

## A Researcher's Dilemma: Philosophy in Crafting Dissertations and Theses

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**ABSTRACT** The purpose of the present paper is to advance arguments that reflect on the researcher's dilemma caused by tendencies to conflate metatheory and paradigm in the crafting of dissertations and theses. Philosophy as an umbrella concept under which metatheory and paradigm are subsumed proves evasive in some social science dissertations and theses. Consequently, most novice researchers become confused by the conflated and unexplained use of these concepts in research. The researcher attempted to clarify philosophy, paradigm and metatheory as used in the social sciences in this paper. To this end, the paper demystified the use and relationship of research philosophy concepts normally found in dissertations and theses. This paper is primarily a theoretical exploration intended to guide beginning researchers on the scientific and scholarly use of the philosophy of research concepts in their dissertations and theses.

### INTRODUCTION

Philosophy has been practised and acclaimed historically by humankind for over two thousand years as the mother of all disciplines (Kamber 2011: 292), thus, claiming universal validity (Vidal 2007). Philosophy is considered as applied philosophy in other disciplines where it is known as philosophy of science (Siegel 2013), philosophy of education (Noddings 2011), philosophy of religion (Wainwright 2005), philosophy of mathematics (Russell 2008), philosophy of language (Lycan 2008) and others. This essay is a metaphilosophical reflection on how philosophy is used in dissertations and theses in the social sciences in particular and across various disciplines to make genre-appropriate judgments about research (Lee 2014). The paper strives to minimise philosophical misperceptions and related challenges inherent to usage of philosophy and its fundamental principles mainly in qualitative research (Tang 2011). An examina-

tion of dissertations and theses revealed great disparities in the use of philosophical underpinnings within social research studies (Nicholls 2005). In fact, some doctoral theses make no reference at all to philosophy, yet philosophy must be the driving force that guides theses (Sefotho 2013: 25). This is because philosophy is like a roadmap for research without which ones' investigation lacks illuminated direction. Some of the studies highlighting the importance of philosophy in research show that philosophy illuminates trans-disciplinary research and helps resolve problems of interdisciplinary integration (Evely et al. 2008). For instance, *The Importance of Philosophy to Engineering* as studied by Mitcham (1998), *PhD Students' Perceptions of the Relationship between Philosophy and Research: A Qualitative Investigation* by Efinger et al. (2005), *Research Philosophy Debates and Classifications: Students' Dilemma* by Mkansi and Acheampong (2012) as well as, *Importance of Philosophy in the Conduct of Educational Research* by Pring (2012). As observed by Bracken (2010), 'The practical implications are that, through a deeper awareness of the ontological substructures informing studies, researchers will be more clearly positioned to iteratively reflect upon, and define how best to engage with their research projects' (p. 1). Philosophy provides better understanding of the research process and aligns critical aspects of the dissertations and theses, addressing various dilemmas researchers might encounter. Lately philosophy

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is also applied to such recent fields as nanomedicine (Ofstedal 2014).

### **A Researcher's Dilemma in Crafting Dissertations and Theses**

Beginning researchers and post graduate students are confronted with a dilemma in making sense of terminology sometimes used in social science research (McIntyre 1998). Emerging from Greek etymology; the word dilemma presupposes a double proposition. In this paper, a researcher's dilemma means multiple propositions of explanation and choice of paradigms which make it difficult for researchers to make the right methodological choices for their dissertations and theses. It is however, important to recognise that varieties of paradigms are indicative of maturity of the philosophy of science. What is crucial is for researchers to understand all the different paradigms. Mackenzie and Knipe (2006) identify this dilemma as paradigms, methods and methodology. The researcher contend that in and of themselves, paradigms, methods and methodology may not be a dilemma; but understanding the intricate relationships and making correct choices among these processes is a dilemma for many novice researchers. The dilemma becomes an impediment when researchers have to use relevant philosophical concepts and principles (Laurence and Margolis 2003) in crafting dissertations and theses. Generally philosophy as a discipline and paradigm as a philosophical concept pose a dilemma as part of the phenomena less understood by many researchers (Margolis and Laurence 2007). Most of the philosophical concepts used in research might form part of jargon that makes it difficult for researchers to apply it effectively.

