The Transformative Approach

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THE TRANSFORMATIVE APPROACH

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Recent polemics on both sides of the Atlantic attest to the contentiously political nature of management research (cf. Grey, 2001; O’Connor, 1999; Pettigrew, 2001; Pfeffer, 1993, 1995; Starkey & Madan, 2001; Tranfield & Starkey, 1998; Van Maanen, 1995a,b; Weick, 2001). Management theorists as well as funding agents, practitioners and consultants are increasingly debating the usefulness and validity of management knowledge (Powell, 1997). While each of these groups may have quite different perspectives and biases, despite the polemic nature of the exchange one needs to accept that various stakeholders claim to possess management knowledge (Abrahamson, 1996; Antunes, 2002).

This chapter emphasizes a transformative approach to management knowledge, which is a methodology intended to improve the linkage across key stakeholders of the field. This methodology is proposed as an alternative to the most commonly used approaches in management studies, namely, positivist and interpretive approaches. The transformative approach is particularly suitable for connecting management consulting and research because this approach attempts to integrate action and reflection, personal and organizational realities, and theory and practice.

The chapter initially discusses ontological and methodological issues in management research, with particular emphasis on the relationship of theory and practice. The second part highlights the main characteristics of
positivism and interpretive research. The chapter then focuses on transformative inquiry, examining its origin as related to action research and other methodologies such as grounded theory and contextual research. The discussion emphasizes transformative inquiry as encompassing a triple axis of transformations—on the subject under investigation, on the research site, and on the individual researcher (self). Various aspects of the pedagogy of the transformative inquiry agent, as well as issues associated with the use and operation of this research approach, are also examined. The chapter concludes with a comparative assessment of the three approaches, emphasizing their theoretical underpinnings, nature, practice and anticipated outcomes, and a tentative exploration of the ramifications for the field of management consulting.

INQUIRY AND METHODOLOGY: THEORY AND PRACTICE

Inquiry in the human sciences can take a variety of approaches. Whatever the approach chosen, a crucial aspect is its suitability to the object under investigation. Methods are also subject to choice, development and limitations. Researchers need to choose the tools they want to employ and develop, and, as a result, the outcomes might not be as solid as expected. As Giddens (1984, p. xxxii) argues, “...there are no universal laws in the social sciences and there will not be any.” Causal conditions involved in generalizations about social conduct are inherently unstable with respect to the very knowledge (or beliefs) that actors have about the circumstances of their own action. That is, the actions we attempt to interpret have already been subject to interpretation before the research takes place. Thus, as Giddens (1984) notes, the lack of universal law in the social sciences is not due to any inadequacy of methods for empirical testing and validation, but rather from its ontological nature being subject to the double hermeneutics mentioned above.

The process of making sense of research results cannot follow predetermined steps and control, because producing sense of a specific situation involves experimentation with interpretations. In essence, when flexibility for change and redesign matters, a total detachment of subject and object of observation cannot occur. The text to research is therefore both the written reflexive description of a certain practice and the imprinting of a constructive practice upon an ongoing reality. Text shapes context; text is therefore action, and it emerges as praxeological knowledge (Bourdieu, 1973).

From a pragmatic point of view, approaches to inquiry differ at four fundamental levels: their theoretical underpinnings, nature, practice and results. Theoretical underpinnings have two dimensions that relate to the worldview embraced by the researcher: the epistemology governing the
The nature of inquiry practices has three dimensions: the underlying origin of the inquiry, the selected method of diagnosis, and the favored concept of action. Practice (implementation) of an inquiry has four dimensions: the challenges raised by the project, the core skills needed by the researcher, the length of fieldwork, and the dangers (problems) inherent in the project. The final distinction of inquiry approaches focuses on two aspects of the project’s results: the evaluation of the project and its expected outputs. These distinctions will be drawn on to compare and contrast positivist, interpretive and transformative approaches to inquiry.

