推翻伪科学，从而不断地接近真理。实证主义承认客观的存在论和认识论。即

*(Continued)*

认可客观存在，独立于人的认知以外的现实。所以实证论者认为探讨真相的过程也应该采取客观的手段，研究人员不应该带进自己的偏见和感情。接受实证主义的研究者大多采用定量研究法，主要步骤包括：提出假设；找出对社会概念的测量；通过发问卷，做实验等向一定的人群收集数据；用复杂的统计方法分析数据；最后用结果支持或否定假设。他们认为这样的得出的结果较大幅度代表客观现实。

有少数的实证主义者也采用定性研究法。他们认为有些概念带有主观性，所以不能用测量的方法去研究。这类研究会采用访谈，观察等方法收集数据。但最终目的也是为了寻找客观现实，所以他们更强调研究人员的中立和客观的地位。往往他们的研究方法论包括很多用于减少主观偏见的手段，如研究员之间互相监督，采用多个来源收集数据，尽量运用电脑之类的客观的分析手段以减少误差。

### 3.2.2 Realism（现实主义）

Realism adopts an objective ontology, which assumes a reality independent of our cognition. Similar to positivism, realism promotes a scientific and objective approach to doing research. However, realists do not all adopt the same epistemology. Saunders et al. (2015) distinguish between two branches of realism based on how realist researchers collect data and make sense of those data. The first is direct realism, which proposes that what we see is what reality is. It shares an objectivist epistemology and holds that our senses (eyes, ears, hands, etc.) provide us with direct and accurate access to the natural and social worlds. Thus, this branch of philosophy sees the information collected by our senses as useful evidence which depicts reality. However, sometimes we are unable to see the whole truth. This is because we have insufficient information. Therefore, direct realists emphasise the collection of data from multiple sources in order to see the full picture of reality.

On the other hand, critical realism adopts a more subjectivist or social constructionist perspective of epistemology. Critical realists believe that our knowledge of reality is a result of social conditioning and cannot be understood independently of the social actors involved in the knowledge-derivation process (Bhaskar, 1978). In other words, what we see and feel about things may not reflect what things really are. Bhaskar (1989) argues that there exists a reality independent of our knowledge of it. But this reality and the way it behaves are, in important respects, not accessible to immediate observation. In other words, the reality and the 'representation of reality' operate in different domains – a transitive epistemological dimension and an intransitive ontological dimension. The task of the realist researcher is to unearth the real mechanisms and structures underlying perceived events. However, this is not an easy task. Critical realists recognise that societies are structures of social relations where people occupy different positions, have access to different resources and have different interests. Because of our social positions, we tend to see only some parts of reality and are blind to others.

A further difference pointed out by Saunders et al. (2015) is the degree to which direct and critical realists believe research can change reality. Direct realists believe that the social world is relatively

stable and that we only study what it is to improve our understanding, whereas critical realists argue that the world is constantly changing due to the changing structures, procedures and processes within it. Our research may enhance our understanding of reality, as well as change it.

### KEY CONCEPTS IN CHINESE: REALISM

现实主义承认客观的存在论，所以现实主义者做研究的主要目的是为了寻找客观的，独立于人的认知能力以外的真理。但现实主义者对认识论没有统一的看法。主要有两种观点，直接现实主义和批判现实主义。直接现实主义者认为应该持有客观的认识论。但与实证论不同，现实主义讨论的重点是究竟通过人们感官（如眼睛，鼻子，耳朵，手）收集的信息能不能代表现实或真相。直接现实主义认为现实就是我们直接看到，听到，和感受到的事物。即所谓的‘眼见为实’。而批判现实主义者则倾向于主观的认识论。批判的意思是看问题不能光看表面现象。认为人作为社会的个体都是有局限性的。我们对社会现象的看法往往受我们自己成长过程和所处的社会角度的影响。我们认识的事物都是片面的，带有个人偏见的。所以‘眼见的不一定是现实’。