One of the most outstanding challenges of usage forming part of the dilemma may be aggravated by how paradigm is used interchangeably with its pillar principles in the form of ontological paradigm (Temple 1999; Rajbhandari and Takala 2011) or epistemological paradigm (Jelavic 2011). 'Together, ontological and epistemological assumptions make up a paradigm' (Mack 2010: 5). How then do they become paradigms, if not posing a researcher's dilemma? This dilemma spells out 'some perils of paradigms' as predicted by Atkinson (1995: 117). The overuse of the word paradigm seems to render its meaning fluid, resulting in multiple meanings (Mor-

gan 2007). Central to the dilemma is misalignment between philosophy and methods used in research projects (Knox 2004). It can be inferred that this dilemma may be a result of less informed understanding of the philosophical concepts underpinning research, with a related dilemma being that of 'the paradox of data and theory' (Pathirage et al. 2008: 4). A paradigm is associated with a model for doing research (Huitt 2011). Many models are available, but for the purposes of this paper I follow a model suggested by Muhammad et al. (2011). According to this model, a paradigm is made up of a philosophy, ontology, epistemology and methodology. Although acceptable for now, this model may need reviewing but that may be the subject of another paper. Basically, 'All research projects have philosophical foundations' (Hunt and Hansen 2011: 111), however, the researchers need to state their philosophical stances explicitly. In some Universities researchers are required to explicitly state the paradigm they follow as well as the metatheory that guides their research. To many this a difficult task as they may not know where to begin.

In the following section the researcher reviewed paradigm as a philosophical concept within the philosophy of research. Grounding research in philosophy to guide inquiry becomes complex to most beginning researchers. Through this paper, the researcher attempted to demystify the relationships between research and philosophy to alleviate a researcher's dilemma in understanding and using relevant concepts appropriately. The researcher began by examining fundamental philosophically central concepts (Jackman 2005) such as paradigm, philosophy, methodology and metatheory, while the researcher described how they relate to specific parts in the research protocol, sometimes known as the research proposal. Stredwick (2001) recognises 'the primacy of paradigms in directing and guiding research' (p. 7). In the following section the researcher closely reviewed the concept paradigm as used in the social sciences.

### **Paradigm**

In the arena of social sciences, paradigms are generally perceived and understood through their core ontological and epistemological assumptions emanating from distinct worldviews (Tang 2011). 'Paradigms of inquiry are historically based' and, therefore, change with time and

context (Plack 2005: 224). Notably, there are paradigm proliferations in many discourses currently (Lather 2006). Generally paradigm refers to scientific paradigms, philosophical paradigms or research paradigms. The word paradigm has become synonymous with the essence of research. As Grix (2004) remarks, '...all research takes place within a paradigm, whether it is explicitly stated or not' (p. 171). However, there appears to be no consensus in the classification and categorisation of paradigms (Mkansi and Acheampong 2012), which led to paradigm wars still prevalent among researchers today (Oakley 1999; Alise and Teddlie 2010; Denzin 2010).

There are many research paradigms (Harrits 2011) and paradigm is used in this paper to refer to research paradigms (Krauss 2005; McGregor and Murnane 2010). Researchers need to make conscious choices of paradigms or work towards paradigm harmonisation, stepping beyond paradigm wars (Jones and Kennedy 2012). In this paper, the researcher reviewed the social sciences research paradigms such as positivism, post positivism, interpretivism and pragmatism (Wahyuni 2012). Tang (2011) suggested that there are eleven foundational paradigms in social sciences. Indeed more classifications of paradigms exist (see Gray 2009) such as that suggested by Guba and Lincoln (1994). These different classifications provide researchers with a wider and appropriate choice for their studies. The antecedents of the concept paradigm can be traced back to ancient philosophers such as Plato and Aristotle (Göktürk 2011), but extensive and modern use of the word is attributed to the context of science through the work of Thomas Kuhn (Coletto 2013; Wray 2010).

Current usage of the word paradigm can be traced back to Kuhn (1962) who tried to establish the difference between natural sciences and the social sciences (Wray 2010). Kuhn's work on paradigms became an important milestone in philosophy of science. Hoyningen-Huene (1989) notes that Kuhn's *Structure of Scientific Revolution* of 1962 promoted the emergence of terms among which paradigm became prominent. Wray (2009: 2) portrays Kuhn as claiming that, "...paradigms are a standard feature of the natural sciences, but not of the social sciences". In later writings, Kuhn had changed and described a paradigm as "...examples of successful practice" Kuhn (1977: 318) as cited in (Wray 2009: 2). In this study, a paradigm is described as a philo-

sophical lens and a way of conducting research which is agreed upon by a community of researchers in their field and established over time as a standard to follow. A paradigm is informed by how such researchers view the world and make sense of it.

World views form the bases of paradigms in fact paradigms are sometimes known as world views (Huitt 2011) and are the highest manifestation of philosophy (Wolters 1989). It is from worldviews that beliefs about phenomena are formed and consequent practices follow. As with many important concepts, paradigm has been interpreted and defined in a plethora of ways, but the general focus is around paradigm as a set of beliefs and practices, as well as world views that influence researchers (Morgan 2007). It is important to note that paradigm is contingent upon established ways of doing research which influence sets of beliefs and research practices. Equally these may influence how researchers perceive the world (establish a worldview) and subsequently understand it (Heron and Reason 1997). Depending on their sets of beliefs, researchers are likely to practice research following the beliefs they hold about phenomena and about the world. If a researcher is interested in the experiences of people, such a researcher is likely to study those experiences as a way of understanding the world.

