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## RESEARCH IN DEVELOPMENT ARENAS

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**ABSTRACT**

*Research plays a vital role in the field of development by involving development managers, agencies, stakeholders, policy makers, and organizations. It depends on theoretical background, specific information, experience, responsive behaviour, analytical skills at conceptual level, contextualization, and ethical standards and perspectives. Development research also makes a link between the epistemological stand of the research and validity of the research. Both positivists and non-positivists recognize the need for setting boundaries, given time and resource constraint in development researches. In the positivistic tradition, the researcher is independent and observable, system is inflexible, less descriptive and value free. There are two different boundaries systems-close and open, depending on how research is formulated, articulated and implemented. On the other hand, the selection of research method is one of the most important issues, which are required rigorous design and a great deal of expense. It is clear that over time different sets of thought about the quality of research will be associated with different methods and the type of research and will be associated with the epistemological stance. It will develop a relationship among epistemology, methodological preferences and various type of research.*

**KEYWORDS**

Epistemology, Development arena, Ontology, Rigour, Conceptualization, Brute data.

**INTRODUCTION**

**R**esearch is the systematic process of collecting and analysing information to increase our understanding of phenomena. So, research is one of the most important learn for finding out to solve problems. Through research we search knowledge, carry out any systematic investigation, establish novel facts, solve new or existing problems, draw new inferences, prove new ideas or develop new theories, learn the demand/necessity, know the present status of any subject or situation and so on. Development is a process in which something gradually changes from a simple to a more complex level or to a different stage, especially a more advanced or matures stage. Moreover, development is related to time, place, efforts of human beings, policies, strategies, plans, guidelines, and circumstances for which there is no universal formula.

Most development interventions of the past few decades share one common characteristic. This characteristic is top-down programme architecture where only experts/professionals assumed to make standardized poverty diagnosis and thus command development action (Chambers, 2010). This approach however resulted in poor conceptualization of development problems and ineffective programme implementation. This was essentially because local communities were considered as 'mere beneficiaries' and thus left out in the designing and operationalization of development programmes (Chambers, 2010). However, experiences have proved that local communities, as immediate witnesses of poverty, have primary information and important perspectives on development issues, which should be used to inform development actions.

Hence, it is no more sensible to design development programmes at the top and instruct local people to take part only at implementation phase. Accordingly, under the new 'socio-institutional paradigm' of development intervention, the perspectives and socio-structural dynamics of local communities are perceived as change factors, thus necessitating public participation in the whole development process (Dreze and Sen, 1989; De Herdt et al., 2004).

After defining the link between applied research and development activities, the following sections of this paper will examine the different philosophical stances on how development researches should be framed and conducted. In so doing, this paper aims at highlighting on the strength and weakness of different approaches and making a value judgement on which approach best benefits development researches.

**THE ROLE OF APPLIED RESEARCH IN DEVELOPMENT ARENAS**

Applied researches, unlike scientific researches, are not intended to build on abstract concepts and theories (Sumner and Tribe, 2008). They rather are meant to generate information on real problems with the core aim of solving them. Hence, applied researches are sometimes referred to as problem-oriented investigations that can be used as a means to facilitate realization of socially desirable changes (Thomas, 1998).

As poverty is one of the main problems of human kind, applied research has a central role to play in the effort to tackle such a developmental problem. In particular, applied research plays an immense role in informing development workers and policy makers on the progress, outcome and impact of their action (De Herdt et al., 2004).

In development projects, applied research is employed throughout the project cycle - in the project design, during operationalization of the project and even after project implementation (Sumner and Tribe, 2008). In the project design stage, conducting applied research is crucial in several ways. First, applied investigation in the form of needs assessment is useful to decide on areas of development intervention (Sumner and Tribe, 2008). With such investigation, development workers can identify whether or not a particular development project is needed in a certain society. Also, applied research is employed for conducting a baseline study that aims at identifying socio-economic situations the on ground before launch of a development project. Such investigation is important because its findings will be used afterwards to assess the post-implementation outcome and impact of a development project. More importantly, development workers mostly conduct applied research in the project design stage to identify set of people and/or institutions that might affect or be affected by the project - stakeholder analysis (Thomas, 1998). As development intervention is a multi-actor process, identification of areas of convergence and divergence among different stakeholders is an important exercise to make an informed decision on the level and mode of future partnership with stakeholders (De Herdt et al., 2004).