例如很多企业采用员工弹性上班时间，即有需要的员工可以经上级同意自行安排上下班时间。享受过该项政策的员工觉得这项措施好，因为这使他们达到工作与生活的更大平衡。而不采用该项政策的员工觉得这项措施造成管理混乱。批判现实主义者认为虽然有客观的现实（弹性上班时间的后果），但我们对它的认识只能是主观的（不同的人有不同的体会）。做研究的目的是为了发现那些更深层的，无形的社会结构和机制。因为这些结构和机制经常左右人们的想法和行为规范。在对社会科学的研究上，因为大部分的概念（如企业文化）都没有物理的形态，所以研究员大多采纳批判现实主义。

### 3.2.3 Interpretivism（解释主义）

Interpretivism is often presented as a competing philosophy against positivism. Indeed, interpretivists believe that positivist methods are unable to capture the rich experience of human actors and argue that the social world is too complex to be reduced to a series of definite ‘laws’. Denzin (1983), for example, notes, critically, that ‘references to the social world that [can] not be verified under quantifiable, observable, scientifically controlled conditions must – following Wittgenstein’s dictum – “be passed over in silence”’ (p. 132). In a nutshell, this branch of philosophy sees human interpretation as the starting point for knowledge development in the social world (Prasad, 2005). Most interpretivists assume a subjectivist ontology which entails that reality and the individual who observe it cannot be separated (Weber, 2004). How we perceive reality and act on it are inextricably influenced by our life experience. In epistemology, interpretivists have a strong commitment to *verstehen* (the German word for understanding) and emphasise the role of humans as social actors in constructing meaning in the world. It is argued that we intentionally form our understanding by making sense of the world we live and work in. Interpretivists believe that the knowledge we develop is contextualised (Halldén et al., 2008), as it bears the mark of our particular culture, experience,

history, and so on. The same information can be interpreted by different individuals in different ways, and assume different meanings depending on the context in which the information is explored.

Moreover, interpretivism recognises the role of the researcher within the knowledge construction framework. Researchers are social actors themselves, with a pre-understanding of the phenomenon (Alvesson and Sköldberg, 2000). As frequently the aim of interpretivist research is to increase understanding or seek an explanation for some social phenomenon, the challenge of researchers is to keep an open mind and see the world from the research subjects' point of view. However, this is by no means easy. Scholars from symbolic interactionism suggest that we, as humans, are constantly interpreting the world around us and we adjust our views and actions as a result of our interaction with others in our socialising process. In this case, knowledge produced in a piece of research is co-constructed by the researcher and the researched.

Just as positivism is often associated with quantitative methods, interpretivism is linked to qualitative research (Denzin and Lincoln, 1995). With a view to producing 'thick description', interpretivist studies are conducted at a micro level to develop detailed and contextualised descriptions of certain social phenomena. This insightful understanding of a small part of society is used as a window to look into wider social issues. However, as interpretivist inquiries operate within a small number of observations to acquire in-depth knowledge, they are limited in their ability to generalise. Many interpretivists reject generalisation as a research goal. Guba and Lincoln (1982: 238) maintain that 'The aim of inquiry is to develop an idiographic body of knowledge. This knowledge is best encapsulated in a series of "working hypotheses" that describe the individual case. Generalisations are impossible since phenomena are neither time- nor context-free'. Scholars have since developed new criteria to assess interpretivist and qualitative research (see, for example, Symon and Cassell, 2012). We will elaborate on the issues of sampling and assessing research quality in the next two chapters.

### KEY CONCEPTS IN CHINESE: INTERPRETIVISM

解释主义提出很多与实证主义不同甚至相反的理论。解释主义的提倡者认为研究社会科学不应该用研究自然科学同样的方法。社会科学（包括管理学）在很大程度上是研究人们对事物的看法和观点，而不是一个事物本身。解释主义者大多接纳主观的存在论，认为社会上的事物存在于人们认知的层面。一些社会现象（如歧视）的存在是因人而异的。感受到其后果的人认为它存在，而感受不到的人则认为它不存在。所以‘真理’产生的过程跟认知这个事物的人有很大关联。解释主义同意主观的认识论，认为人们对事物的看法，解释跟个人的背景分不开。知识和理论的产生其实是我们对社会现象的解释。而这种解释，或我们对事情的感受与看法，总受到我们自身的文化、背景、生长的社会环境，历史环境的影响。这些都是唯心的。