In the particular case of management consulting, the creation, diffusion and use of research tools have always been contentious, since consultation is itself a practice that has significant potential for value creation. Therefore, the links between theory and practice in management consulting research have always been strong (Berry, 1995). Nevertheless, there is constant criticism of the gap between practitioners and theorists in the field. Some observers have argued that a research strategy designed to fill this gap implies a closer collaboration between research and business (e.g., Ghoshal, Arnzen, & Brownfield, 1992; Schön, 1983). This orientation is particularly explicit within the literature on action research (Elden & Chisholm, 1993; Greenwood, Whyte, & Harkavy, 1993), participatory research (Torbert, 1991) and “direct” field research (Mintzberg, 1979). Similar arguments are also found in the clinical perspective (Schein, 1987), action science (Argyris, Putnam, & Smith, 1985), and contextualist research (Pettigrew, 1990). All these strands share a concern with issues related to the use of the researcher’s knowledge to improve the research set. They also argue that conceptualizing the research process as and exchange of interactions between researcher and target companies can facilitate both access to and relationships with key gatekeepers. In essence, fieldwork can be more than the acquisition of data, and researchers should strive to provide inputs to improve access and relevance. These inputs can range from in-depth co-interpretation of the company’s situation and insights from meetings, conversations and discussions with organizational actors, to training and workshops, to framing problematic issues and problem-solving activities.

Access to research sites, of course, is not always easy. As Van de Ven (1992, p. 181) observes, “one reason why gaining organizational access has been problematic is because researchers seldom place themselves into the manager’s frame of reference to conduct their studies.” Researchers would have more success if they balanced their own reflexive detachment from the research with the need to look at the issue from the manager’s perspective. There should be a constant exchange of feedback and feed-forward between researchers and practitioners to help build, develop and test theo-
ries. It is important to remember, however, that questions, interactions and conversations during the fieldwork can have unintended consequences in the researched organization, in the inquiry agents, and in practitioners involved in the inquiry process, as chaos and catastrophe theories warn us (Hampden-Turner, 1983; Kauffman, 1995).

The Positivist Approach

Positivist approaches have exerted a significant influence in a variety of fields in the social sciences. It still actively informs the design and implementation of a significant portion of social science research. This influence is particularly strong in theory testing. Nevertheless, some argue that positivism has failed to produce a convincing philosophy of science.

The positivist perspective developed from Auguste Comte’s (1896) view that the organization of knowledge should follow a distinct and hierarchical manner. Accordingly, positivism places mathematics at the top of all types of knowledge. The positivist epistemology argues that knowledge can only be produce scientifically, i.e., by the scientific method. Hence, it defends the quantification of proof as the ideal to be pursued by all sciences, as laws and regularities. For this purpose, positivism emphasizes the primacy of observation and the pursuit of causal explanation by way of inductive generalization. In logical terms, its propositions follow a model based upon “X causes A” or “W leads to B.” By doing this, it attempts to find rules and truth, which should be universal, timeless, and independent of culture, gender and race. Positivism refuses to view social science as a separate branch of the sciences. It views science in the singular, not sciences in the plural, and social science is seen as an underdeveloped and immature branch of the more developed natural sciences. For positivism, the development of the social sciences would mostly depend upon methodological and statistical control, data collection and data analysis, and the use of the scientific method.

Positivism is a research approach highly visible in management studies. Valued publication outlets such as the Academy of Management Journal and the Strategic Management Journal practically only publish positivist papers. As a result, this practice has influenced the evolution of academic publications, the definition of management inquiry per se, and the career of management inquiry agents. An outcome has largely been the exclusion of non- or anti-positivist approaches that are capable of illuminating aspects unreachable via a positivist approach. Such non- or anti-positivist approaches include thick descriptions in interpretive and ethnographic research and case studies that emphasize specific and unusual issues. By overemphasizing the separation of object and subject of investigation, the
positivist approach has not given enough attention to research practices that intend to actively improve the conditions of the object of inquiry, therefore producing an effect on the subject of investigation. Nevertheless, such integration is a well-accepted research practice in fields such as psychotherapy, education and nursing. By privileging the logic of identity and the concerns for generalizability, positivist approaches have damaged the generation of knowledge in management studies in general and management consulting in particular. As Stern and Barley (1996, p. 155) argue, “the requirements of statistical inference legitimized a rhetoric of identity that cast aspersion on case studies as relics of administrative theory’s pre-scientific past.”

Criticisms of the positivist paradigm have occurred throughout this century. Indeed, an anti-positivist approach has developed in social, historical, political, managerial and anthropological theory (Giddens, 1984; Habermas, 1984, 1987; Winch, 1956). For instance, by expanding Wittgenstein’s (1953) philosophical reflections into social theory, Winch (1956) argued that the context of utterances matters, insofar as the very idea of an explanatory science of society is untenable. Thus, social and natural sciences are discrepant in ontological and logical terms. Schön (1983, p. 116) shows how the positivist epistemology rests on three unacceptable dichotomies: the separation of means from ends, the separation of inquiry from practice, and the separation of knowing from doing. Similarly, Bourdieu, Chamboredon, and Passeron (1991) have argued against the positivist epistemology by positing that scientific facts are conquered, constructed and contested through rupture with common sense, application of relational concepts, and methodological confrontation of the model with the evidence generated by different methodologies.

