

**A CRITIQUE OF THE ADEQUACY OF POSITIVIST AND INTERPRETIVIST  
VIEWS OF ORGANISATIONAL STUDIES FOR UNDERSTANDING THE 21<sup>ST</sup>  
CENTURY ORGANISATION(S)**

**Idika Awa Uduma<sup>1</sup>, and Waribugo Sylva<sup>2</sup>**

<sup>1</sup>Department of Marketing, University of Port Harcourt, Nigeria;

<sup>2</sup> Department of Management, University of Port Harcourt, Nigeria.

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**ABSTRACT:** *This paper theoretically evaluated the adequacy or otherwise of the Positivist/Managerialist approach to organisational study in understanding organisations. The review of related literature revealed that positivism and managerialism through their scientific and quantitative characteristics help organisational researchers achieve an objective understanding of organisations which enables managers to make informed predictions about future expectations of business activities but the approaches do not take cognizance of the human experiences and subjective influences which more often than not exact great impact on organisational performance thereby making the decisions made following the outcome of positivist-managerialist oriented studies unrealistic and basically insufficient for understanding 21<sup>st</sup> century organisations. On the contrary, the literature shows that interpretivists/critics argue that organisational processes and activities can only be understood and interpreted in the light of the context in which they happen and by taking into account the subjective characteristics of the actors and conclusions are drawn from the real life experiences and context-based perspective of those actors. However the findings based on the interpretivist approach is ineffective for making predictions about future events and therefore often seen by managers as absolutely unnecessary and practically irrelevant for achieving predetermined goals. It was therefore concluded that none of the alternative approaches on their own can lead to a complete understanding of organisations hence the paper suggests a mixed method such that the scientific, quantitative qualities of positivism can complement the subjective, qualitative qualities of interpretivism and vice versa, for a better understanding of organisations while the search for the one-best approach continues.*

**KEYWORDS:** Positivism, Managerialism, Interpretivism, Critics, Mixed Method.

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## **INTRODUCTION**

In the literature on organisational studies, two dominant philosophies namely Positivism and Interpretivism take centre stage on discussions on understanding organisations. The positivists believe that good and reliable understanding of organisations can only be achieved by studying the organisation activities scientifically using quantitative techniques while the interpretivist argue that because human beings are involved in organisational activities, understanding organisations can better be achieved through qualitative evaluation of the practical experiences of the organisational subjects. The argument of the positivist is based on the premise that organisational realities exist separate from the organisational actors. Hence they argue that to understand the organisation, the researcher should adopt an objective, quantitative and scientific approach. The essence according to them is to achieve results that will as much as possible be free from the values and subjective characteristics of the organisational subjects. The positivist approach has some obvious benefits. Some of the major benefits, for instance,

include helping managers to be able to make predictions about future events and outcomes. To ensure that findings of the study is as objective as possible in order to help managers take informed decisions. To ensure that the findings obtained from studies can be replicated with a reasonable assurance of achieving a consistent outcome in subsequent times thereby ensuring that the solutions adopted as a result of the finding is reasonably reliable. But managers' practical experience has shown that the positivists mainly describe the problem and the likely causes without any attempt to prescribe solutions to the problems thereby leaving the managers almost as confused as they met them and sometimes even worse. Also positivism has been criticised for its inability to consider the characteristics of the human elements in the organisation and has been labelled "unrealistic".

However the interpretivist school of thought argue that organisational realities are not separate from the actors. They see organisational realities as being socially constructed by the interactions of the organisational elements. For the interpretivist, what constitutes a good understanding of the organisation can only be achieved subjectively using qualitative techniques. The 21<sup>st</sup> century organisations have some peculiar characteristics different from the traditional type of organisations. A typical organisation in the 21<sup>st</sup> century is more inclined towards digitization of organisational processes and usually tends to emphasize employee empowerment, autonomy, and self-regulation thereby undermining the position of managers in the organisations. In the light of these distinctive characteristics of the 21<sup>st</sup> century organisation, it becomes imperative to examine how a good understanding of organisations could be achieved. Though there is a long and clear history about organisational study in the literature, the reality on ground still necessitates the fundamental question: "what constitutes relevant research questions, foundational assumptions, viable methodologies, compelling evidence, and larger objectives for organisational inquiry?" (Wicks & Freeman 1998). In other words, it is still not clear from the literature what constitutes the best approach to understanding organisations, especially in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. This study is therefore aimed at evaluating the adequacy or otherwise of the positivist and managerialist views of organisational studies in the achievement of an effective understanding of organisations in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. To achieve the purpose of the study, we examined the alternative concepts and philosophies about understanding organisations including positivism and managerialism on the one hand and interpretivism and critics, on the other hand. Attempts will also be made to examine how these philosophies could affect an effective understanding of organisations in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. The remaining parts of the paper are structured as follows: the next section examined the concepts and nature of positivism and managerialism, this is followed by an evaluation of alternative approaches namely, interpretivism and critics. Thereafter, the nature of 21<sup>st</sup> century organisations will be examined and attention will be paid to how the different philosophies influence the understanding of a 21<sup>st</sup> century organisation and conclusions will be drawn based on the review of literature.

