

Specifying the object of the research an essential prerequisite the case of research on responsible human resources management.

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ABSTRACT:

Commitment to a research project is found at the start of any research work that puts the researcher in front of a general question that is a little vague or not clearly formulated. Research involves a balance between theory and empiricism. The determination of the object of the research is generally the result of back and forth, between the field and the theories, or even between the different theories, its evolution is often continuous and variable until its delimitation and its final fixation.

It is an essential prerequisite of the research process, it will guide the theoretical research, on the ground and the methodology followed. It corresponds to the main question posed at the beginning of the research project. Through this article, we highlight “How the researcher can specify the object of the research within the framework of a hypothetico-deductive approach? In addition, we illustrate the process with a case in management science dealing with the responsible management of human resources.

KEY WORDS: responsible management of human resources, hypothetico-deductive, research object, research process.

RESUMÉ :

L'engagement dans un projet de recherche, se trouve au début de tout travail de recherche mettant le chercheur devant une question générale, un peu floue ou n'est pas clairement formulable. La recherche implique un équilibre entre théorie et empirisme. La détermination de l'objet de la recherche est généralement le fruit d'allers et retours, entre le terrain et les théories, ou encore entre les différentes théories, son évolution est souvent continue et variable jusqu'à sa délimitation et sa fixation finale.

Il est un préalable incontournable du processus de recherche, il guidera la recherche théorique, sur terrain et la méthodologie suivie. Il correspond à la question principale posée en début du projet de recherche. A travers cet article nous mettons en évidence « Comment le chercheur peut spécifier l'objet de la recherche dans le cadre d'une démarche hypothético-déductive ? » Et nous illustrons le processus par un cas en sciences de gestion portant sur la gestion responsable des ressources humaines.

MOTS CLÉS: la gestion responsable des ressources humaines, hypothético-déductive, objet de recherche, processus de recherche.

1. INTRODUCTION

The subject of research is an indispensable prerequisite in the research process, enabling the researcher to concretize their project. It provides the roadmap that guides theoretical and on-field research and the methodology employed. It corresponds to the main question posed at the beginning of the research project.

Through this article, we aim to emphasize this initial step in any research methodology. We present a practical case of a thesis project under the theme: Responsible Human Resource Management. This theme leads us to address the practices of this new approach to Human Resource Management (HRM) during the pandemic and to illustrate how certain Moroccan SMEs reacted in terms of HRM. It would be challenging to adequately address all the questions related to this theme and the exhaustive appropriate methodology in a few pages. In this regard, we specify that the chosen paradigm is post-positivism. This paradigm is an enhancement of positivism, preserving the foundations of positivism: ontological realism, the possibility and desire to find objective truth, and the use of experimental methodology.

The hypothetico-deductive approach is the most commonly used in post-positivism by researchers. Through this approach, characterized primarily by empirical tests to validate or refute one or more hypotheses, the researcher arrives at reasonable deductions related to their initial theory or the one constructed. It is, in a way, the answer to the question, "What am I searching for?" In this perspective, we first define what we mean by the research object and show that it can take on different meanings depending on the epistemological assumptions of the researcher. We then discuss the ways in which we can develop the research object for our example subject: responsible human resource management.

2. Building the Research Object in a Hypothetico-Deductive Approach

The hypothetico-deductive approach involves deriving truths through rigorous and systematic experimentation. The researcher is obliged to observe reality without any preconceived ideas to deduce concepts, hypotheses, theories, and laws. This empiricist approach begins with hypotheses and concludes with results.

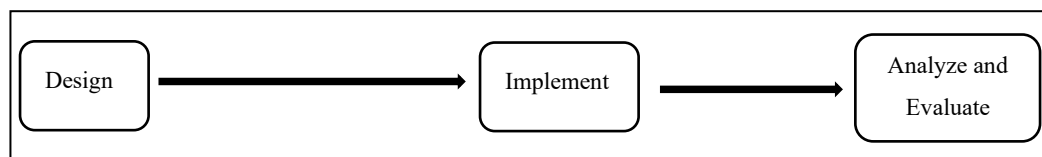
To construct the research object in a specific manner, it is necessary to further elaborate on what is meant by "research object" and therefore to present possible answers to a pressing question: How can one construct and specify the research object within the framework of a post-positivist approach? To provide further clarification, we will aim to define the research process and introduce the terminology used within this approach. We will also illustrate the process of constructing the research object by specifying foundational concepts.