Philosophers' understanding of the world is informed by the philosophy they espouse. Generally, the role of philosophy is a search for answers about meaning of complex phenomena. According to Wolters (1989: 3), 'the goal of philosophy is to address the highest questions of meaning and value, and these it must deal with on the level of worldview'. The search is aimed at understanding the world (Kamil 2011). As it is, the world is a broad and complex concept, and therefore, the metaphor understanding the world needs to be examined. The world can be understood from own experiences and from those of others. The world in this sense refers to a social world and the experiences of people in that social world. These many experiences form one's view of the world, popularly known as a world view. Hart (2010: 2) elaborates that:

*Worldviews are cognitive, perceptual, and affective maps that people continuously use to make sense of the social landscape and to find their ways to whatever goals they seek. They are developed throughout a person's lifetime*

*through socialization and social interaction. They are encompassing and pervasive in adherence and influence. Yet, they are usually unconsciously and uncritically taken for granted as the way things are. While they rarely alter in any significant way, worldviews can change slowly over time. A worldview can hold discrepancies and inconsistencies between beliefs and values within the worldview. Hence, worldviews often contain incongruencies.*

The incongruence contained in the worldviews call for a continuous search for answers to local and global phenomena. Sometimes worldviews converge, other times they diverge. Divergent worldviews usually become phenomena for philosophical inquiry as they challenge the status quo and Wolters (1989) affirmed that “worldview crowns philosophy” (p. 3). For instance, the worldview of family is changing locally and globally due to phenomena such as orphan hood (Boyes and Cluver 2013), child headed households (Phillips 2011), same-sex marriages (Woodford et al. 2011), children born and growing up in prison (Lejarraga et al. 2011), children marginalised by poverty and disability (Liasidou 2012). There are many more examples that form worldviews with their inherent incongruence. In research, approaches to research such as qualitative, quantitative and mixed-method could also be seen as worldviews about how to conduct research. It is the object of philosophy to establish informed decision-making and understanding about different worldviews. Therefore, philosophy becomes instrumental in searching for answers to incongruent phenomena in the world as it supports other disciplines in finding answers. Paradigm therefore should be central to the crafting of research studies. Understanding different paradigms is consequently crucial for researchers to choose a paradigm that is appropriate for their study.

A paradigm is paramount to how people form belief systems and develop theories as well as how others form belief systems about the theories preceding their metatheories. A paradigm can be seen as the main philosophical frame of reference that guides the researcher (Tuli 2010). Paradigms occupy a very central place in qualitative research. A paradigm, thus, should become the driving force behind the whole research process (Gray 2009). When researchers choose to follow a particular paradigm, they must do so conscious that they are aligning themselves to

the precepts, principles and methodologies of that particular paradigm. That means there should be alignment and harmony of the research processes indicative of the paradigm chosen from the topic to the conclusions of the study. It is recommended that researchers overtly declare the paradigms they use in their studies as paradigms are critical in research (Holliday 2007). They should then make paradigmatic assumptions (Thota et al. 2012) stated in ways that showed what their ontological, epistemological, methodological as well as their metatheoretical stances are (Bhaskar and Danermark 2006). This also helps the researcher to be congruent and consistent throughout the study. Now I review the some of the major paradigms generally used in research starting with positivism. Please note that the pattern of how these paradigms are presented is but just one of the many classifications in social science research. Many more models exist.

### **Positivism**

Positivism has been generally regarded as a dominant paradigm (Morgan 2007). Paradigms are generally polarised into positivism and post positivism as overarching research paradigms (Castellan 2010). Positivism is purported to promote methodological monism (Nudzor 2009) which claims that the right way to provide certain knowledge can be established through objectivity and quantification (Kamil 2011). Objectivity implies that the researcher and the reality being researched are separate and objective reality exists beyond the human mind (Weber 2004). To establish meaning ‘positivist researchers believe that they can reach a full understanding based on experiment and observation’ (Ryan 2006: 13). ‘Positivism allows us to gain objective scientific information’ (Farr n.d.: 2). The basis of science proper is anchored upon empirical observation and experimentation and is therefore, objective and neutral (Strauss 2012).

Positivism has been discredited however, as having an *Achilles heel* (Strauss 2003) compelling a paradigm shift towards post positivism (Barr and Tagg 1995). Primarily, positivism is criticised for claiming that ‘...science aims at the explanation and prediction of observable phenomena by presenting these as derivable from general laws that hold in all regions of space and time’ (Keat 1980: 4). The central criticism

surrounds general laws that hold in all regions of space and time. This has seemingly been a major failure of positivism. Caldwell (1980) notes that critics of positivism included Karl Popper and Herbert Marcuse in the field of philosophy while some neo-Marxists featured in the field of economics. Indeed, one is inclined to believe that there exist many more critiques of positivism in many other fields of knowledge. Nonetheless, in this paper, the researcher does not encourage the wholesale overturn of positivism, but rather, an adaptation of aspects that can be found to add value to opposing paradigms such as post positivism.