解释主义者关心的是对社会现象进行深入的调查，了解事情的来龙去脉：现象为什么会产生，如何产生，对人们有何影响，人们的感受如何等。解释主义常从微观的角度研究，采用定性研究法，通过面谈，长期深入的观察等方法收集数据，提供解释。解释主义认为研究者在调研的过程不是被动、中立的。研究员本身对某件事物的看法是知识产生的一部分。

### 3.2.4 Pragmatism (实用主义)

After reading the above discussions, you may find it very difficult to completely agree with either an objective or a subjective ontology and either an objective or a subjective epistemology. This is exactly the argument of pragmatism. Some pragmatist researchers believe that it is futile to engage in endless debate between the positivists and the anti-positivists. The term pragmatism comes from the same Greek word which means action. It was also developed into other English words we use frequently, words such as 'practice' or 'practical'. This branch of philosophy originates in the work of some American philosophers, such as William James and John Dewey, as a way to escape the epistemological deadlock between the realist view and the relativist view. Pragmatists do not always have the same ontological perspective. Some, for example Peirce (1878/1992), appear to adopt a more realist stance, while others, such as Rorty (1980) and James (1975), reject any attempt to represent a world independent of possible human experience. In epistemology, or the theory of knowledge, pragmatists place an emphasis on practice. Pragmatists accept a view that our practical knowledge is greater than our theoretical knowledge, as any theory must arise out of practice and individual experience (Mounce, 2000). James (1975) argues that the truth of a belief lies in its consequences for experience. A belief can be seen as true if it enables us to anticipate further experience. However, when experience is insufficient to distinguish between two competing views of the world, we tend to accept the one that is more persuasive (Rorty et al., 2004).

In terms of doing research, pragmatists reject the notion that there are predetermined theories that depict reality. Nor do they believe people can construct meaning out of nothing (Rorty et al., 2004). Instead, pragmatists suggest that our research question determines the method we adopt. A researcher can have both objectivist and subjectivist epistemologies depending on what is being studied. In other words, there is no need to stick to one perspective, and it is perfectly acceptable to adopt variations in ontological and epistemological issues in different projects and sometime even in the same project. For example, some researchers use mixed methods – both quantitative and qualitative methods in one piece of research. We will return to the discussion of mixed methods in Chapter 4.

#### KEY CONCEPTS IN CHINESE: PRAGMATISM

实用主义起源于19世纪后期和20世纪初期几位美国哲学家的著作，主要倡议人包括查尔斯皮尔士，威廉詹姆斯和约翰杜威。实用主义打破了唯物论或唯心论的对立，认为这些争议都是次要的。有的实用主义者甚至认为哲学家们争论不休的存在论和认识论都是没有意义的。实用主义被认为是唯物，唯心论之间的折中或妥协的办法。实用主义既否定了实证主义的很多基本前提，即任何事物都有不受人思想控制的规律，做

*(Continued)*



研究就是要找出这些规律。但实用主义也否定了极端唯心主义，即真理只存在于每人的意识形态里。实用主义者在存在观上接受多元论，即社会上有些概念是客观存在的，有些是主观存在。但哪些是主观，哪些是客观的其实我们也不一定知道。因此，他们的认识论也接受主、客两种观点。

在学术研究上，实用主义强调两点。第一，研究的问题或对象决定研究的方式。如果你研究的是客观存在的事物，那可以用客观，中立的方法，如做试验，发问卷等。但如果你研究的是意识形态上的问题，如人的情感，对事物的态度等，就要用感性的方法，如通过深入的访谈，研究个人背后的故事或其感想等。第二，实用主义认为即便有客观真理的存在，这些真理也必定来源于人们实践的经验。杜威提倡的现实主义提别强调抽象的理论和个人经验，反思之间达成平衡。要判断一种理论的‘好’与‘不好’，就要看其是否有实用价值。对于某种知识，不管它是用哪种方法论发展出来的，只要是有用的就是‘真理’。这有如中文里常说的‘不管黑猫还是白猫，能抓老鼠的就是好猫’。