## **POSITIVISM AND MANAGERIALISM**

Positivism generally refers to the view that organisational realities have objective existence and could be studied scientifically using quantitative techniques. Positivism started from the 17th century Enlightenment, in the United States during the Progressive Era when Woodrow Wilson wrote the first essay on the study of public administration (Al-Habil, 2011). According to Fox and Miller (1998) cited in Al- Habil (2011), "positivism can be defined as research approaches that employ empirical methods, make extensive use of quantitative analysis, or

develop logical calculi to build formal explanatory theory". Grey (2013) sees positivism as the belief that organisation theory is, or will inevitably become, a science just like the natural sciences. He argues that positivism majorly views organisational reality as being observable and objective which exists independent of organisation theory. The underlying premise of the positivist view is that the task of researchers is to find reality rather than to create or interpret it. They tend to describe realities as they exist without any attempt to find out what corporate managers should do about them and why (Wicks and Freeman, 1998). Positivism adopts quantitative research techniques (Jean Lee 1992), which is associated with inferential statistics, hypothesis testing, mathematical analysis, and experimental and quasi experimental design (Lee 1991). It posits that the study of organizations can occur through a value-free scientific approach which is qualitatively superior to non-scientific methods. Astley (1985) and Astley and Zammuto (1992) suggest that positivism is characterized by "a conventional model of scientific progress as a cumulative discovery of objective truth" and the belief that "knowledge grows linearly as new data are added to the existing stock of research findings". At its core, positivism sidesteps ethics and mainly advocates the study of organisational activities from scientific point of view. Brian (1975) cited in Al-Habil (2011) claim that positivism introduced the use of scientific methods of research. He argues that adoption of positivism generates knowledge that will support solving socio-economic problems in the most objective manner and sees the positivist approach as the only plausible method that could eliminate arbitrary decision-making and also help in dealing with values-laden or selfish interests in decision making. However irrespective of how impeccably efficacious scientific knowledge appears to be, studies and experience have shown that science is inherently bedevilled with a plethora of uncertainties and controversies. By not exploring the value of assumptions and subjective implications of their work, researchers have overlooked the responsibility of considering the ethical concerns of their findings and conclusions thereby running the risk of making their work "a naive tool for advancing an unquestioned administrative conception of social order and function" (Alvesson, 2011). For instance, applying positivist method to the study of leadership in organisations, Sashkin and Garland (1979) cited in Alvesson and Spicer (2012) argue that by all sense of fair judgement, the application of scientific knowledge in the study of leadership has not lived up to the expectation of producing universally acceptable, practically useful, and widely applicable principles and concepts. Also Robert (1947) in Al-Habil (2011) rejected the positivist approach and argued that value-free science is impossible. This implies that there are almost always some subjective reasons behind our decisions and actions.

Managerialism, on the other hand, refers to concentration of managers' interests on how organizations are managed, stressing the role and accountability of individual managers (Lawler & Hearn, 1995). Managerialism is a sociological philosophy that is anchored on the belief that the major interest of the management is how to manage the organisation's human and material resources most effectively and efficiently in order to achieve set goals and objectives. In their study of communication research, Heracleous and Hendry (2000) found, among other things, that managerialist research follows traditional communication studies thereby focusing on how the effects of the actions of the study subjects in relation to the effectiveness of communication might be manipulated by the author in order to achieve predetermined goals. According to Grey (2013) the managerialist are mostly interested in how to manage organisations more effectively. The implication of this, he argues, is that they share both the political and intellectual interests of managers. Grey further submits that the managerialists are often positivists since they are likely to provide fact-based, reliable organisational predictions which could be very useful to the managers. However he argues that despite their high sounding and soothing claims of supporting achievement of organisational