The role of applied research in development projects continues in the project implementation stage through monitoring and evaluation of the project implementation (Sumner and Tribe, 2008). Here also, applied research informs the monitoring and evaluation process by assessing what is actually done on the ground. Also after completion of project implementation, applied research is employed to examine whether and to what extent a development intervention brings the desired change on the ground - evaluation of project outcome or impact (De Herdt et al., 2004). Sometimes, applied research may also be conducted as a follow-up study to investigate future action.

In addition to development intervention, development policies also benefit from applied research through policy analysis studies (Sumner and Tribe, 2008). Such policy investigations are crucial in analyzing the impact of existing/proposed policies and suggesting for policy change if that is needed. Even if findings of a single applied research may not dictate policy reform, it will at least add to the policy debate and make a discursive struggle with other competing policy stances.

In general, applied research has an undeniable role in informing and shaping development works and policies. It is however worth noting that development researches may not always bring the desired change on the ground. This is partly because of the possible value based conflict among diverse development actors (Thomas, 1998), which therefore requires a researcher either to look for a negotiated value or represent all the different values as they are. Hence, the effectiveness of a development research in bringing social change always depends on its quality and composition.

**EPISTEMOLOGICAL ISSUES AND BOUNDARY SETTING IN DEVELOPMENT RESEARCH**

As defined by Sumner and Tribe, epistemology is a "branch of philosophy that is concerned with the nature, origin, scope of knowledge and 'how we know what we know'" (Sumner and Tribe, 2004: 30). Hence, epistemology studies the ways with which one can reach to the truth or reality. However, because there are divided views on what constitutes the truth or reality (question of ontology), the same division extends in answering epistemological questions.

Though there are numerous ontological and epistemological standpoints, the two best known stances are empiricism/positivism/things paradigm and non-positivism/people paradigm (Prowse, 2010).

According to the positivist paradigm, reality exists independent from observation (Sumner and Tribe, 2004). This reality being out there in a form of objective brute data, positivists claim that one can reach to such truth through quantitative data verification (Kanbur and Shaffer, 2007). Hence, research is considered as a process of matching or creating causal explanation with reality, much focus placed on verification. Because such paradigm inclines to numerical data and ignores the impact of language in research process, it is mostly associated with researches on areas of natural science like engineering (Chambers, 2010).

On the contrary, non-positivists, including both interpretivists and social constructivists, allege that there is no single reality as contended by positivists. While radical interpretivists deny the very existence of reality but subjective meaning systems to every action (Schwandt, 1994), social constructivists assert that there are multiple realities, which are perspectives socially constructed through dialogue and discursive struggle among different actors (Sumner and Tribe, 2004). According to non-positivists, as humans act internationally/within their own meaning system, what a human science can best do is to contextually understand the intention and interests of the people involved in the research (Sumner and Tribe, 2010). Hence, the epistemological focus lies on understanding of views and interpretation of social action (Schwandt, 1994). As a result, the non-positivist paradigm stresses on the need to use local "[...] knowledge, aspiration, capability and priority" as an important ingredient to development research by getting into the mind of such local actors (Chambers, 2010: 13).

The philosophical and methodological difference in the two main paradigms above further extends with respect to the issue of boundary setting, which is a process of setting a conceptual line to demarcate what is within a research from what is outside (Blackmore and Ison, 1998). By setting a boundary, a researcher will limit the size and type of participants in the research process as well as the scope of coverage of the research, including geographical coverage (Blackmore and Ison, 1998).