### *Post Positivism*

The evolution of post positivism emerged through the need for an alternative to positivism (Morgan 2007; Racher and Robinson 2003). Paradigms seem to beget counter-paradigms. According to Henderson (2011: 432), '...post-positivism provides another paradigm that can move positivism from a narrow perspective into a more encompassing way to examine real world problems'. This is perhaps the reason why in some typologies positivism and post positivism are classified under one paradigm (Hà 2011; Mackenzie and Knipe 2006). Post positivism believes in generalisation just as positivism does, but takes a critical realist stance (Bisman 2010; Downward et al. 2002) in recognising social reality and social phenomena in the social world (Wahyuni 2012). Post positivism does not totally disqualify positivism but extends it beyond the narrow view of looking at reality as capable of being generalised. Post positivism considers reality in more expansive ways (Henderson 2011). Thus, Guba (1990) considers post positivism as a modified version of positivism. If it is a modified version, has post positivism really changed its worldview from that of positivism?

Post positivism equally fell out of favour with many researchers because of its deficiencies as a paradigm. Lapid (1989: 239) observed that post positivism presents itself as incoherent and 'loosely patched up'. It is mostly difficult to identify what exactly constitutes post positivism as a philosophy and therefore as a paradigm. On another level, Tekin and Kotaman (2013) perceive post positivism's foundational assumption to be problematic because it denies the existence of facts and laws. Post positivism ac-

quires a distanced view or an overview of research phenomena and the researcher following post positivism is equally distanced from that which is researched (Ryan 2005). This distancing also leads to another problem of post positivism, that of claiming to be 'value free' as values are seen as confounding variables in positivism (Guba and Lincoln 1994: 114). It becomes apparent that the value free stance places post positivism in an awkward position to research social phenomena. It is virtually impossible for researchers to completely discard their values when they engage in research. As the primary instruments, researchers carry their values with them throughout the research process. These values call for and could be accommodated within the interpretivist paradigm.

### *Interpretivism*

The term "interpretivist" describes a non-positivist approach to research (Leitch et al. 2010: 68). Interpretivism discards a binary worldview represented by positivism and post positivism and introduces multiple paradigms which address multiple realities as found in society; such as the feminist paradigm, disability paradigm, and indigenous paradigm among others (Hart 2010). De Villiers (2005: 12) traced the origins of interpretivism from the social sciences and the humanities and establishes its aim as '...to find new interpretations or underlying meaning from multiple realities'. It is from interpretivism that research begins to embrace multiple worldviews as holding multiple realities for different researchers. Phenomena are value-related and consequently lead to multiple meanings depending on time and context (De Villiers 2005). The interpretivist approach acknowledges that meaning is socially constructed (Andrade 2009) and '...can reveal hidden aspects of the culture and worldview' (Roth and Mehta 2002: 133).

The critics of interpretivism, among whom prominently feature 'Giddens and Rex, have argued that interpretivism fails to acknowledge the role of institutional structures, particularly divisions of interest and relations of power' (Blaikie 2004: 6). The non-acknowledgement of institutional structures is likely to disadvantage research related to policy; divisions of interest contradict the multiple views and *value-ladenness* of interpretivism and power relations pose a serious threat to marginalised groups such as

the disabled, the unemployed and people of different sexual orientations. Researchers may have to be aware of these criticisms as they usually further marginalise the already disadvantaged groups. Sometimes, the practical nature of research may be questioned on the grounds of how best it addresses the day to day problems of members of society. The researcher now reviewed pragmatism as a paradigm in research.

### **Pragmatism**

Pragmatism as a research paradigm emerges as accepting both singular and multiple realities in the world, setting itself towards solving practical problems in the real world (Feilzer 2010). This is a paradigm that seems to be both a pacifier between paradigms as well as breaking way from the grips of dominant paradigms (Reason 2003). Pragmatism also takes a very bold step of pretending to solve practical problems in the real world (Gray 2009). The phrase *real world* sounds reminiscent of *phenomenon* as described later in this paper. I describe the real world as the specific and subjective contexts in which people spend their day to day living, which provides real world research problems for social scientists. Equally, Gray (2009: 9) identifies that ‘... the real world comprises of any setting where human beings come together for communication, relationships or discourse’. Ormerod (2006: 892) identified that ‘the core idea of pragmatism is that beliefs are guides to actions emphasising the practical, commonsense, scientific approach embedded in pragmatism’. Central to pragmatism is the *practical* nature of being, reality or phenomenon. Ormerod (2006: 892-893) succinctly explicated that:

*“...the word pragmatism has for me positive connotations. I take it to be about being practical, getting things done, doing things a step at a time, not allowing the best to be the enemy of the good, taking account of others’ views, not being hung up on unattainable principles and yielding on some issues in order to make progress on others.”*

Through pragmatism, researchers become aware and are receptive of the ideas of others. Philosophical pragmatism acknowledges that ‘...ideas and practices should be judged in terms of their usefulness, workability and practicality’ (Reason 2003: 104). There seems to be recognition of power relations also expected to filter

down to the participants providing their ideas in research studies. Shields (1998), observed that because it speaks to the world of practice, pragmatism has the potential to unblock many roads to research. In order to unblock many roads in the philosophy of research, below is a discussion of a model to demystify the dilemma experienced by many novice researchers.