Positivism has received attacks from prominent social theorists for two other reasons. First, this view artificially separates facts and values; by doing this, it has been attached for being ethically misleading in its outright acceptance of the dominance of technical rationality (Giddens, 1984; Habermas, 1984, 1987). Second, positivism misunderstands the necessary implications of the double hermeneutics for social research. It excludes taking into account that the world social scientists interpret has already been interpreted by those who constitute it (Gadamer, 1975; Giddens, 1984; Winch, 1956; Wittgenstein, 1953). Positivist views fail to recognize that any social inquiry intersects two frames of meaning: the interpreter and the object to be interpreted (Bourdieu, 1980, 1982). As Giddens (1984, p. 374) puts it, “there is a constant ‘slippage’ from one to the other involved in the practice of the social sciences.”

Thus, positivism is unsatisfactory for the study of practice, since social practice is in itself highly contextual, dependent upon time, culture, and space and therefore subject to double hermeneutics. Practices are prone to
a variety of contingencies—and contingencies are irreducible to a set of laws and rules, since in their strictest sense laws and rules imply the exclusion of the contextual dimensions of social practices. To find such rules and laws, a clear demarcation of observer and subject of observation becomes obligatory. Such separation can be severely limiting, especially for studying situations of unfolding and becoming (Deleuze & Guattari, 1992).

**Interpretive Studies**

Positivism has not fully dominated the management research scene, in particular for its inability to deal with theory development. Theories cannot exist without concepts and models, and these, in turn, do not necessarily emerge magically from data (Thagard, 1992). Theory development involves interpretation, insights and correlation as “glues” that can bring together concepts in consequent, logically and rhetorically coherent and convincing ways. Theory generation and development involve a critique of data, and the most well known approaches for this task are critical theories and hermeneutics, a set of related theories that is referred to as *interpretive studies*.

The interpretive studies perspective developed considerably in the past century, mostly through the work of European social philosophers involved with critical theory and hermeneutics such as Adorno and Horkheimer (1979), Heidegger (1959a,b), Ricoeur (1991a,b), Winch (1956) and Gadamer (1993). However, in the Western Hemisphere, it is possible to trace back the written origins of interpretive studies to Ancient Greece and philosophical discussions on meaning and truth. In terms of methods, interpretive studies gained much from developments in the humanities such as historiography, literary theory and religious studies. It also gained from the focus that social science placed on the ways human beings have used language, rules and tradition to organize themselves (Thompson, 1991).

What became known as critical theory comes from a revision of Marxian thought, which is itself of Hegelian inspiration. It also incorporates elements of existentialism and psychoanalysis, and originally concerns itself mostly with problems of aesthetics, culture and modernity. The critical theory tradition emphasizes the ideological nature of the world and relationships established by humans and organizations.

Authors operating under the critical theory tradition have produced a significant impact in the field of social and political theory, philosophy, psychoanalysis and cultural studies. The work of Jürgen Habermas (1984), for instance, continues to exert a major academic effect in all areas of social sciences and humanities. His influence went beyond the boundaries of educational establishments, and it would be misleading to discard the effects of
social thinkers upon the constitution of social realities, fantasies and utopias. Nevertheless, the direct impact of critical theory has mostly remained within the boundaries of academia, government and the legal system.

This segmentation appears to be for two main reasons. First, critical theorists tend to remain attached to a Marxist worldview when the practical influence of Marx became discredited. Second, they have remained attached to a limited conception of praxis in which the concept of action is the intellectual production of texts. This way, action remains textual practice insofar as the major practical engagement has been in political parties or social movements which become the valid terrain for praxis.

The other branch to influence interpretive studies is hermeneutics (Gadamer, 1993; Ricouer, 1991a, b; Valdez, 1991). These studies are centrally concerned with the elucidation of rules for the interpretation of texts, and their core aim is to achieve an understanding of the text under interpretation (Thompson, 1981). It developed in this century as result of the influential work of German theologians and philosophers such as Husserl (1960), Heidegger (1959b), and Gadamer (1993).