因为实用主义强调理论的实践价值，所以对管理科学的研究起了重要的贡献。实用主义也受到一定的批评。反对者认为实用主义太过讲究实际效果，其实是功利主义。有些理论可能短期内不一定有很强的实用效果，但不见得是没用的。而且，有用与否有时是因人而异。我们不能否定一些真理的存在，只因为它们对我们没用。

### 3.3 RESEARCH APPROACHES

As we suggest in Chapter 2 and throughout this book, your research should be underpinned by a body of existing knowledge and involve a set of theories. Although you may learn your theories and methods from separate courses, there is interplay between theory and method (Dubois and Gibbert, 2010). Van Maanen et al. (2007) make this explicit when they suggest that ‘it is our stand that theory and method are – or should be – highly interrelated in practice. Theories without methodological implications are likely to be little more than idle speculation with minimal empirical import. And methods without theoretical substance can be sterile, representing technical sophistication in isolation’ (pp. 1145–6). While the links between theory, method and empirical phenomena are crucial, in practice not every piece of research draws on the same amount of theories at the design stage of research. The amount of existing knowledge and theories available in your topic and the extent to which you are clear about the theories at the beginning often inform the choice of your research approaches. In this section, we explain three research approaches, namely deduction (演绎法), induction (归纳法) and abduction (溯因法), and the implications of adopting each approach in relation to developing context-related knowledge. (See Table 3.1.)

#### 3.3.1 Deduction

The deductive approach (or top-down approach) owes much to positivism and Popper’s (1959) falsificationism. As you may have guessed, it is related to the use of quantitative methods. Some researchers also adopt a case study method – see, for example, Yin (2014). Popper famously

**Table 3.1** Comparison of research approaches

Research approach	Philosophy	Knowledge in relation to context
Deduction	Positivism Realism	Context-free knowledge, context-embedded knowledge
Induction	Interpretivism	Context-specific knowledge
Abduction	Critical realism Pragmatism	Context-embedded knowledge, context-specific knowledge

proposes his hypothetico-deductive method, in which he argues that researchers should try to disprove (rather than prove) their theories. He suggests that no matter how many instances we observe that could confirm our theory, it is always possible that the next observation could contradict the theory. In other words, we can never be sure that our past experience would be adequate to predict future instances of the phenomenon we are interested in. As such, we might probably never be able to prove our theory to be true. What we could do, instead, is to falsify it. Science advances as we get closer to the truth by removing the errors.

Popper further suggests that in order to make this process operationalised, we should develop hypotheses – a set of unproven assertions about the relationship between the concepts (Gill and Johnson, 2010) – and test them. The process of deductive logic is presented in Gill and Johnson (2010), where they outline five steps: (1) theory – deduction starts from the development of a conceptual and theoretical framework or model; (2) hypothesis formulation and operationalisation – following the deductive logic and review of literature, researchers formulate speculative statements that make precise predictions about what should happen. Theoretical concepts are tested through a set of measurements; (3) data are collected to test the hypotheses and by implication the underlying theory; (4) if the theory survives empirical testing, it becomes facts of reality; (5) otherwise, the theory should be adjusted. Details of developing and testing hypotheses will be presented in Chapters 4 and 8.

The deductive approach has been highly popular among scholars conducting research related to China. Quer and colleagues' review of 180 empirical articles in leading international journals in the areas of business and management in China show that an overwhelming 82.2% of the articles adopted a deductive/quantitative approach (Quer et al., 2007). In a similar vein, but more specific to the HRM discipline, Cooke (2009) analyses 230 China-related papers and concludes that quantitative methods, typically in the form of a questionnaire survey, dominate data collection. In developing global management knowledge, the deductive approach might be particularly useful in context-embedded research, i.e. research that uses a nation's social, cultural, legal and economic variables as predictors and organisational attributes as dependent variables (Cheng, 1994). Context-embedded research starts with Western theories and models and incorporates contextual factors of China, such as collectivism or *guanxi*, in an attempt to modify or extend existing theoretical



predictions in relation to the dependent variables. This type of research generates context-bounded models (Tsui, 2004). If the findings show that the theories are insensitive to the context, this research could also generate context-free or universal knowledge.