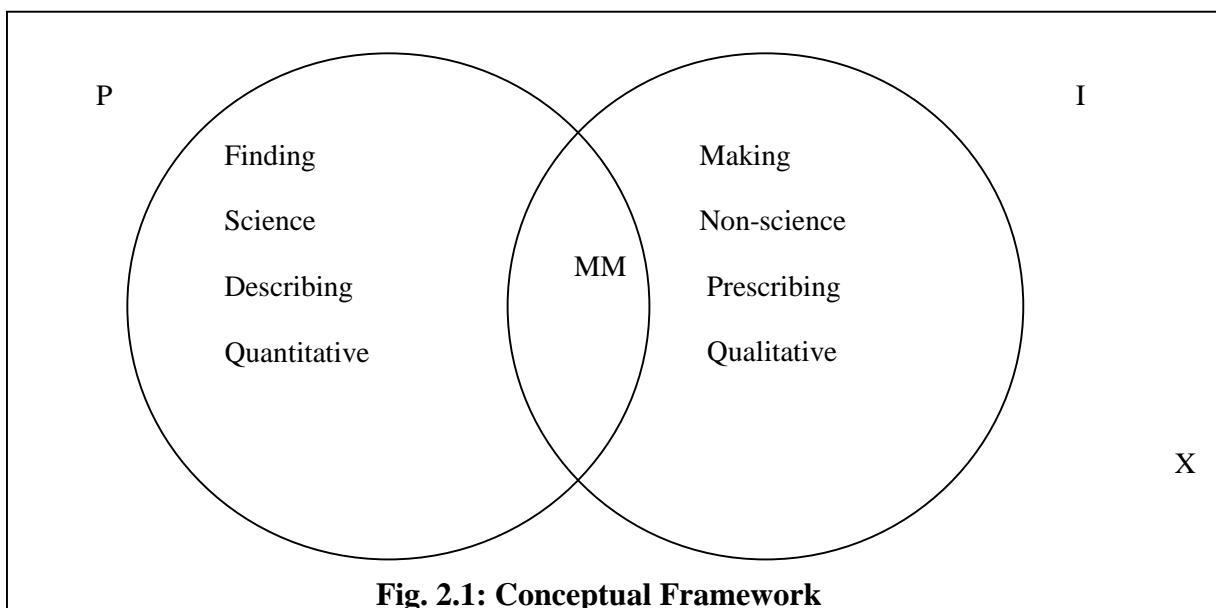
goals and objectives, the positivist- managerialist group have consistently failed to come up with anything of much use to the managers which create the need for an alternative approach. In this paper, the positivist- managerialist group were commonly referred to as the positivist.

## **INTERPRETIVISTS AND CRITICS**

Burrell and Morgan (1979) ushered in a wave of attempts to characterize Paradigms employed in organization theory. The phenomenal study by Burrell and Morgan in which they introduced a four-by-four matrices including two opposing perspectives on knowledge creation: subjectivity versus objectivity as well as two alternative perspectives on the usage of knowledge either for the purpose of maintaining the status quo or to create desirable change in the organisation namely regulation versus radical change (Lewis and Grimes, 1999). The paradigms which are aimed at fostering better understanding of organisations from different views of the social world have opened up theorists to the assumptions and practices in organisational theory, and provided grounds for possible agreements among scholars and ultimately legitimized less mainstream alternative perspectives to the study of organisations. The paradigms including the functionalist, the interpretivist, the radical humanist, and the radical structuralist, provide a framework for appreciating as well as understanding different perspectives of organisational behaviour (Hassard 1991). The functionalist paradigm is the dominant framework for the conduct of academic sociology and the study of organisations. It is firmly rooted in the “sociology of regulation” and approaches its subject matter from an “objectivist point of view”. On the other hand, Interpretivist paradigm views the social world as an emergent social process which is created by the individuals concerned. Social reality is little more than a network of assumptions and intersubjectively shared meanings. Furthermore, the radical humanists have much in common with the Interpretive Paradigm; however, its frame of reference is committed to a view of society which emphasises the importance of overthrowing or transcending the limitations of existing social arrangements. The Radical Structuralist, on their part, shares much in common with Functionalist Paradigm proponents. However, unlike the functionalist school, the radical structuralist is committed to radical change, emancipation, and potentiality, in an analysis which emphasises structural conflict, modes of domination, contradiction and deprivation. Focus is on structural relationships within a realist social world. Contrary to the claim by Brian (1975) cited in Al- Habil (2011) that “positivism is the only plausible method of inquiry...” the existence of these alternative paradigms justify the alternative methods of inquiry (Ahrens, Becker et al. 2008). However, this paper focused on interpretivism and critics as alternatives to positivism.