### **The POEM Model of Paradigm**

The researcher represented and explicated philosophies that underpin research in academia, popularly known as research philosophies. According to Krauss (2005: 259), ‘understanding the differences in epistemology among research paradigms begins primarily as a philosophical exercise’. Thus, philosophy precedes paradigm. Nonetheless, the researcher acknowledged the framework by Muhammad et al. (2011) and accepted it as providing important insight into understanding the relationship between philosophy and paradigm. The model provides a mnemonic device which should aid easy retention of paradigm structure by students. Considered under the rubric of paradigm, philosophy assumes the position of a research philosophy which links well with ontology, epistemology and methodology. First, the researcher reflected on paradigm as an overarching concept then philosophy, ontology, epistemology and methodology as philosophical concepts that underpin any research paradigm which must be inherent and explicitly stated in the research process (Burke 2007). The researcher considered philosophy as a researcher’s point of departure under the framework below.

### **Philosophy**

Identifying a research philosophy that guides one’s life is a crucial step in self-positioning as an inhabitant of a world that is continually becoming complex. It becomes more of an imperative as a researcher to espouse a research philosophy to guide a dissertation or a thesis and ‘make explicit what is implicit’ in order to illuminate research (Pring 2012: 28). Philosophy need not be intimidating in research since it occupies a very crucial role in the research process: that of *a light that must not be put under a bushelin order to illuminate* research (Hirshleifer et al. 2012). Philosophy must

illuminate the research process because inquiry into human affairs is a philosophical undertaking. Given its importance in guiding humanity in the search for meaning, philosophy has been variously defined. A classical definition of philosophy is that it is a study or pursuit of wisdom (Sample 2009). According to Macdonald (2001: 1), 'wisdom is not one thing; it is a whole array of better-than-ordinary ways of being, and living, and dealing with the world'. This definition re-emphasises illumination as better-than-ordinary ways of being and living and dealing with the world. Thus, the better-than-ordinary ways of being are perceived as ways of being of a researcher as exemplified by inquiring minds (Kvanvig 1998), living in ways that reflect an attitude of living a life that contributes to the betterment of humanity and interacting with the world in ways reflective of transformation and conservation.

Wisdom is also variously defined, but Diane (2001: 253) defines it as '...a value system that balances concern for oneself with concern for others and extra personal concerns such as concern for the environment'. It is such concerns that lead researchers to embark on inquiries of various sorts in attempts to bring about equilibrium with philosophy as guide. Dodson (1908) identifies one of the functions of philosophy as that of helping the researcher to organise the content of his mind, and to attain a comprehensive world-view. Reflecting back to philosophy as love of wisdom, a relationship becomes apparent with organisation of the content of the researcher's mind and attainment of a comprehensive worldview. In this paper, the researcher defined philosophy as a process of knowledge search and acquisition towards a comprehensive worldview that allows reading the world for understanding self and one's environment.

Philosophy can also be defined through the functions it performs in the real world (Gray 2009). Sternberg (2001: 228) indicated that:

*'Robinson points out that, ...there are three different senses of wisdom: wisdom as (a) sophia, which is found in those who seek a contemplative life in search of truth; (b) phronesis, which is the kind of practical wisdom shown by statesmen and legislators; and (c) episteme, which is found in those who understand things from a scientific point of view'.*

Although, all three senses of wisdom are important in research, it is *episteme* that forms a

foundation for research in that it seeks knowledge and understanding (Krauss 2005). Indeed, *episteme* also interlinks with *phronesis* or practical wisdom which must be imbedded in the methodology of the research project. Understanding *episteme* then becomes vital if researchers are to contribute meaningfully to human affairs. It is fundamental to examine *episteme* within the context of its use in philosophies of research, especially in the social sciences. Below, the researcher examined the role of philosophy in the social sciences.

