

Research instruments and Interpretivism: Evidence of constructivism and co-constructivism

Prof Dr Allan S. Pillay

Research Department, Mancosa

Keywords

Research instruments;
Interpretivism;
Constructivism;
Co-constructivism.

Abstract

Research instruments designed for the interpretivist paradigm usually are based on interview questions that are posed essentially by the interviewer as the researcher with usually no opportunity given to interviewees to pose their own questions unless for clarification at the end of the interview. The interviewer's questions usually follow a one-way sequence from interviewer to interviewee. There is usually no evidence in the interview schedule of a co-construction of knowledge based on an interactive dialogue between the interviewer and interviewee. A study was conducted with 20 students who had completed their Doctoral and Masters degrees in either Business Administration or Business Management. The main objective of the study was to assess interview schedules, the methodology chapter and the analysis chapter for evidence of interactive dialogues between the interviewer and interviewee. The research approach was qualitative, and the findings of the study revealed that while every student used interview questions pertaining to interpretivism, none of them posed questions to the interviewees engaging them in interactive dialogues from a constructivist perspective. The conclusion for the study was that modernist standard interview schedules were designed with the lack of a post-modernist strategy of co-creation of knowledge between interviewer and interviewee, despite claims by the students of an interpretivist engagement. There is a need for such a shift that is true to the interpretivist paradigm of meaning-making through constructivism.

1. Introduction

Research instruments are a key development and expectation in the research process and, should be driven by the research paradigm chosen by the researcher. Quantitative research is supported by research instruments derived from the positivist paradigm which are usually questionnaires. Such

questionnaires, unlike interview schedules, are true to the positivist paradigm, e.g., the use of Likert Scale items. Qualitative research is conducted with interview schedules true to the interpretivist or phenomenological paradigm chosen by the researcher. Invariably, a constructivist engagement between the interviewer and interviewee true to the expectations of an interpretivist paradigm is expected to occur unless the interviewer engages in an interactive dialogue with the interviewee or conducts an interactive focus group interview based on such a dialogue. The idea is to enable a co-construction of knowledge between the interviewer and interviewee in which knowledge is co-constructed or co-created. This study is important because it will prompt interviewers and interviewees to be reflective during interviews.

Research Question: Do interviewers co-construct knowledge with interviewees? Do they develop interview schedules indicating such an engagement?

2. An overview of Interpretivism and Co-construction of knowledge

Interpretivism is an approach to social science that asserts that understanding the beliefs, motivations, and reasoning of individuals in a social situation is essential to decoding the meaning of the data that can be collected around a phenomenon (Confrey, 1992). Interpretivist approaches to research differ from the positivist paradigm in their emphasis on interpretation of qualitative data as opposed to quantitative data, and the focus on context. Constructivism is based on the principle that knowledge is a constructed entity (Alanazi, 2016). Constructivists are interested in how individual realities are constructed and as researchers believe that reality is socially constructed through an interactive dialogue between or among people in which meaning is co-constructed and co-created (Demsas and Luvigsen, 2016). The relevance of interpretivism, constructivism and co-construction of knowledge to the study is that interview schedules are designed with the intention of obtaining data from interviewees.

3. Purpose and objective of the study

The key objective of this paper is to explore the structure of interview schedules for evidence of a constructivist engagement between interviewer and interviewee in the co-creation of knowledge through interactive dialogues. The reason for the exploration and the purpose of the study is to establish whether masters and doctoral students studying for Business Administration and Business Management degrees develop and implement interview schedules designed for interpretivism from a constructivist perspective.

3.1 Outline of the structure of the paper

The paper commences with an Introduction, An overview of Interpretivism, Constructivism and Co-construction of knowledge, a purpose and objective of the study, a literature review, research

instruments investigated, the methodology used, data presentation and analysis, discussion, recommendations, conclusion and references used for the study..

4. Literature Review

4.1 Theoretical and Conceptual Frame

4.1.1 The Interpretivist Paradigm

The interpretive paradigm is concerned with understanding the world as it is from subjective experiences of individuals. Meaning oriented methodologies related to interpretivism and phenomenology, such as interviewing or participant observation, rely on a subjective relationship between the researcher and subjects, as opposed to measurement in positivist strategies. Interpretivism is more sensitive towards individual meanings and contribution, unlike positivism which is based on universal laws. Interpretivism as a paradigm assumes that reality is subjective and can differ considering different individuals and data is mainly dependent on a specific content, viewpoint and values (Saunders et al., 2012).