Hermeneutics, however, faces a similar problem of practical and organizational engagement with reality faced by critical theory. Critical and hermeneutic theorists concentrate merely on attempting to achieve one magnitude of transformation—on extant knowledge. They do not intend to alter the research sites directly. Their focus rests on macro issues such as world affairs and the society as a whole rather than on precise organizations with specific problems.

Thus while positivism and interpretive studies have both contributed to the development of social science in general and management research in particular, they fall short of giving due importance to the role of practical actions. They also fall short of producing a broader scope of transformations in which transformations are achieved in the researcher undertaking the study as well as the subject and object under investigation. The transformative inquiry approach attempts to overcome these limitations.

**TRANSFORMATIVE INQUIRY**

In a narrow sense, all types of research are transformative. Research itself is always an attempt to transform something; if not, there would be no reason to “re-search,” that is, the intellectual act of searching again. In traditional research approaches, the “something” being transformed is usually the available stock of knowledge within a given field of inquiry. However, an important aspect that distinguishes transformative research is the understanding that the scope of transformations achievable in the research process has a much broader spectrum than that advocated by traditional
research approaches. Researchers cannot only alter our knowledge about something, but they can also alter the practice and state of affairs within the target organization.

Transformative inquiry is the type of research that is characterized by the involvement and drive to participate in an unfolding practice by research agents. Such participation in the research set typically results from two main motives. The first motive can be the result of personal choices of the researcher in terms of methods that he or she values most, he or she feels more comfortable with, or finds more profitable for desired research outcomes. A second motive comes from the necessity of the situation or the subject under investigation itself. Transformative research relies heavily on time actively spent in the field. This process also includes the post-fieldwork period as the researcher reflects on such issues as the conditions which made the research itself possible, how the research agents shaped and were shaped by the events and experiences, and the practices seen in the research set.

**Action Research as a Form of Transformative Inquiry**

Action research is, perhaps, the most well-known form of transformative inquiry. At its outset, the intention is to transform the site under investigation. It involves alterations of given institutional and organizational practices, systems and values through joint work with members of the investigated set. Yet, rarely has this perspective assumed a sufficiently reflexive nature, and the origin of the research practice is usually seen as coming from the demands of the set rather than from the intentions of the researcher.

The main creator of action research, the Gestalt psychologist Kurt Lewin (1948), proposed the use and development of the process as a methodology. He argued that our understanding of a social situation is enhanced when one observes the effects of an introduced change and that research should be a way to alter the state of affairs within a site. As later defined by Rapoport (1970, p. 499), one of its main supporters, action research aims to contribute both to the practical concerns of people in an immediate problematic situation and to the goals of social science. The way to accomplish these dual goals is through joint collaboration within a mutually acceptable ethical framework.

Greenwood et al. (1993) show some of the important characteristics of action research: collaboration, incorporation of local knowledge, eclecticism and diversity, case orientation, emergent process, and scientific understanding to social action. It is also a useful tool to integrate different stakeholders of management knowledge (Elden & Chisholm, 1993). The
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The Transformative Approach is oriented toward the future in a way that “normal” research is not, yet it can also provide inquiry agents with insider access to the essential issues and concerns of a corporation on a real time basis. Moreover, it can be useful in identifying new research questions and developing new midrange theories (Ghoshal et al., 1992). For example, by stating that strategy processes cannot be fully researched without possibly affecting its very nature, Chakravarthy and Doz (1992, p. 10) argue that action research should gain more legitimacy in strategy research.

From a management consulting perspective, since action research provides the potential for feeding knowledge developed by intervention back into the field (Eden & Haxham, 1996), it has the strongest potential to combine business relevance and theory development. Despite its advantages, however, there are some characteristic dilemmas—dealing with ethical concerns, multiple goals and overly ambitious initiatives—of action research (see Rapoport, 1970). Moreover, more traditionally minded inquiry agents treat this type of interventionist perspective with certain suspicion. A number of academics suspicious of action research argue that the approach is little more than a hidden agenda that inquiry agents employ to increase their revenue to the detriment of true academic commitment, which could increase the state of knowledge.

There are four basic factors that have fueled such suspicion. One is the hegemonic nature of positivism that relates to the “publish or perish” mentality, together with the necessity of educational institutions to develop clear ways of measuring productivity and effectiveness of academics. A second factor is the dominance of the Cartesian split between observer and object of observation as intended by positivist research in its attempt to use the scientific method of the natural sciences. The two other reasons relate to some suspicion against the practice of transformative research. One concerns the ideological limitations of the classic action research program itself. The other arises from a certain academic confusion between the aims of management consulting, pure research and action research.