### **The Role of Philosophy in Social Science Research**

Philosophy has a specific role in qualitative research, and that is to understand phenomena (Bobbitt et al. 1990). What then is a phenomenon? This is one of the central questions which have been a concern of philosophy for centuries. Dahlberg (2006: 11) explained a phenomenon by pointing towards its essence, which is; 'that which makes a phenomenon to be that very phenomenon, in other words; ...an essence could be understood as a structure of essential meanings that explicates a phenomenon of interest'. By implication, a phenomenon is not tangible, it is not an entity or a thing; it is an essential component of a being to be studied, a being whose meaning philosophers speculate upon and researchers seek. In other words, the essence of a phenomenon is *sub-rosa*, covert, and therefore, has to be divulged in order to be understood. Thus, through research, especially qualitative research, the essence or meaning of phenomena needs to be revealed for understanding. In essence, 'research paradigms address the philosophical dimensions of social sciences' as phenomena to be studied (Wahyuni 2012: 69).

Qualitative research is therefore fundamentally phenomenological and is referred to as interpretive phenomenological research (Miner-Romanoff 2012). Van Manen (2007: 12) perceives phenomenology as '...a fascination with meaning' and "phenomenology is the study of essences", (Merleau-Ponty 1995: vii). More clearly, Converse (2012: 28) contends that: 'Phenomenology is a philosophical perspective that helps researchers to explore and understand everyday experiences without pre-supposing knowledge of those experiences'. The words phenomenology, essence and meaning are profoundly

difficult to explain. They form part of philosophical and linguistic impasse that spans centuries of debate and are sometimes known as complex phenomena (Hayek 1967). It is these complex phenomena which form the object of research, especially qualitative research (Lauer 2013). Phenomena are fundamentally important for qualitative researchers (Sale et al. 2002). They must seek understanding of people's lived experiences as phenomena for inquiry.

Phenomenon is a philosophical construct which, therefore, places philosophy at the centre of social science research. The complexity of the construct phenomenon renders it philosophical in nature. Phenomenon is an oxymoron of anything and not anything particularly. 'Phenomenology is a way to educate our vision, to define our posture, to broaden the way we look at the world ... a powerful tool for research in human science' (Mortari and Tarozzi: 10). When a researcher conducts a phenomenological study, it is primarily to understand a particular phenomenon. Such a phenomenon could be anything of interest to the researcher or one that is suggested by the research supervisor, department or faculty, even a University. As such, a phenomenon would be defined by the application of philosophy in researching the area of interest, which could practically be anything within the social sciences and beyond!

The affinity of philosophy with the social sciences emerges from philosophy's interest in human affairs. Philosophy applies itself to the social life of human beings and therefore studies any science relevant to social life. Philosophy ought to be a part of each science in all departments and faculties (Dodson 1908). Within the social sciences, philosophy scientifically studies social phenomena. The social phenomena may include interactions between human beings and their interaction with the environment. Next I turn to the concept of ontology.

### *Ontology*

As a philosophical construct, ontology is understood to be the study of being (Crotty 1998: 10). For Grix (2002), 'ontology is the starting point of all research' (p. 177) as a researcher starts asking philosophical questions about the reality they want to study. As a philosophy of research construct, the meaning of ontology is extended to the study of reality (Gray 2009). Both

being and reality are in themselves complex constructs which can be subjected to extensive research. In the paper, the researcher perceived ontology as the study of research phenomena. Thus, phenomena represent the being or reality of the subject matter of research. Such subject matter exemplifies *non-entities* which usually form the subject matter of qualitative research in the form of ideas, feelings, emotions and attitudes encapsulated in *experiences of research participants* (Borck 2011). Experiences are fundamental to social science research as they constitute phenomena for inquiry.

Ontology therefore can be said to study conceptions of being, reality or the phenomenon of the presenting research problem. Researchers then form their own conceptualisations of being, reality or phenomenon they are researching. 'Researchers need to take a position regarding their perceptions of how things really are and how things really work' (Scotland 2012: 9). As a result, researchers take a particular ontological stance which they need to declare. Such a stance is sometimes made public through ontological assumptions of studies '... concerned with what constitutes reality, in other words what is' (Scotland 2012: 9). There existed an iterative link between ontology and the problem statement in a research study. The researcher states the reality or being or the phenomenon to be studied in a form of a problem. The problem statement is one of the trickiest aspects of most research proposals. If not adequately and succinctly stated, any research study is rendered weak because it is not clear what the problem is it sets to investigate. It is equally important for researchers to explicitly state their ontological assumptions about the being, reality or phenomenon they research about (Höijer 2008). Researchers have or form their own beliefs about being, reality or phenomena. The following aspect of a paradigm then is establishing how the researcher knows about being, reality or phenomena of research; that is, epistemology.

### *Epistemology*

Epistemology is a branch of philosophy concerned with the nature and forms of knowledge (Cohen et al. 2007: 7). The concept of *knowledge*, however, presents what is referred to as a *knower's paradox* in that there is no absolute notion of knowledge (Kroon 1993). The paradox



of the knower begets the *epistemic paradox* (Burge 1984) in research in that the researcher is faced with the task to establish what can be known (Kroon 1993). This scenario is compounded by the proliferation of epistemologies in academia (Pallas 2001). It is, perhaps, this paradox that prompts human beings to want to know and researchers to feel obliged to provide answers. It is generally agreed that epistemology as a theory of knowledge answers the question: 'How, and what, can we know?' (Willig 2013: 6).