The development of the interpretive theory and qualitative research methods are traceable to the work of Wilheme Dilthey in the 19th century. Wilheme emphasized the significance of understanding and studying the lived experiences of people through their historical and social context based on the belief that the research in social sciences should explore the lived experiences in order to connect the particular actions under study to their social and historical aspects (Ritchie and Lewis, 2003 cited in Al- Habil 2011). The interpretivists, according to Grey (2013), deny the scientific view of organisations and maintain that organisational reality does not have an objective existence but is formed by the people and the organisation theory itself. He further argues that there are no laws to be discovered since the laws do not exist anywhere and which therefore means that making prediction in the light of non-existing law is not attainable. In the same vein, in the words of Grey and Willmott (2005) “there is no world out there ready to be mapped by a skilful cartographer but in the process of drawing a map, the

world is shaped". In a nutshell the position of the interpretivist could be summed up in the sentence, "All that there is exist as the outcome of interaction of humans with humans and/or objects" (Al-Habil, 2011). Interpretivism is a more subjective and qualitatively inclined approach whose view can help to acquire a better understanding of organisations from the standpoint of the practical experiences of organisational actors especially the workers. The interpretive approach favours qualitative research (Jean Lee 1992), and its associated with ethnography, hermeneutics, phenomenology, and case studies (Lee, 1991). Lewis and Grimes (1999), have observed that though functionalism-positivism remains dominant, theorists increasingly are adopting more critical and interpretive paradigms. The critics, according to Grey (2013), are more concerned with understanding the organisation as whole and tend to prefer the views, perceptions and interpretations of the employees on any matter to those of the managers. Paradoxically, Grey (2013) observed that the critics tend to provide some analytical account of organisations, which is recognisably about actual people in the organisation unlike the abstract statistical hypothesis testing of the positivist. They provide a practical account of organisational activities beyond the hypothetical generalizations of positivism by being cognizant of the value assumptions and implications of organisational studies (Wicks & Freeman, 1998). However, it has been argued that interpretive researchers do not offer a viable alternative to positivism because, in the final analysis, they still retain key positivist assumptions thereby embracing moral relativism that precludes the integration of ethics (Wicks & Freeman, 1998). To emerge as an alternative to positivism, the interpretivists should avoid emulating the attributes of the positivists and go beyond critique to policy and practice engagement (Parker, 2008). They should go beyond "bad leadership practice" identification and aim to create and support successful ethical frameworks for leadership (Alvesson and Spicer, 2012). Hence, because the critics do not provide necessary information for organisational predictions and control they tend to be seen as less useful to managers (Grey 2013). Hence the question still remains, "What is the best approach to understanding organisations in the light of the foregoing arguments?" In this essay, the interpretivist and critics were commonly referred to interpretivists.



**Fig. 2.1: Conceptual Framework**

Figure 2.1 above is a Venn diagram showing a diagrammatic representation of the conceptual framework of the study. As illustrated from the lettering of the diagram, the study of organisations has two opposing approaches including Positivism (P) and Interpretivism (I). The



thrust of positivism is encapsulated in the scientific approach to investigations which is fundamentally characterised by finding, science, describing and adoption of quantitative techniques. This approach has some undisputable advantages including ability to provide information that could help managers making predictions. However, the adoption of the positivist approach, according does not consider the practical experiences of the actors involved is generally has not been able to live up its expectations. The interpretivist approach, on the other hand, is adjudged to consider the experiences of the study subjects, say, employees but the outcome of the studies almost always does allow decision makers to make predictions. It argued in this study that the mixed method approach be adopted. This mixed method could be located at the intercept of cell P and I which is represented by "MM" in the diagram. The region marked with "X" in the diagram represents the unknown best approach in the study of organisations and it the suggestion for further studies.