### KEY CONCEPTS IN CHINESE: DEDUCTION

演绎法和归纳法是西方研究方法论里最普遍的两种方法。演绎法遵循实证主义和证伪论的原则，其目的是要找出事物之间的因果关系。采取演绎研究方法的人一般也采用定量研究法。但也有一部分人采用案例分析法。演绎法推理的过程是先提出理论，再用实例或数据来验证该理论。具体操作包含几个重要的步骤：第一是从现有理论为出发点，逐步推论并提出一些假设（即新理论），如提高工资会提高员工的积极性。第二是找出测量主要概念的方法。第三是收集和分析数据。第四是用结果证实或否定该假设。演绎法经常被认为是前半段难，后半段易。做研究时，开始要大量阅读文献，参考前人的理论从而提出自己的理论框架，所以前期工作量较大。演绎法强调研究过程必须很严谨，数据必须有效和可靠，这样得出的结果才能够作出科学预见。

演绎法有一定的局限性。第一，研究的过程不够灵活。由于在前半段已经提出了理论框架和假设，后半段就很难再加进新的东西。即便研究人员后来有新的想法或发现更有趣的现象，也只能放弃。第二，演绎法有一定的风险。有人认为演绎法就跟钓鱼一样，提出的理论和假设‘被证实最好，被否定了就拉倒’。如果所有的假设都被否定了，则浪费了时间和精力。

### Example 3.1

#### DEDUCTIVE RESEARCH

An example of using deduction to conduct context-embedded research is the study of high-performance work systems (HPWS) and organisational performance in China by Zhang and Morris (2014). Their literature review starts from Western notions of HRM and performance, and then focuses on HPWS and employee outcomes, and their relevance in China. On this basis, six hypotheses were proposed. Data collection involved a survey of HR directors/managers of firms in Beijing. Measurements were adopted from existing research from the West. Data analysis shows that five hypotheses are supported, which thus confirms that these Western theories are applicable to the Chinese firms.

### 3.3.2 Induction

While deduction starts from theory and later uses empirical data to prove or disprove the theory, the logic of induction is almost the reverse. To put it simply, the inductive (or bottom-up) approach attempts to build theory based on empirical observations in the world. Historically, the debates between supporters of the two camps have been longstanding and often involve

natural science pitted against social science researchers. Research using an inductive approach in social science shares at least three characteristics.

First, many inductive researchers challenge the idea of establishing a theory upfront (Gill and Johnson, 2010). They argue that it is pointless to give explanations of social phenomena based on speculation. Instead, theories developed out of real-life experience are more useful and accessible to practice. They also oppose relying too much on literature, because existing theories limit our imagination and negatively affect the novelty of research. Researchers should conduct research without a priori constructs, as this allows them to let concepts emerge from the data rather than being constrained by previous theory (Randall and Mello, 2012). Perhaps the most famous method developed out of the inductive tradition is grounded theory, which is designed to allow theories to emerge from the data (Glaser and Strauss, 1967), as will be discussed in Chapter 4.

Second, proponents of induction reject the deductive approach of attempting to uncover the causal relationships between variables. Researchers following this tradition often subscribe to an interpretivist philosophy and see human interpretation of the social world as a crucial step in developing knowledge. Thus, they argue that an inductive approach allows them to establish insightful understanding about those situations leading to human actions, and the subjective dimension of human action, such as people's intentions, motives, attitudes and beliefs.

The third characteristic lies in the methods that researchers use for data collection and analysis. Proponents of induction are critical of deduction, which tends to follow a rigid methodology that leaves little room for alternative explanations. They argue that, at best, researchers using a deductive approach can only find what they seek (to prove or reject a hypothesis). The inductive approach that relies on the qualitative method of data collection and analysis, on the contrary, enables a more flexible structure to allow a potential change of research emphasis as the study progresses. However, every piece of research should have a focus. To solve this problem, research adopting induction usually forms research questions at the beginning and uses them to guide the process.