While both positivists and non-positivists recognize the need for setting boundaries, given time and resource constraint in development researches, they have divergent stances when it comes to the method of boundary setting (Blackmore and Ison, 1998).

The first divergence comes with respect to the question 'who should be involved in boundary setting?' For social constructivists, because realities are there within the contextual thoughts and values of local communities, a boundary setting process should involve such local communities through joint and continuous dialogue and negotiation (Prowse, 2010). This is crucial, particularly to create a shared vision with local actors and bring a sense of joint ownership in the whole process.

Yet in the positivists' view, as knowledge is out there independent of values, boundaries are centrally set by the researcher herself or external organs (like donors) without any need to discuss or negotiate it with local actors (Chambers, 2010). This however goes against the very foundation of development research which requires according to Deuze and Sen "participation by the public in the process of social change" (Deuze and Sen, 1989: 259).

The divergence between positivists and social constructivists further extends in their choice of boundary type. For positivists, once boundaries are initially defined in the planning stage, there is no need to make modifications overtime since knowledge is perceived as stable or independent from changing views and perspectives (Blackmore and Ison, 1998). Hence, boundaries are fixed; leaving less/no room for reconceptualization of research questions. However, for social constructivist, as knowledge is fluid and unpredictable, requiring continuous conceptualization and reconceptualization of research frameworks, boundaries need to be set in a flexible manner allowing adjustment to changing ideas (Blackmore and Ison, 1998). Setting flexible boundaries is an important exercise in development researches given the fact that a development research is part of an ongoing policy process which is open to change and thus requires continuous reconceptualization of frameworks (Thomas, 1998).

To conclude, with its flexible, participatory and bottom-up approach to research undertaking, the social constructivist paradigm best fits development researches. Even though Chambers (2010) categorizes economics as a discipline close to the positivist approach, fundamental causes of economic problems in most developing countries are factors related to governance, culture, social norms and values, which clearly fall still under the people paradigm of Sociology and Anthropology. As such, one can best understand deep-rooted economic problems in a development research if a holistic and participatory approach is adopted so as to bring key socio-cultural issues into picture.

**CHOICE OF RESEARCH METHODS (QUANTITATIVE-QUALITATIVE): WHICH? WHEN? WHY?**

Qualitative and quantitative approaches are research methodologies or frameworks that a researcher adopts in order to decide on the different methods of gathering information (Prowse, 2010). While a quantitative research mostly involves collection and analysis of numeric data using methods like survey, statistical correlation and mathematical simulation, qualitative researches employ more interactive methods of gathering information through focus group discussion, ethnography, semi-structured and life history interviews (Rao and Woolcock, 2003).

Although the two methodologies are quite different in terms of approach, both are very important depending on the nature and objective of an investigation; the type of research question as well as the environment in which the research will be conducted.

In terms of research objective and questions, a quantitative methodology is most appropriate when our research objective is to simply measure the degree or prevalence of a certain indicator/factor at a certain point in time, like measuring impact levels in a positivist fashion (Bryman, 2004). In such cases of what and when questions, a quantitative approach is suitable because measurement involves quantification of factors through data collection and analysis that falls in the domain of quantitative methodology.

On the contrary, a qualitative approach is applicable when the objective of a research is to make in-depth examination of reasons behind observed behaviour and outcome (why and how questions); sometimes involving unquantifiable psychological factors like level of satisfaction, trust or motivation (Kanbur and Shaffer, 2007). In such instances, with its participatory and flexible ways of collecting information, a qualitative approach allows a researcher to broadly identify and contextually understand multitude of human factors be they quantifiable or unquantifiable (Potter and Subrahmanian, 1998; Rao and Woolcock, 2003). This is so unlike a pure quantitative approach under which "if it can't be measured, it won't happen" (Chambers, 2010: 14).