The large influence of external consultants in organizations should lead us to believe in the importance of the intervention process itself, not to say the increasing growth of the consulting industry itself (Micklethwait & Wooldridge, 1996; O’Shea & Madigan, 1997). Yet, although there are theories of practice in organizational settings that are helpful for understanding the intervention process (cf. Argyris et al., 1985; Schein, 1987; Schön, 1983), published academic reflection on consulting has been rare (Sturdy, 1997).

The literature on organizational interventions has two main shortcomings: psychological behaviorism and a lack of reflexivity. Differently from Lewin’s (1948) original Gestaltian proposition, in what became the action research approach, the change at stake aims to alter the behavior of the
agents in the field. Therefore, behavioral techniques constitute the genetic material the interventionist brings to fertilize the field. These techniques do not give sufficient importance for the introduction, creation or transference of concepts. It does not make the crucial distinction between behavioral and conceptual intervention. Yet, action researchers have not been reflective enough on the influence of site upon the inquiry agent.

Action researchers’ belief in an outside reality entraps them. In their view, the splitting of subject and object of observation is a guarantor of grasping reality. This links to another shortcoming—their lack of reflexivity. The researcher must be able to “bend back” to see how agency, habitus, field and knowledge interact in the investigation and utilization of what is being investigated (Bauman, 1991; Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992). This implies considering the conditions that enabled the research to take place, bringing into the open considerations on how the research agents shaped and were shaped by events, experiences, practices and interactions in the process of inquiry. The fundamental dimension of the development of the self is an aspect that transformative researchers need to deal with to achieve the triple axis of true transformation.

The Triple Axis of Transformative Inquiry

Transformative inquiry agents depart from an awareness of the various stakeholders of management knowledge, together with the intent to maximize the benefits of the inquiry output on three interconnected levels: (1) reflecting on existing theoretical knowledge on the subject; (2) reflecting on the inquiry agent as a persona who constitutes the inquiry subject and at the same time reconstitutes her or himself as an effect of the learning process; and (3) producing an effect on the site as a result of the transformative interaction with agents on the site.

The depth and amount of effects produced will vary according to each project of inquiry. The scope of transformations varies depending on the awareness of the inquiry agent of the possibilities in the scope of transformations, in the project, and in the inquiry agent’s interest, ability and habitus. The transformative inquiry approach pursues a fuller scope of transformation by focusing not only on the extant knowledge, but also on the self of the research agents and on the site where the research takes place.

Knowledge

According to the epistemological perspective developed here, any research transforms a certain state of knowledge. The available stock of knowledge exists at three levels. One is present on a worldwide scale at a certain time. Another is the stock in a community of knowledge-users
based on a common paradigm, mindset and language. This knowledge is also present on an individual level, as a result of personal processes of adding, rearranging or reorganizing extant knowledge before the acquisition of new knowledge.

The transformation of the stock of knowledge involves researching the content and re-utilizing the original content through diffusion processes such as publishing, consulting, presentations, conversations, interviews and conferences. The idea that inquiry agents interact with the stock of knowledge is not at all a polemic argument. Yet we must advance the argument from the viewpoint that there are different stocks of knowledge in the sense that there are different “containers” where this knowledge is subject to accumulation, processing, analysis, recycling and diffusion. These containers can be individuals, nation states, languages, and fields of research.

**Self**

The second magnitude that the transformative inquiry process attempts to reach relates to the interaction with agents involved in the project of inquiry (e.g., managers, consultants, policy makers). Such transformative interaction occurs on the level of skills, perspectives, worldview and experiences of the agents. This process is also a result of the learning aspect of transformative interactions within the site and the stocks of available knowledge. This aspect is of a more sophisticated nature and involves a reflexive reframing or exclusion of previous knowledge for the acquisition of new knowledge. While this part of the process of inquiry has suffered significant neglect, individuals engaged in learning processes act reflexively as part of their daily life. One can therefore say that it happens on a constant basis, although the omnipresence of the phenomenon is not always obvious when it comes to the writing stage of research (Van Maanen, 1988).