4.1.2 Constructivism

The notion of constructivism was developed by Ernst von Glasersfeld (1974) in the context of education and states that all knowledge is constructed rather than perceived through senses. Learners construct new knowledge on the foundations of their existing knowledge. Radical constructivism also argues that there is no way to directly access an objective reality, and that knowledge can only be understood through the individual's subjective interpretation of their experiences. This theory asserts that individuals create their own understanding of reality, and that their knowledge is always incomplete and subjective and needs to be developed further.

The voice of the researcher/interviewer and the voice of the interviewee are three different voices in an interview according to van der Walt (2020). He claims that every individual constructs their own model of the world from an individual constructivism perspective as opposed to social constructivism. In social constructivism, a social group of one kind or the other reach an agreement. There is consensus between or among them, knowing that human beings construct their own perceptions of the world (Owen, 2014). Co-construction or co-creation of knowledge through social constructivism is indeed a process emerging from interpretivism as a philosophical research paradigm. There is limited specific research optimizing the user experience (the interviewer) in interview dialogues. Understanding how to make these interactions more user-friendly, engaging, and effective is crucial. Hence, the concern of the researcher related to the need for a constructivist approach to interviewing, or to make room for it in a structured, semi-structured or open interview.

The process of the interviewer posing all the questions in an interview reflects or represents individual constructivism in which the interviewer becomes the sole beneficiary of knowledge from a modernist perspective typical of traditional interviewing. In such a process, the interviewee has no real voice since

Research instruments and Interpretivism: Evidence of constructivism and co-constructivism. Pillay, A.S. *Future X*, 26-33.

a social construction of knowledge occurs through an interactive dialogue between the interviewer and the interviewee and not through a one-way intervention directed to the interviewee. Such an interactive dialogue is rooted in postmodernism as a shift away from traditional interviewing.

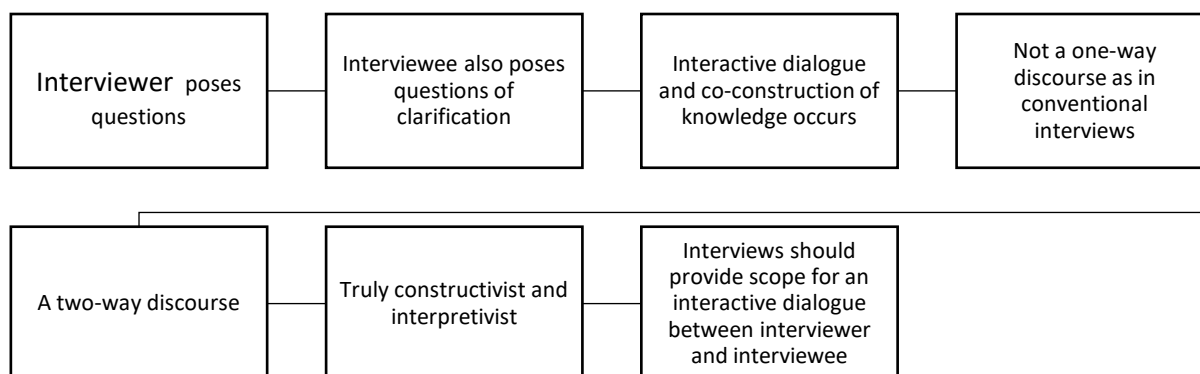


Figure 1: Flow diagram of a Constructivist process

4.1.3 Postmodernism

Interpretivism-constructivism is rooted in postmodernism. A postmodern orientation is polythetic as opposed to being monolithic and inclines the researcher towards listening to all voices concerned as opposed to being monolithic. An assumption of postmodernism is that social life should be fundamentally conceived as the negotiation of meanings (Barrat, 2009). In the current thesis the tendency of the interviewer to dominate the discourse in planning interview schedules/guides so that the interviewee is marginalised and is left with no voice in the discourse is the key issue under study. The idea is to break the tendency of modernistic approaches to research and engage in a post-modernistic approach to interviews by giving the interviewee a voice.