The inductive approach has gained increasing recognition in the researching-China community since the mid-1990s, as many researchers quickly realise that general knowledge developed in the West provides limited or little explanation of local concepts that are deeply embedded in Chinese culture and society. Chinese culture is fundamentally different to that of the USA or Europe. The search for a theoretical framework to research phenomena unique to the Chinese context (guanxi, Confucius ethics, yin-yang, job allocation in state-owned enterprises, etc.) in the literature often proves fruitless. In their article on the methodological challenges of researching in China, Stening and Zhang (2007) point out that 'Western conceptualisations and measurements of Chinese culture are inadequate and flawed insofar as they take, among other things, a rational perspective rather than one based on contradictions and process' (p. 123). Thus, there have been a number of calls for context-specific or indigenous Chinese research that leads to context-bound knowledge (Meyer, 2006; Quer et al., 2007; Tsui, 2004). Tsui (2004: 501) defines indigenous research as that which 'involves the highest degree of contextualisation or research that does not aim to test an existing

theory but to derive new theories of the phenomena in their specific contexts'. Developing such highly contextualised knowledge is certainly the strength of inductive research. While it is considered good practice to start with a review of the literature, researchers generally go beyond the boundary of existing conceptual frameworks. Western theories are treated as preliminary and their limited explanatory power is indicated right at the beginning. Most of this type of research focuses on a unique social phenomenon and uses a small sample with unique attributes to build new theories based on observations.

### KEY CONCEPTS IN CHINESE: INDUCTION

归纳法的推理逻辑与演绎法相反。提倡归纳法的人认为理论的发展应该从社会现象为出发点，通过深入的观察，用各种研究方法收集数据，最后归纳总结出理论。由于理论来源于经验和实际操作，这样研究出来的理论知识才有实际意义，而且可行性较高。大部分采用归纳法的人倾向于接受解释主义的哲学思想，认为社会概念跟物理概念不同，人有思想，而物体没有，所以不能用同样的方法研究。社会概念存在于人们的主观意识中。人们对这些概念的认识很多时候是既模糊又复杂。因此社会概念不能简化为测量，并采用数学的方式分析。支持归纳法的人一般采用定性研究法，虽然他们刚开始也参考文献，以增加对该研究课题的了解，但不会提出一个完整的理论模型。归纳研究法是上半段容易，下半段难。前期对文献的回顾是点到为止，提出研究的问题即可。后期收集数据（通常采用访谈，观察，去现场亲身体会等方式），分析数据（如逐字逐句地分析访谈的文字稿），到最后归纳出理论的工作量较大。

归纳法也有局限性。首先，归纳法强调质量而非数量。追求对现象进行深入的调查，所以只能研究较少的样本或人。因此很多人质疑归纳法提出的理论，认为这种理论没有合法性和广泛性。其次，归纳法也有风险。由于研究的过程较灵活，涉及的面广，有时容易迷失方向，失去重心。所谓面面俱到，其实是面面不到。

### Example 3.2

#### INDUCTIVE RESEARCH

One such indigenous study conducted in the Chinese context using an inductive approach is Woodhams et al. (2015), who examined female managers' careers. After discussing the distinctive social and cultural environments in which Chinese women develop their careers, the authors question the suitability of applying Western theories in China. To obtain authentic understanding, the authors conducted 20 interviews with female managers who held senior and executive positions. Data were analysed using two culture-specific factors: the system of gender relations and the culture of collectivism. Using this framework, the authors developed a four-fold taxonomy that captures Chinese women's career orientations.

### 3.3.3 Abduction

Both inductive and deductive approaches assume that the relationship between theory and empirical data, or vice versa, is one-directional. One apparent issue when conducting research is that there is interplay between theory and the empirical world. Abduction has been presented as an approach that could combine the advantages of both deduction and induction. Originating from the philosophical position of pragmatism, the abductive approach has also become popular with critical realists and moderate constructionists. Järvensivu and Törnroos (2010: 102) discuss the use of research approaches in relation to researchers' ontological and epistemological positions:

Naïve realists usually adopt a deductive research process, wherein researchers begin with theoretical argumentation and test these arguments with empirical observations. In contrast, naïve relativists often start with subjective accounts of lived experiences and from thereon build theory inductively. Critical realism and moderate constructionism are more in the middle and therefore adopt often a research logic based on abduction.