Hampden-Turner (1983) has developed an interesting account of the interplay of the individual and the macro-social level. In his reflection, the (personal) self deals with national and cultural influences. The grasping of such processes occurs reflexively and will vary immensely according to the cognitive and conceptual ability and intention of each individual. In another example, Schön (1983) gives detailed description of such processes in his analyses of how practitioners think in action. Indeed, the literature on organization learning has incorporated part of this argument. Yet this literature tends to concentrate on organizations as learning agents, and tends to exclude inquiry agents as agents also motivated by learning intents. In other words, the basic assumption is that knowledge is a result of organizing experience satisfactorily, as pragmatist philosophers argue. In practice, knowledge alters the knower. The one who learns acquires or
redefines his or her stock of knowledge or process of knowing, therefore being altered by the knowledge itself being acquired or redefined.

Therefore, from the inquiry agent point of view, it is a matter of awareness that the uses of language produce effects upon the site. As argued by those influenced by the work of the Wittgenstein (1953) and post-structuralism, the main sources of social realities are the act and context of the use of language in communicative actions (cf. Derrida, 1992; Giddens, 1984; Winch, 1956). The understanding of this aspect of the practice of inquiry must accommodate discussions on the consequences of the inquiry process. It must also give room to an awareness of possible inputs, as part of the symbolic exchange between inquiry agent and practitioners in a given site. These inputs can include in-depth co-interpretation of issues on the site, a generation of insight during meetings, conversations and discussions with organizational actors, workshops and training sessions, framing of problematic issues, and problem-solving activities.

**Site**

The third magnitude of transformations is more polemic and involves interaction with the site itself. Transformative interaction with the investigated set has been a common methodological practice in fields of research such as education, management, architecture and psychology. There are certain fields of practice that produce knowledge mostly from this perspective, for example, policy making, as in the actions of an empowered government. In this case, the main intention in the research process is mostly to produce an effect on the site. The research activity itself, however, may be intertwined with the diffusion of research results. The same applies to managerial activity—the intent of knowledge production is mostly to produce an effect in the set, i.e., the organization. The transformation in this case is also a result of the application of learning possibilities.

Transformative interactions, however, can produce both intended and unintended consequences. Being open systems, the effect of external agents on any type of organization is beyond the total control of the external agents and the agents on the site. This is, therefore, a risky business for both agents. The intention to produce an effect on the site provides effects that can improve the quality of access and the utilization of new or extant knowledge (Argyris et al., 1985). Such procedure may also improve the generation of practical insights as tools to explain and diffuse the new knowledge. This third magnitude of transformation arises from the intention of transformative production and the creation of events in which organizational actors can engage themselves during the process of inquiry. The writings of action researchers document this aspect, as they focus on the alteration of given institutional and organizational practices, systems and values through joint work with members of the investigated set. Neverthe-
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less, this type of perspective has rarely assumed a sufficiently reflexive nature. Moreover, the drive to originate action research practice usually comes from the demands of the set rather than the inquiry agent him or herself. These observations point to the need to fully understand the educational challenges inherent in transformative research.

The Pedagogy of Transformative Inquiry

In comparison with traditional research approaches, transformative inquiry demands a unique set of interactive skills, knowledge and experience—personal and intellectual—on the part of the researcher. On a personal level, the challenge involves a combination of skills including negotiation, synthesis and self-image management, together with high flexibility and adaptability to cope with the uncertainty and ambivalence of constantly dealing with open-ended situations. These personal characteristics are more likely to come from what the researcher will bring as part of his or her own being rather than as a result of any acquired training. There is also an inherent intellectual challenge in preparing to become a transformative researcher that demands a high level of personal awareness and introspection.

Transformative inquiry clearly involves an interest in the conceptual aspects of knowledge development and a multi-disciplinary mindset, skills which typically go beyond those normally developed in more traditional courses in research methodologies. As Stern and Barley (1996, p. 159) argue,

...to engage in systems-level thinking, we may even need to encourage ourselves, and especially our students, to read less of our own research literature and more history, economics, political science, and anthropology. Even newspapers may be more substantially relevant than most articles published in our journals.

A personal research agenda would benefit by considering contemporary developments in social theory, including structuration theory (Giddens, 1984), constructive transformation (Unger, 1987), symbolic interactionism (Goffman, 1987), and the theory of social systems (Luhmann, 1995).

The transformative researcher would also gain through dialogues with constructivism and world constitution (Bruner, 1986; Goodman, 1978; Searle, 1995). Also of particular relevance are discussions of the connection of theory of practice (Bourdieu, 1973, 1990; De Certeau, 1984). The recent work on philosophy as the “art of forming, inventing and fabricating concepts” (Deleuze & Guattari, 1994, p. 2) can be particularly helpful
in the highly abstract yet fundamental area of the theory of concepts. Another relevant line of inquiry is the literature on post-modernism in its philosophical, cultural and institutional terms (Lyotard, 1984, 1988; Vattimo, 1988). Particularly relevant is the use of postmodern approaches in the research of organizations (cf. Clegg & Hardy, 1996; Gergen, 1992; Kilduff, & Mehra. 1997).