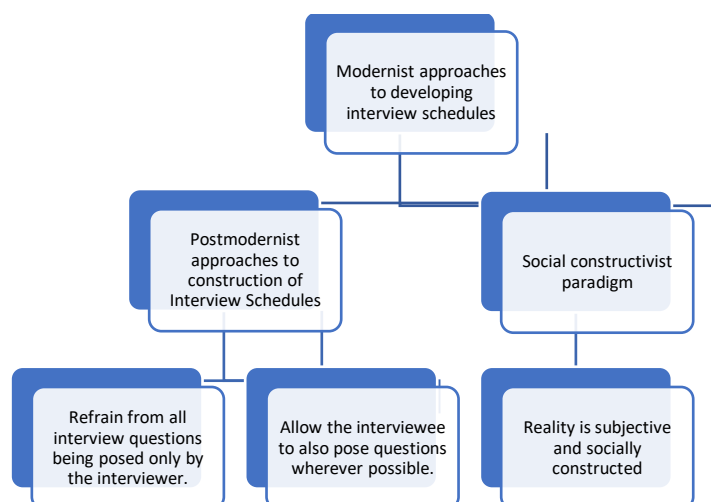


Figure 2: From a modernist to a post-modernist perspective of conducting interviews

5. Research Instruments

Research instruments are a key development and expectation in the research process and should be driven by the research paradigm chosen by the researcher. Quantitative research is supported by research instruments derived from the positivist paradigm which are usually questionnaires. Such questionnaires, unlike interview schedules, are true to the positivist paradigm, e.g., the use of Likert Scale Items.

A structured interview is a qualitative research method commonly applied in survey research. The aim of this approach is to ensure that each interview is presented with exactly the same questions in the same order. Such interviews usually do not allow for interactive dialogues. Unstructured interviews, also called non-directive interviews, refer to an interview concept without any set format in which questions are not predetermined so that the lack of structure enables the interviewer to pose questions which come to his or her mind on the spot. A semi-structured interview is a qualitative research method that combines a predetermined set of open questions (questions that prompt discussion) with an opportunity for the interviewer to explore particular themes or responses further.

Qualitative research is conducted with interview schedules true to the interpretivist or phenomenological paradigm chosen by the researcher. However, as indicated in the theoretical frame presented above, there is a tendency for such schedules to be dominated by the interviewer, leaving the interviewee with little or no opportunity to engage in interactive dialogues with the interviewer. Such interactive dialogues can be developed through the use of informal participatory conversations that are richer than the structured components of the interview (Swain and King, 2022; Rutakumwa et al., 2020).

6. Methodology

Masters dissertations and doctoral theses were read in relation to the methodology employed and especially the research philosophy declared. There was a document analysis of the proposed research instruments for qualitative research in the form of semi-structured, structured interview and semi-structured interview schedules. In the process, evidence of interview questions provoking interactive dialogues between interviewer and interviewee was sought. Analysed excerpts of transcripts were also scrutinised for recordings of interactive dialogues that were incidental to responses to interview questions, yet with pertinent evidence of constructivism and co-construction/co-creation of knowledge provoked by interviewee stimulation of an interactive dialogue with the interviewer.

6.1 Data Presentation and Analysis

There was a document analysis of the proposed research instruments for qualitative research in the form of semi-structured, structured and open-ended interview schedules. Evidence of interview questions

provoking interactive dialogues between interviewer and interviewee was sought. Analysed excerpts of transcripts were also scrutinised for recordings of interactive dialogues that were incidental to responses to interview questions, yet with pertinent evidence of constructivism and co-construction/co-creation of knowledge provoked by interviewee stimulation of an interactive dialogue with the interviewer. The key objectives of the research were fulfilled never-the-less.

Student 1: A Doctoral Student: The research study was positioned and viewed through the lenses of interpretivism as the research questions posed sought to understand why and how state-subsidized independent schools continue in operation and remain financially sustainable or non-sustainable in their operations even though such schools experience challenges in financial management that was influenced by several factors that the study explored. The student presents responses to her search for information from the literature pertaining to Interpretivism and interactive dialogues:

The assertion made by Thanh and Thanh (2015) suggests that interpretive researchers have access to a reality that is socially construed through language, consciousness and shared meanings.

According to Wahyuni (2012), interpretivists believe that reality is constructed by social actors and peoples' perceptions of it. This belief infers that reality is better appreciated through interaction and dialogue with the participants that have lived this experience.

According to Rosenthal (2016) in-depth interviews involve the posing of open-ended questions and follow-up probes designed to obtain an in-depth understanding of participants' experiences, perceptions, opinions, feelings, and knowledge.

In-depth interviews allowed the participant to communicate much more freely in relation to an interpretive paradigm and to provide more detailed descriptions through an interactive dialogue. (Walle, 2015).

The student was able to co-construct knowledge with a participant from an interpretivist perspective during the interview by engaging from a perspective of the social construct in the way the questions were structured and asked. There was evidence of co-construction of knowledge when an interviewee working for the Gauteng Department of Education corrected her views on issues related to independent schools from a departmental perspective. This was a good example of co-creation of knowledge true to interpretivism and constructivism, provoking an interactive dialogue at the end of the interview when the participant attempted to correct a view of the interviewer during a process of co-construction.

