

Organic Change in Academic Research

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Consistency is the Mantra!

The [Scientific Method](#) is built upon the assumption that no matter how far outside the box an observation may seem, the assessment can always be validated by the subsequent testing and refinement of hypotheses.

With each iteration, it is argued, scientists are able to get closer to a clearer comprehension of what was observed. Provided those iterations are conducted with established methodologies, the results can be acknowledged as “accurate” within the confines of a broader commonly accepted code of research practice.

Is Qualitative Methodology Soft Science?

The two decades between the 1930s and 1950s saw a paradigm shift in favor of quantitative methods. The prevalent steady growth in acceptance of qualitative research methodologies coming out of anthropological and humanistic studies was brought to a dramatic halt.

Under the mantra of “if it can’t be measured it doesn’t exist,” qualitative methodologies built upon researcher observation were dismissed as being “soft science” that could not be aligned to the rigid conventionalism of statistical analysis.

Only after the passage of time and the development of a portfolio of successful research in environments where quantitative methodologies could not be applied did qualitative methods stage a complete recovery. The social upheaval of the 1960s and 1970s, in particular, and the subsequent growth in interest in phenomenology and ethnomethodology were critical to this revival.

It’s Not About One Methodology Versus the Other

The approach of accepting one [methodology](#) based on broad application with a corresponding derision of any alternative approaches is fundamentally [flawed](#).

A universal dismissal of one methodology until a specific research situation forces a revisitation of that dismissal is both closed-minded and potentially detrimental to the continued advancement of scientific knowledge.

If every new idea is benchmarked at an unattainable level of “better” or “not better enough,” future advances in research will be limited to routine incremental improvements rather than the transformational shifts that are often needed to move a body of knowledge forward.

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Burns and Stalker noted in *The Management of Innovation* that “organic structures are appropriate in unstable, turbulent, unpredictable environments and for nonroutine tasks and technologies.” Organic change should be equally nonlinear and non-routine.

Our current predilection for the incremental change of [applied research](#) projects may suit the risk aversion of the corporations funding such research, but the potential for transformative breakthroughs is severely limited in such an operational framework.

In addition, organic change, by definition, embraces new and unexpected problems as opportunities. They may be hard to justify in terms of grant applications and research study updates, but if we insist upon forced conformation into existing templates in the name of consistency and reliability, how will we know if a new approach that lies outside the norm has any value?

We know that the almighty [peer review process](#) is not perfect and yet it is treated as the only means of reassurance of research quality. The content of prestigious journals is automatically accepted as being of the highest quality with occasional retractions dismissed as minor anomalies. Such confinement to a “comfort zone” may prove to be counterproductive in the future if we do not find a way to embrace an organic change in academic research. After all, we are working in an unstable world of research and technological advancement.

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