An intervention strategy designed to take a transformative view would benefit by considering beforehand a series of problems that often arise in its application. The transformative approach demands creative and improvisational energy on the part of the researcher in his or her interaction with organizational actors. The ideal of transforming and being transformed by the research process, however, raises significant ethical implications for researchers, consultants, managers and policy makers. An underlying commitment to mutual respect must be addressed and sustained during the entire project. Moreover, there is an inherent tension between the independence of the research project and the necessary commitment to the research set (organization). Although always involved, the researcher must preserve a certain distance and independence from the research set to be able to improve the reflexive possibilities of the intervention.

While this approach is appropriate for a vast array of organizational situations, researchers must be able to convince organizational actors of the potential value of a collaborative and transformative project. Transformative thinkers must also recognize the importance of self-reflexivity to include issues such as the participation of the knower in the process of knowing as a circular process of constructing realities. They should also be sensitive to the transitory nature of discourses and epistemes, and the political constitution and use of knowledge and practices (Foucault, 1970). Since knowing and learning result from dynamic interactions with the environment, politics constitutes a significant part of the research act, since its content and process both influence and suffer from the influence of political dynamics.

**Transformative Inquiry in Practice**

From a methodological and intervention vantage point, transformative inquiry can be enriched by a combination of diverse research perspectives. Relevant approaches include blending research perspectives that merge theory and practice such as grounded theory, ethnomethodology, semi-structured interviews, focus group, action workshops, in-depth co-interpretation of issues, in-house training, and collaboration in both framing and solving problems. The transformative method is also flexible with respect to its potential combination of sources. Appropriate data can range from
such secondary sources as newspapers, magazines, trade newsletters and
governmental bulletins, to archival organizational data (e.g., memos, com-
pany brochures, annual reports), to primary data from more or less formal-
ized interviews, field notes, similar or divergent cases described previously.
Since what matters most in this perspective is conceptual thinking for orga-
nizational practices rather than statistical proof, internal consistency
should relate to broadening the scope of understanding of the organization
situation as much as possible. An underlying goal is to enhance the
researcher’s ability to perform well in his or her interactions and improvi-
sations. Emphasis is placed on generating good insights from these interac-
tions, which are useful as both input for the research project and output
for the organizational set.

A COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS OF THE THREE APPROACHES

As illustrated in Table 13.1, a number of observations can be made when
contrasting the positivist, interpretive and transformative approaches to
organizational research and intervention. A crucial aspect of the theoreti-
cal underpinnings of the different approaches is the theory of knowledge
that is intended to support a given research agenda and perspective. These
three approaches differ significantly at the epistemological level. Com-
pared to positivist’s scientific epistemology, for example, transformative
inquiry has a constructivist epistemology that locates knowledge in a circu-
lar social practice involving perceiving, thinking, acting and being. The use
of language and acting becomes the crucial mediator in the construction
and reconstruction of the plurality of meanings in any intended and non-
intended action (Goffman, 1959; Thompson, 1991; Wittgenstein, 1992a,b).
In contrast to critical theory, the transformative approach aims directly at
influencing practice by catalyzing and reflecting on an unfolding state of
affairs and the worldview that underlines the project’s constitution.

Another aspect to consider is the main disciplines that form the base of
knowledge for each approach. While the positivist approach bases itself
largely on the natural sciences and quantification, both the interpretive
and transformative methods are more integrated with the social sciences.
However, whereas engineering and its technological concerns with prob-
lem solving and modeling is a guide for the transformative approach, rhet-
torical argumentation, sometimes of a philosophical, literary or historic
nature, is the main influence in the interpretive method.

The basic nature of three approaches also differs significantly. The
underlying drive and origin of the project, for instance, come from site
problems and personal issues for transformative researchers, from social
concerns for interpretive researchers, and from an academic research gap
### Table 13.1. Three Practices of Inquiry

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Theoretical Underpinnings</th>
<th>Positivist</th>
<th>Interpretive Studies</th>
<th>Transformative</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Epistemology</td>
<td>Scientific</td>
<td>Critical</td>
<td>Constructivist</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Foundational Disciplines</td>
<td>Natural Sciences</td>
<td>Literary Criticism</td>
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for positivist researchers. Moreover, the content of the research itself is quite varied, ranging from a joint diagnosis of issues in transformative inquiry, to theoretical and ideological personal position in interpretive research, to a need for proof in positivist studies. The concept of action itself is an integration of practice and theory for the transformative researcher, and the production of a text for the two other approaches.