Student 2: A Doctoral Student: He claimed that he followed an interpretivist paradigm and indicated in his methodology that he acknowledged the role of constructivism in developing his interview schedule. However, there was no evidence of an interactive dialogue in his interview schedule and findings from the data obtained from his structured interview schedule.

Students 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8, 9, 10, 11, 12, 13, 14, 15, 16, 17, 18, 19, 20: MBA/MBM students: Some of the students presented semi-structured interview schedules while others presented structured interview

schedules. There was no evidence of a co-construction of knowledge through interactive dialogues true to a constructivist approach.

7. Discussion

Constructivist researchers believe that reality is socially constructed Berger and Luckman (1967). Interpretivists are interested in knowing how such realities are individually experienced. The closeness of interpretivism and constructivism implies that one cannot conduct interviews that are dominated by the interviewer with no opportunity provided to the interviewee to get involved in an interactive dialogue with the interviewer. Conducting interviews in the interpretivist paradigm without enabling opportunities for a co-creation of knowledge deviates from the expectations of interpretivism and can declare a study null and void. Therefore a post-modernist approach to interviewing is necessary (Barrat, 2009).

8. Recommendations

It is recommended that semi-structured interview and structured interview schedules include some questions that will enable an interactive dialogue to prevail. Focus-group interviews should also not be uni-directional and should provide scope for an interactive dialogue not only with the interviewer, but also between the interviewees of the focus group in true constructivist/ interpretivist fashion. It becomes necessary for students to revisit interview schedules, or the one they may have designed, be it at a masters or doctoral level, and critique it to determine the extent to which it is truly interpretivist or constructivist.

9. Conclusion

The main finding of the study is that if it is located in an interpretivist paradigm, it should be informed by research instruments that are of a truly constructivist nature. The interviewer and the interviewee should engage in an interactive dialogue to co-create knowledge wherever possible. While realizing the objectives of the study through a one-way dialogue with the interviewee is important, it is equally important that the interviewee should not be marginalized but be given a voice in the interview process through such an interactive dialogue of co-construction of knowledge with the interviewer. It is advised that postgraduate students should become aware of the need to produce data through an interpretivist paradigm by developing a constructivist engagement with the interviewee.

.

REFERENCES

- Alanazi, A. (2016). A critical review of Constructivist Theory and the emergence of constructionism. *American Research of Humanities and Social Sciences*, Vol. 2, 2016, pages 1 – 8.
- Berger, P.L.T and Luckmann, T. (1967). *The social construction of Reality. A treatise in the sociology of Knowledge*. New York. Pages 1 – 28.
- Barret, S.R. (2009). *Anthropology*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press.
- Confrey, J. (1992). What constructivism implies for teaching. In R. B. Davis, C. A. Maher, & N. Noddings (Eds.), *Constructivist views on the teaching and learning of mathematics (pp. 107-122)*. *Journal for Research in Mathematics Education Monograph No. 4*.
- Damsa, C.I. and Luvigsen, S. (2016). Learning through interaction and co-construction of knowledge objects in teacher education. *Learning, Culture and Social Interaction: Volume 11, December 2016*.
- Saunders, M., Lewis, P. and Thornhill, A. (2012). *Research Methods for Business Students*. 6th Edition, Pearson Education Limited.
- Owen, T.O. (2014). *The Qualitative Report 2014*. Volu,e 19, Article 52, 1 – 19.
- Rutakumwa R., Mugisha J. O., Bernays S., Kabunga E., Tumwekwase G., Mbonye M., Seeley J. (2020). Conducting in-depth interviews with and without voice recorders: A comparative analysis. *Qualitative Research*, 20(5), 565–581. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1468794119884806>
- Swain, J. and King, B. (2022). Using informal conversations in qualitative research. *International Journal of Qualitative Methods*, Vol.21: 1 – 10.
- Van der Walt, J. (2020). Interpretivism-constructivism as a research method in the humanities and social sciences – More to it than meets the eye. *International Journal of Philosophy and Theology*, June 2020, Volume 8, No.1, pp. 59 – 68.
- Warren C. A. B., Barnes-Brus T., Burgess H., Wiebold-Lippisch L., Hackney J., Harkness G., Kennedy V., Dingwall R., Rosenblatt P. C., Ryen A., Shuy R. (2003). After the interview. *Qualitative Sociology*, 26(1), 93–110. <https://doi.org/10.1023/a:1021408121258>