The other relevant factor in choice of research methodology is size of research population. In this regard, a quantitative approach is desirable when a researcher has a large research population (Prowse, 2010). This is because conducting survey is not as engaging and thus time consuming as most of the participatory methods under qualitative approach. Also in quantitative research it is possible to collect data only from a sample population and generalize the result to the broader population. However, if a research is to be conducted on a small population size, qualitative method can be rightly adopted with the benefit of extracting thicker data (Sumner and Tribe, 2004).

Employing a qualitative methodology is beneficial also when respondents are illiterate or less familiar with quantitative measurements and ambiguous research terminologies (Rao and Woolcock, 2003). In such a case, qualitative methods like focus group discussion, storytelling and participatory rural appraisal are preferable because such methods will allow the researcher to define concepts and contexts together with respondents – avoiding threats of respondent effect (Prowse, 2010).

From the points raised above, it can be generally concluded that both quantitative and qualitative methodologies have their own strong and weak sides. Hence, choice of any of the methodologies will involve some trade-off.

But if we compare the two methodologies in the context of development research, a qualitative approach is more suitable than that of pure quantitative approach. This is because a pure quantitative approach has the effect of underestimating development problems on the ground since it only takes into account few quantifiable variables, holding other social and institutional factors constant, while that is not the case in reality. This is also contrary to the multi-factor and multi-actor nature of development research (Thomas, 1998). Besides, quantitative methods in development researches tend to ignore or downplay the role of local politics and social structure in development process while in fact such factors are fundamental drivers of development (Rao and Woolcock, 2003).



Moreover, adoption of participatory methods in a qualitative approach will allow a development research benefit from local knowledge and commitment which are key ingredients for effective implementation and sustained use of research findings on the ground (Dreze and Sen, 1989).

Yet at times, it may be useful to employ some quantitative instruments, within a qualitative research framework, when quantification of some of our research findings is important (Maxwell, 2005).

### WHAT CONSTITUTES RIGOUR IN DEVELOPMENT RESEARCH?

Thomas defines rigour as “[...] being able to show that one has enough evidence to justify one’s conclusions, that the evidence has been obtained properly and that contrary evidence has been sought but either not found or found to be relatively unconvincing” (Thomas, 1998: 13). Hence, rigour is a question of credibility, validity or strength of a research finding and not a simple methodological question (Maxwell, 2005). This is to mean that a research finding cannot be valid simply because the research is conducted within a certain methodological framework or using a particular research method.

However, one’s expectation from a research finding or requirements of valid research differs depending on the type of research under question and its epistemological foundation. Given the apparent difference between positivists and social constructivists on what constitutes the truth and how one can reach to such truth, the requirements for rigour and validity are also different in each of the epistemological standpoints.

For positivists, mostly representing quantitative approach (Sumner and Tribe, 2004), the term validity is used to refer to “the approximate truth of an inference” (Shadish et al., 2002: 34). Also because there is one ‘single truth’, a research is said to be valid when its result corresponds to such single reality that can be observed in the form of brute data (Sumner and Tribe, 2008). However under social constructivism, because there is no single truth to which we can correspond our research finding, the concept of validity is used to refer to the extent to which our research recognizes and incorporates existing multiple realities which take the form of local perspectives, values and interests (Lincoln and Guba, 1985). The subsequent paragraphs will explore how the specific requirements of validity and rigour are different in the positivist and social constructivist paradigm.