2.1. The Research Process: A Homogeneous Set

In the context of a scientific approach, research can be conducted from various perspectives or positions, such as constructivist, positivist, or the post-positivist approach known as hypothetico-deductive. However, the process of scientific research typically involves common phases. It is inherently incomplete, being a questioning process that does not emerge explicitly from the outset. It results from the identification of a problem: A problem can be defined as a perceived gap between an unsatisfactory initial situation and a desirable end situation. A research process is undertaken to bridge this gap (Mace and Petry, 2000). It is a more or less complex construction aimed at clearly defining objectives. Indeed, if the research object is well formulated, the phases of this process proceed smoothly and with relevance.

Generally, each research process consists of a predetermined number of components and stages, starting from the initial intuition to document writing and concluding with concrete results in terms of theory and fieldwork. The stages of the research process are not standardized and vary from one approach to another. However, the classic stages used in a hypothetico-deductive approach are presented in the figure below:

Figure N° 1 : The classical steps in a hypothetico-deductive approach



Reference : Yvonne Giordano, Alain Jolibert. Spécifier l'objet de la recherche. Méthodologie de la recherche. Réussir son mémoire ou sa thèse en sciences de gestion, Pearson Education, 2008, p. 48.

The figure above illustrates the three main stages of the research process in the hypothetico-deductive approach. First, the design of the research object - problem and research question - the researcher must explain why they are beginning a research project in order to formulate their research object clearly. Therefore, they are obliged to carefully choose the object, conducting a literature review, constructing a theoretical framework, and deducing hypotheses for their research. Depending on the nature of the research, the time interval varies from a few weeks to several months for the design of the research object.

The second phase of the process involves constructing the architecture of the research, ensuring the connection between theoretical concepts and collected and processed data. In this phase, the researcher moves to the implementation or action in the literal sense, through their research plan.

They proceed to choose the sample, collect data, and code and process this data. However, in most cases, this action phase occurs after finalizing the theoretical framework. In other words, it's the field where the two famous qualitative and quantitative methods appear.

The third and final step - logically - is the analysis and evaluation of the results obtained from the research action itself. It is at this level that the researcher validates or refutes the initial hypotheses. An interpretation of the results obtained allows the researcher to raise the theoretical and practical implications of the entire research process.

2.2. Key Concepts for Determining the Research Object in the Hypothetico-Deductive Approach

The research object is truly a combination of various essential elements. If we modify one of these elements, it is the overall structure of the project that changes. Many researchers embarking on a project face the difficulty of finding a clear starting point. They often begin with a general question or a somewhat vague theme - for example, 'Digital management' - where the scope of the research is extremely broad, and the research object is not well-defined. As a result, the process of defining the research object takes time, and the researcher eventually arrives at what is called the 'research question' for a thesis or dissertation. A literature review is necessary to arrive at the most relevant research question. Therefore, it is necessary to formulate a precise and robust initial question. This initial question helps to delimit the scope of the research, preventing energy and time from being wasted.

The research object, more classically known as 'the problem,' remains a very provisional formulation. There is a strong chance it will be modified later on, depending on changes in the research structure influenced by the theoretical framework and the fieldwork. However, these changes should not extend beyond the early stages of the research. If changes occur towards the end, the researcher should incorporate the new findings into the results analysis, without challenging the problem formulation.

In hypothetico-deductive research, the research object is generally constructed quite rapidly. Qualitative and quantitative research typically yield structured results at the beginning of the research process, facilitating data collection and initial analysis. Multiple secondary questions naturally emerge, related to the main question. These secondary questions form a platform for the research architecture, guiding the entire process. The main question reflects the researcher's central concern and is a formulation of the research problem. It is also referred to as the perceived gap, representing the researcher's desire to bridge the gap between an existing situation and a desired one. This gap, formulated as the main question, is a genuine mechanism for crafting a relevant

problem statement. Refining the research question helps the researcher clarify the problem statement. Thus, the researcher must be patient.

In addition to these terms, various terminologies are commonly used in scientific research, not limited to the post-positivist approach. These terms include 'theory,' 'concept,' 'hypothesis,' and 'variable,' which can be added to the concepts of 'problem statement,' 'research question,' and 'research object' mentioned earlier. However, as previously mentioned, these terms are not specific to this approach but can be associated with other postures and approaches. A theory is often a set of related, unobservable, and empirically testable formulations or laws aimed at increasing knowledge rather than persuading. This is achieved through hypotheses that trigger most of its relational structures. In management sciences, researchers use intermediate theories from distinct disciplinary fields, as this research area does not belong to an exact science.