The objective of epistemology is the production of knowledge and reflection (How, and what can we know) on different knowledge claims about phenomena (Soini et al. 2011). Researchers are expected to make explicit their epistemological positions, stances, claims, or assumptions (Kamil 2011). Epistemological assumptions are concerned with how knowledge can be created, acquired and communicated, in other words what it means to know. Guba and Lincoln (1994: 108) explained that epistemology asks the question, 'what is the nature of the relationship between the would-be knower and what can be known?' Researchers have a responsibility to declare their epistemological positions in their dissertations or theses in order to provide direction both for themselves and their readers. The epistemological positions must be informed by a paradigm followed.

### METHODOLOGY

Introducing methodology, Sobh and Perry (2006: 1195) note that: 'Essentially, ontology is 'reality', epistemology is the relationship between that reality and the researcher and methodology is the technique used by the researcher to discover that reality'. Paradigm as a set of beliefs and practices forms the basis or link to methodology. There are varieties of research methodologies designed to address a multiplicity of problems in research (Tuli 2010). Methodology must be informed by a paradigm, be it a positivist, post positivist or interpretivist paradigm. According to Hesse-Biber and Leavy (2011: 5), there are three major methodological approaches in qualitative research: (1) post-positivist, (2) interpretive, and (3) critical. Post-positivism posits that the social world is patterned and that causal relationships can be discovered and tested via reliable strategies. The interpretive position assumes the social world is con-

stantly being constructed through group interactions, and thus, social reality can be understood via the perspectives of social actors enmeshed in meaning-making activities. Critical perspectives also view social reality as an ongoing construction but go further to suggest that discourses created in shifting fields of social power shape social reality and the study of it.

Usually, the researchers merely mention that they follow a qualitative research methodology, without being specific about which methodology among a gamut of methodologies found in qualitative research they are espousing. Methodologies must follow a paradigm, and within paradigms, existed a wealth of methodologies to choose from. Methodology is the strategy or plan of action which lies behind the choice and use of particular methods (Crotty 1998: 3). Thus, methodology is concerned with why, what, from where, when and how data is collected and analysed. Guba and Lincoln (1994: 108) explained that methodology asks the question: how can the inquirer go about finding out whatever they believe can be known? (Scotland 2012). Karatas, -Özkan and Murphy (2009: 455) potentially answer the aforementioned question thus:

*... each paradigm offers a research focus and means of classifying and construing social phenomena. Paradigmatic choices are made by the social scientists according to the purpose of the research endeavour and the researcher's philosophical assumptions about the nature of reality (ontology) and the best ways of enquiring into the nature of this reality (epistemology).*

Researchers have to make methodological decisions cognisant of a paradigm within which they are working, in other words, there has to be alignment between methodology and paradigm (Morgan 2007). Wahyuni (2012: 72) perceived methodology as 'a model to conduct a research within the context of a particular paradigm'. The methodology follows beliefs about ontology and epistemological stances within a paradigm (Gray 2009). A researcher should be guided by the underlying belief systems of a paradigm they have chosen to study phenomena. For instance, a researcher following an indigenous research paradigm will do well to engage indigenous methodologies based on indigenous worldviews in their inquiry (Hart 2010). A methodological choice has to be an informed and appropriate participant-focused one (Kovach 2010). This means the researcher has to think holistically of

the research project and the implications of undertaking it given the paradigm chosen. Methodology should be a fulcrum upon which the uneven processes of research find a balance. A paradigm then serves as a guide that gently but firmly steers the research process in an appropriate direction. However, a paradigm must be based on a particular philosophy. Methodological choice should be rooted in a paradigm. Central to paradigms is theorising about being, reality and phenomena.

Reflecting on the model proposed by Muhammad et al. (2011) leaves a critical question unanswered: what is the relationship between philosophy and paradigm? The researcher contended that philosophy precedes paradigm and therefore propose the following model as clarifying the researcher's dilemma regarding this intricate relationship.

Philosophy is central to the formation of a paradigm and therefore fundamental as a guiding principle for a paradigm. Different schools of thought in philosophy provide frameworks through which different people view the world, for instance; existentialism, humanism, phenomenology, pragmatism, empiricism and rationalists to name but a few. Paradigms emerge from these philosophical schools as they provide established ways of viewing the world and doing things. Paradigms provide guidance within particular philosophical schools of thought for ontology, epistemology and methodology. Metatheory relates to how researchers theorise about phenomena and, therefore, provides direction for analysis and sometimes development of theoretical and conceptual frameworks. For further illumination, it is pertinent to examine the place of metatheory in a paradigm (See Fig. 1).