The practice of the three approaches differs as well, and each method faces different challenges. While political agreement and confidentiality are central issues for transformative researchers, interpretive researchers are more concerned with rhetorical influence and persuasion, and positivists are concerned with ensuring rigor, control of data and the generalizability of their findings. Therefore, the skills needed to perform these operations vary as well. Transformative research requires significant political and improvisational skills, interpretive research emerges from argumentative and compositional skills, and positivist research is embedded in analytical and design-enforcement skills. The central locus of these approaches ranges from in-depth fieldwork integrated with reflection for transformative researchers; a combination of library, office and, at times, fieldwork for interpretive researchers; and the research office and library for the positivist researcher. The lack of outside contact and engagement with organizations and managers can certainly limit the extent of in-depth practical knowledge researchers using a positivist or interpretive approach can achieve.

There are also various hurdles that researchers using these different approaches need to overcome. Positivist researchers, for example, typically face critical questions about the relevance of findings. For the interpretive researcher, a main concern is the potential hermeticism of over-interpretation of issues. Finally, the transformative researcher is confronted with underlying dangers in generating conflict within the field and the practical difficulties of developing sufficient self-knowledge. One can see that in practice these approaches are based on different attitudes about what constitutes “good” research and the appropriate use of the research itself.

Another way we can compare and contrast these three approaches is by the results they are likely to produce, in terms of both output and evaluation. Before highlighting the contrasting differences regarding expected outputs, it is important to emphasize that the intent to publish is as a crucial common output, since all these three perspectives are research-based processes. Nevertheless, whereas a positivist researcher will be more than happy to test and prove an empirical issue, the interpretive researcher will expect to develop new theory or to provide better lenses or angles from which to see the issues at stake. Going further, the transformative researcher will intend to achieve personal, organizational and theoretical development with the research process. These differing types of intentions
within the research process should call for differing types of evaluation of
the research outcome. Judgments about the quality of positivist research,
for example, seem to emphasize its analytical and technical expertise. Eval-
uations of interpretive research should also consider the quality of inter-
pretation and the potential influence it is likely to achieve, while
transformative research raises questions about the scope and breadth of
the transformations achieved at the personal, organizational and theoreti-
cal levels.

TRANSFORMATIVE INQUIRY AND MANAGEMENT
CONSULTING

It should be clear from this chapter that I favor a transformative approach
to research and organizational intervention. The transformative approach
takes a deeper and broader view of well known and uncomfortable dichot-
omies in the philosophy of social sciences, including theory and practice,
knowledge and action, and facts and values. The underlying orientation is
multidisciplinary, participative, fieldwork-intensive and case-study based.

Engaging oneself in transformative research is much closer to midwifery
than to detached scientific experimentation. Midwifery allows for an
understanding of the phenomena of birth, however, it cannot and does not
intend to provide for insight into the ontology of life—an aim of natural
science. Transformative inquiry is a method that has clinical aspects and, as
such, uses scientific procedures and knowledge at the same time that it
includes artistic and philosophical dimensions not usually present in tradi-
tional scientific work. It attempts to co-construct the future and to improve
the interactions among different stakeholders of management knowledge.
In doing so, it increases the relevance of the research activity as well as
facilitating research access to strategic concerns of corporations, institu-
tions and governments on a real-time basis (Pettigrew, 1992).

Management consulting researchers would benefit from using the trans-
formative approach for a number of reasons. From an organizational per-
spective, this approach should increase one’s capacity to get access to data
and situations, since committing oneself to an organization of one’s choice
is likely to generate both interest and support. At a personal level, the
transformative approach can also help those interested in learning how to
put theory into practice and theorize from practical issues. This approach
also enhances the researcher’s ability to improvise, developing him or her-
self as result of the process of research itself. Finally, this approach provides
a lens and framework for “messy” qualitative data, rich in high political
content. Such data can have both practical and theoretical uses. While the
data can be expressed and purified thorough contact with various theoreti-
cal perspectives, it can also generate insights for one’s own personal development and practice as an academic consultant.

**NOTE**

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