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Empirical and Non-Empirical Methods

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Empirical and Non-Empirical Methods

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Abstract

The dividing line between empirical and non-empirical methods is marked by scholars' approach to knowledge gain (i.e., epistemology). Empirical methods typically involve systematic collection and analysis of data (i.e., observation and evidence). They are used primarily in quantitative research involving original collection of data, but also in secondary analyses and increasingly in qualitative research. Scholars using non-empirical methods consider that reflection, personal observation and authority/experience are just as valuable for knowledge acquisition as empirical data. In communication studies, scholars are likely to have a clear preference for either empirical or non-empirical methods. Yet, their scholarship may well include both.

Keywords: empirical methods, non-empirical methods, empirical research, non-empirical research

Scholars' preference for either empirical or non-empirical methods is motivated by beliefs regarding the nature of knowledge and ways to achieve it. Those employing empirical methods see systematic collection of material and/or analysis of data as the way to acquire knowledge. Those employing non-empirical methods value alternative ways, such as reflection on past scholarship or on a certain aspect of social life (see Figure 1).

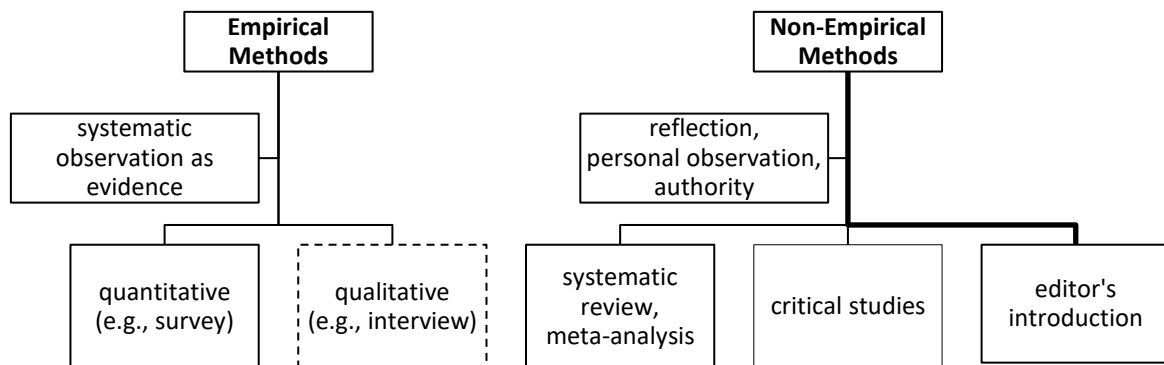


Figure 1. Empirical and Non-Empirical Methods (figure by author)

Empirical methods are employed in communication studies in an attempt to yield objective and consistent findings. This approach is positivistic in the sense that the social world is perceived as governed by laws or law-like principles that make it predictable. Initially, empirical methods have been equated with the use of quantitative measures (e.g., content analyses, surveys) and primary collection and analysis of data (e.g., Bavelas, 1995). Nowadays, secondary analyses and qualitative research are also considered empirical. It seems plausible to categorize qualitative research as empirical to the extent that scholars provide sufficient information that allows the reproduction of their findings (e.g., sampling strategy, data collection and analysis). However, this categorization is likely to be debatable.

Non-empirical methods can be divided into two categories. On the one hand are methods meant to review the progress in a certain field of research (e.g., systematic literature review, meta-analysis). On the other hand there are non-empirical methods that draw on personal observations, reflection on current events, and/or the authority or experience of the author (e.g., critical studies, editor's introduction).

Due to these differences between empirical and non-empirical methods, scholars are likely to have a clear preference for either empirical or non-empirical methods. This can go to such lengths that scholars deem others' results implausible. Stevenson (2014) spoke here of "two hostile camps". Scholars favoring empirical methods have repeatedly dismissed the work of their counterparts as not verifiable, subjective, irrelevant and non-scientific. In turn, scholars giving preference to non-empirical methods criticized empirical work as trivial, reductionist and as insufficient for theory building. Some of this criticism goes back to a time when qualitative

research was not considered empirical and is thus partly overlapping with the controversy over the value of qualitative vs. quantitative research.

It seems that the hostility between these two “camps” is slowly ebbing and more scholars are willing to employ both empirical and non-empirical methods when needed. In fact, some of the most influential publications in communication studies have been those employing both empirical and non-empirical methods. For instance, scholars may start by proposing a typology based on a systematic review of literature and then empirically test the assumptions made.

SEE ALSO: IECRM0084; IECRM0153; IECRM0197; IECRM0195; IECRM0188; IECRM0232

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Further Readings

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