## OBSERVATIONS AND DISCUSSION

### The Place of Metatheory in a Paradigm: Solving the Dilemma

#### Metatheory

Metatheory is generally conflated with paradigm and this causes a metatheoretical impasse (Sklair 1988). It is imperative to clarify the relationship and solve the predicament this dilemma poses for many beginning researchers. While a theory is a set of propositions (Sklair 1988), metatheory is '... about the structure and implications of existent theories' (Turner 1990: 38). Thus, the metatheory is indeed theory about a particular theory in a certain field of study '... engaging in philosophical debate, and offering ideological critique and commentary' (p. 39). Similarly, metatheory, therefore, relates to the part of research that concerns itself with theory within a given paradigm (Brink et al. 2012). Metatheory can assist researchers to be theory-specific in the choice of theories they use to support their research. Kari (1998: 2) explored that '... a metatheory could be called the 'spirit' of a theory'. Metatheory deals with the conceptualisation of phenomena but not with reality *per se* (Kari). This definition differs from definitions of a paradigm which refer to a worldview, a set of beliefs or a model. Thus, in this paper metatheory and paradigm are not conflated.

Since, the metatheory focuses on the analysis of theories, it should facilitate the need to distinguish between theoretical frameworks and conceptual frameworks and how these add value to research and knowledge (Wallis 2010: 78). This could rightfully be pointed out as the part dealing with literature review. In the review, a

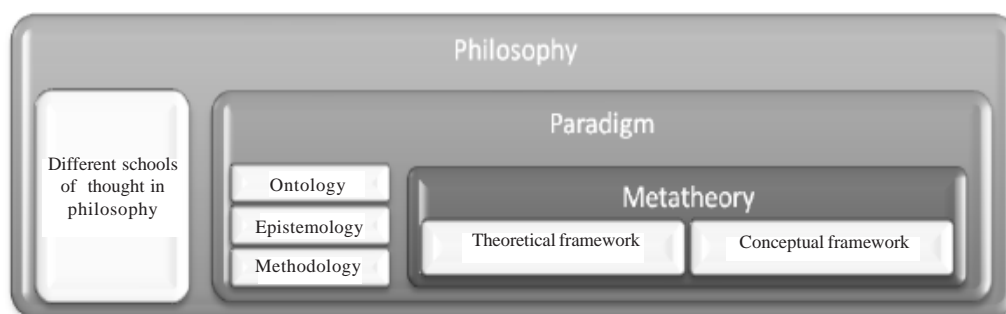


Fig. 1. The relationship of philosophy, paradigm and metatheory (PPM)

researcher uses or analyses the phenomenon under study from a certain established theoretical perspective. Besides, Bronfenbrenner's biological theory is used in many dissertations and theses. A researcher then makes theoretical assumptions about how the theory they use in their study is likely to provide answers to the research question/s, thus, metatheorising. Turner (1990: 40) cautioned that metatheory should not lead researchers towards unresolvable philosophical debates, but towards clarification of concepts used in theories. Among the 9 suggestions made by Turner about what metatheory can do, the researcher subscribed to the following: 'extract what is viewed as useful and plausible in a theory from what is considered less so and make deductions from a theory so as to facilitate empirical assessment'. To these the researcher added; use metatheory as a platform to develop a conceptual framework that addresses the phenomenon you are researching instead of only repeating the main theory wholesale. Use the opportunity to undertake research as a chance to make your own contribution to scholarship. Finally, the researcher concurred with Bates (2005: 2) that 'The philosophy behind the theory, the fundamental set of ideas about how phenomena of interest in a particular field should be thought about and researched'. Metatheory is therefore pertinent to particular sciences. Metatheoretical assumption should be declared within the scope of the science from where theories emanate. Researchers have to identify metatheories available in their particular disciplines, study them and make assumptions about how such metatheories would help them in their respective dissertations and theses.

### CONCLUSION

The extent of the discussion throughout the paper indicated that novice researchers face a dilemma in understanding fundamental philosophy of research concepts such as philosophy, paradigm and metatheory. It has been established through this paper that it is unnecessary to be weary of using philosophy in the crafting of dissertations and theses. Through explication of meanings of philosophy, paradigm and metatheory, it may be possible to develop studies grounded in philosophy of social science research. Metatheory appeared to be tricky as it is generally conflated with paradigm, but once clear

distinctions are made, it is possible to clear away the dilemma faced by beginning researcher.

### RECOMMENDATIONS

To alleviate a researcher's dilemma, at post graduate level, it is fundamentally prudent to introduce philosophy courses at under graduate levels. The role of philosophy within the social sciences should be clearly defined within Universities. PhD candidates should also be encouraged to follow specific philosophies and craft their theses based on their choice. More research is desirable in the area of the philosophy of research and its role in informing dissertations and theses.

### LIMITATIONS

As only a small section of the PhD study, the area of philosophy was not adequately and empirically informed in order to sufficiently inform the current paper.

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