Proponents of this approach suggest a mutually dependent relationship between theory and empirical phenomena in research. The binary of theoretical insights and empirical observations should be treated simultaneously. It is argued that theoretical frameworks evolve as researchers examine data from the empirical world. As such, researchers should travel 'back-and-forth' (Dubois and Gibbert, 2010) to develop better understanding, so as to provide better explanations of the social phenomena as the research progresses. Typically, a study using abduction starts from social phenomena which lack applicable theories. A small number of core concepts are identified to set boundaries to the research (Friedrichs and Kratochwil, 2009). Researchers collect observations while applying concepts from existing knowledge. Instead of trying to impose a theoretical framework (deduction) or abstracting theories from observations (induction), researchers could synergise compatible theories or redefine the boundaries, such as changing core concepts, to create a better 'match' between theory and data. Using abduction is not completely risk-free. Setting core concepts at the beginning might suppress the generation of new theories. Moreover, researchers may unintentionally seek out theoretical frameworks that fit the empirical data and thus omit other perspectives (Järvensivu and Törnroos, 2010).

Abduction can be an important approach in developing context-embedded knowledge and even context-specific knowledge in China. The Chinese belief system is flexible and can synthesise what often appear to be competing, paradoxical or even contradictory notions (Warner, 2010). Arguably, this gives researchers the opportunity to 'abduct' Western theories and use them to provide theoretical depth for their studies in the Chinese context. Thus, abductive studies often take Western theory as a starting point, but go on to explore contextual factors in detail. These studies provide continuity between 'general knowledge' and contextualised knowledge and are seen as a middle way of

developing global knowledge. Many scholars use it to expand Western theory and at the same time identify knowledge that is unique to the Chinese context.

### KEY CONCEPTS IN CHINESE: ABDUCTION

溯因法被认为是演绎和归纳二法之间的中间途径。溯因法来源于皮尔斯提出的实用主义，认为社会科学研究的既不是事物之间的因果关系，也不是人们主观的意识。溯因法提出社会科学的目的应该是给社会概念和事件提供解释和说明原因。一件事情的发生有多种可能的原因。只要解释合理，这些原因都可以接受，所以没必要追求事物单一的‘定律’。在研究方法上，溯因法强调理论和研究数据（包括文字，图像，等）之间的双向关系。具体操作灵活，研究员对某个社会现象产生兴趣，一般从现有文献开始，从现有的理论对其提出解释，然后从现实中收集数据看这个解释是否成立。采用溯因法的人大多用定性研究法，如用访谈或案例分析等收集数据资料，所以过程比演绎法灵活并容许新概念的出现。当研究员在研究的过程中发现之前提出的理论不足以完全解释所有的数据时，可以再去找别的理论甚至提出全新的理论来解释事件发生的原因。

溯因法有几个好处。第一，研究员可以以现有理论出发点来研究新的课题，这样比较有的放矢，不容易跑题。第二，有些关于中国的课题只有很少的参考文献，所以从西方的理论着手可操作性较强。第三，溯因法比演绎法灵活，但比归纳法有章法。溯因法有一定的难度和风险。第一，因为研究员要不断地在理论和数据之间反复探讨，阅读量和工作量很大。第二，毕竟是从现有理论入手，有时很难发展出创新的理论。

### Example 3.3

#### ABDUCTIVE RESEARCH

An example that utilises this approach is the study conducted by Yan and Gray (1994). The authors began with an interest in the issue of bargaining power in Sino-foreign joint ventures (the social phenomenon). The three core concepts (bargaining power, management control and performance) came from the existing literature (deduction). Through an abductive process, the study offers an expanded and revised model after four in-depth case studies. The newly proposed model includes several factors that are based on Chinese culture.

### FURTHER READING

Easterby-Smith, M., Thorpe, R. and Jackson, P.R. (2015) *Management and Business Research*. London: Sage. Chapter 3 provides a useful overview and mapping for a range of major research philosophies and paradigms.

- Johnson, P. and Duberley, J. (2000) *Understanding Management Research: An Introduction to Epistemology*. London: Sage. At PhD level, this book provides an excellent overview of different philosophical positions adopted in social science. Compared with other books about philosophy, this book is easy to read.
- Saunders, M., Lewis, P. and Thornhill, A. (2015) *Research Methods for Business Students*. New York: Pearson Education. Chapter 4 provides a brief but accessible discussion on research philosophies and approaches.

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