The first and most important criterion of validity under the positivist tradition is the requirement of causal verification or internal validity (Seale, 1999). Under this requirement, findings of statistical association or correlation between researched factors should correspond to actual causality on the ground (Shadish et al., 2002). This requirement assumes that there is an ordered and predictable relationship between different factors which can be perceived by professionals or experts (Chambers, 2010). However in reality, especially in development arenas, there is a continuous interplay among multitude of factors all affecting each other and thus always posing simultaneity bias (impact of unanticipated or uncontrolled factor) and ambiguous temporal (which factor causes which and which comes first) (Shadish et al., 2002; Sumner and Tribe, 2004). In recognition of this fact, the non-positivists/social constructivists assert that the validity of a research finding is not dependent on the degree of causality it establishes between different factors but on the extent to which all surrounding factors are taken into account and interests represented through active engagement (Lincoln and Guba, 1985). This point can be illustrated with an example of qualitative researches conducted on psychological factors like commitment, motivation or trust, which are mostly criticized by positivists as imprecise/non-verifiable (Kanbur and Shaffer, 2007). But for social constructivists, as validity is not about correspondence/verification to the ‘truth’ but representation of different views, researches on psychological factors can be conducted with the utmost validity and rigour.

The second requirement of validity in the positivist approach is transferability of a research finding in to other areas or settings (Shadish, et. al, 2002). This requirement also is hypothetical for the dynamic world we are living in as it assumes possible homogeneity of local realities and contexts. Such assumption does not especially hold true in the context of development researches. This is because even if two countries or localities have similar rules and institutions in place, still social norms and values, which are fundamental drivers of development, greatly vary from place to place (De Herdt et al., 2004). In this regard, Seale noted such positivist requirement of transferability of results in social studies as an effort to “promote artificial consensus [...] and somewhat unrealistic demand” (Seale, 1999: 6). Accordingly, social constructivists perceive validity not as transferability of a research result in different setting but credibility or generalizability of the finding in that same setting (Thomas, 1998). Hence, once again, the requirement of rigour is representation/incorporation of all the different interests so that the result can be generalized for all members in the study group (Maxwell, 2005).

The third requirement of research validity/rigour is related to the identity and role of the researcher in the research process. For positivists, the validity of a research finding is highly dependent on its objectivity from values (Sumner and Tribe, 2004). This means, the researcher has to be “detached from the researched” and conduct her study with no value judgement or interference both in the process and the result (Sumner and Tribe, 2004: 16). This requirement is highly challenged by social constructivists for whom a researcher do not have to be value free but value-driven (Thomas, 1998). Hence according to social constructivists, the validity of a research finding will not be compromised if a researcher knowingly and openly employs some of her personal values or perspectives in the research process in such a way that does not obstruct her from seeing the perspective of the researched and other actors (Schwandt, 1994).

The divergence between positivists and social constructivists persist in answering the question ‘at which stage in a research process should we worry about validity?’ In most quantitative researches conducted within a positivist tradition, validity is an important issue only at the research design stage (Maxwell, 2005). This is because of the positivists’ thought that once research questions and methods are selected in a ‘valid way’, then there will be less/no validity threat afterwards. This is in accordance with the positivist notion of research with a ‘preset’ question and ‘blueprint’ design (Chambers, 2010). However, development researches are far from such characteristics since they are conducted in a multi-factor and multi-actor environment where there is a continuous process of conceptualization and reconceptualization of research designs (Thomas, 1998). Accordingly, the social constructivists’ stand of employing validity requirements in the whole process of research undertaking (Maxwell, 2005) best fits the above mentioned features of development research.

In conclusion, there is both conceptual and practical difference in the requirements validity and rigour under the different epistemological stances. But in the context of development research where there are multiple actors and interrelated development factors in play, the social constructivists’ requirement of rigour including comprehensive representation of different factors and interests in the research; credibility of findings to the researched as well as recognition of personal bias have a key role to play in ensuring that development researches can meet their ultimate aim of bringing social change.

### CONCLUSION

Nowadays there is a relatively high inclination towards adopting a multi-disciplinary approach in development researches. This is justified given the multitude of socio-cultural and institutional factors that are highly tied to development. However, while bringing together diverse disciplines under the umbrella of development, we should be cautious of the possible difference in ontological, epistemological and methodological foundation of such different disciplines.

After analyzing the strength and weakness of each of the epistemological and methodological stances in the context of development research, this paper found that the social constructivist paradigm, characterized by participatory approach and in-depth analysis of social accounts, fits best development researches.

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