## MIXED METHOD

The shortcomings of positivism led to the emergence of interpretivism as an alternative method of inquiry in the administrative sciences (Al-Habil 2011). Also, the inability of the interpretivists to produce useful information that could enable the managers to make predictions that will enhance the effective achievements of organisational goals and objectives (Grey 2013) has brought us to a dilemma. This traditional tension between the normative and the factual dimensions of interpretivist and positivist theories of research (Al- Habil 2011), informed the call by Gioia and Pitre (1990) cited in Lewis and Grime (1999) for metatriangulation: *a* strategy of applying a combination of different paradigms in the conduct of research in order to foster greater insight and creativity. For Kakkuri-Knuuttila, Lukka et al. (2008) the strict distinctions between objective and subjective approaches to research make no sense. They argued that social reality emerges from subjective understanding and is objectified through interaction. Also Armstrong (2008) asserts that the anti- positivism conventionally attributed to interpretivist approach is based on misunderstanding, and the distinction is not meaningful (Boland Jr 1989). Orthodoxy emerges from Heterodoxy and none can practically claim no relationship with the other, therefore the distinction between positivism and interpretivism is purely a core- peripheral one (Davis 2008), having no root or substance whatsoever. Both paradigms have their peculiar strengths as well as shortcomings therefore to take advantage of their strengths and also overcome the weaknesses, it is suggested that a mixture of the two approaches, which some authors have labelled pragmatism should be adopted. Pragmatism offers a very different interpretation. On the one hand, the pragmatists agree with the anti-positivists by rejecting the indispensability or privileged status of science which positivist tenaciously uphold while the interpretivists on the other hand generate a profound sense of liberation, but ultimately such acclaimed freedom is adjudged false and problematic and even more elusive especially in the context of 21<sup>st</sup> century organisations. It could be seen from the foregoing that science and all organization studies paradigms provide nothing but a partial and one-sided view of the phenomenon to which they are applied, which by extension reveal partial understanding or knowledge. Therefore it is the view of this paper that emphasis in the study of organisations should shift from finding the "right" paradigm (and/or metaphor) to finding lots of new and different paradigms that will foster our understanding of the organisation looking at each paradigm in the context it appeared and on its own merit. Indeed, by claiming that each paradigm is one-sided, partial, and subjective, anti-positivists have no real way to limit how many or what kinds of paradigms are used. Thus,

multiple perspectives are important in the study of organizations which will result in a better understanding and appreciation of the objective world (Wicks and Freeman, 1998). This is because the adoption of mixed approach to the study of organisations will lead to “a vibrant field, replete with diverse theoretical views that may enrich our understandings of organizational complexity, ambiguity, and paradox” (Lewis and Grimes 1999). However, until that is done the distinction between the two approaches which does not hold water despite their inherent and majorly self-acclaimed subjective and objective differences (Kakkuri-Knuuttila, Lukka et al. 2008) will continue to generate unnecessary scholarly debate and attention.

## CONCLUSION

This paper theoretically explored the adequacy or otherwise of the positivist and managerialist approaches to organisational studies. The review of related literature revealed that: The positivists believe that the organisational reality is objective and observable and can be studied scientifically and quantitatively. The outcomes of the positivist studies are generally expected to produce knowledge that will enable managers make predictions about future state of affairs of the organisations. But the critics have argued that the positivists have not been able to provide anything useful for the managers; hence the emergence of interpretivism which denies the possibility of scientific study of organisation on the grounds that such scientific studies cannot adequately take into account the practical experiences of the actors who are directly involved. The interpretivist, on the other hand, claim to study organisations subjectively by taking into consideration the lived experiences of the actors. However, though the interpretivist tend to provide facts and figures about the real-life experiences of the employees, their findings have been criticized for its inability to provide managers with requisite information that will help the managers to make predictions and be able to plan ahead especially in the high volatile and competitive 21<sup>st</sup> century business environment. Hence it has been argued that their findings are not useful (Grey, 2013), especially looking at it from the point of view of its ability to support managers in the achievement of predetermined goals and objectives. It is therefore concluded that none of the approaches standing alone can lead to a comprehensive understanding of organisations and consequently suggested that a mixture of the two approaches be adopted so they can complement their strengths and weaknesses since the difference between them lies at the choice of research methods not any substantive difference at the metatheoretical level (Weber 2004). However it is warned that this debate should not be closed prematurely (Kakkuri-Knuuttila, Lukka et al. 2008), hence it is recommended that the search for the best approach to the study and understanding of organisations should continue.

This study has both managerial and theoretical implications. It will help the management to better understand the strengths and weakness of the different approaches so they can adopt a mixed method to achieve increased effectiveness. To the theorists, it supports the call for a mixed approach by some authors and most importantly, the call for caution against early closure of the debate by Knuuttila, Lukka et al., because it is believed that knowledge is progressive and the best approach may be on the way.

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