Generally, a theory revolves around a collection of non-decomposable units, in other words, concepts - terms - whose constructed meaning is complete and unambiguous within the framework of a given theory. This theoretical conceptualization operation provides the researcher with specific indicators to guide their research. Regardless of the type of concepts developed, it is highly recommended not to opt for a very specialized or ideological literature review, as the goal is to neutralize research as much as possible and proceed to action more smoothly. The conceptualization and determination of the theoretical framework offer a limited, clear, and concise range to the researcher in terms of research methodology and techniques, thereby filtering different hypotheses.

It is challenging to discuss theories and concepts without addressing hypotheses and variables, two closely related terms. A hypothesis is a temporary answer to the initial question derived from the theory in a hypothetico-deductive approach. This answer will be tested in the subsequent research phases. A hypothesis is a formulation that defines at least two measurable variables. 'A variable is a characteristic dimension of our physical or social environment, a dimension of one or more behaviors, the manifestations of which can be classified into categories or measured, and can take on multiple different values or states' (Anceau and Sockeel, 2006, p. 74). Iterations between dependent and independent variables are essential for well-constructed hypotheses. Generally, a hypothesis is composed of more than one variable.

A good hypothesis clearly indicates how these variables are related. To formulate hypotheses, it is important to specify the research variables. For example, the following hypothesis, 'CSR has a positive influence on the company's social climate,' clearly indicates that we are testing the existence of a relationship between the two variables, the integration of CSR practices and the

company's social climate. Thus, the hypothesis highlights this relationship as being positive.

'In a hypothesis, the researcher deduces from a theory the existence of a relationship between variables. For example, Aurier and Fort (2005) construct a theory regarding the consumer's attitude toward a product with a known origin and brand.' This theory takes into account three variables: attitude toward the product, attitude toward the brand, attitude toward the product's origin, and their congruence. They then formulate six hypotheses corresponding to the influence of these three variables and their congruence on the consumer's attitude toward a product with a known origin and brand (Giordan and Jolibert, 2012, p. 19). Beyond the existence of a relationship between variables, doubt remains an equally important characteristic; it is the ability of a hypothesis to transform certainty into uncertainty.

In this context, a hypothesis should not be either too general or too specific; an optimum balance between the two provides the research object with testable elements. Remember that hypotheses are based on a theory - a theoretical framework - that the researcher confirms or refutes. Validating the hypotheses gives the researcher confidence in their theory, while refutation indicates a false direction. The terms related to the post-positivist approach and scientific research are numerous and not limited to the list above. Indeed, we have presented those commonly used and essential, but reflecting on models, methods, techniques, laws, and the links between paradigms is necessary for a clearer vision..

2.3. Building the Research Object in the Context of a Hypothetico-Deductive Approach

The hypothetico-deductive approach is the most commonly used by researchers. It is based on a set of steps already mentioned. Through this approach, characterized primarily by empirical tests to validate or refute one or more hypotheses, the researcher deduces reasonable elements related to their initial theory or the one they have constructed. This process begins with the selection of the research object (What are we looking for? And in relation to what?). This choice can be broad or narrow, but it is recommended to delimit it as much as possible initially. Then, the researcher is led to conduct a literature review to redirect the research object, and consequently, they are required to carefully and naturally read the scientific writings of others. This essential activity provides the researcher with a pool of theories on their research object. This is done to understand and find useful theories, untested hypotheses, and key concepts. This phase allows for the subsequent construction of the theoretical framework, which is an elaboration resulting from the literature review and the researcher's own knowledge. It is at this stage that the researcher specifies the basic elements of their research - see the terminology of this approach - on which they will rely to conduct their research. A schematic representation of their model emerges as a result of

conceptualization and the interrelationships between concepts. If the theoretical framework draws on multiple theories, the researcher is obliged to develop a precise theoretical framework; otherwise, the theoretical framework simply summarizes the borrowed theory. When a theory has already been well presented, the theoretical framework simply summarizes the theory.

At this stage, the research takes the crucial step from theoretical reflection to practical application. The study aims to flesh out the conceptual hypotheses of responsible human resources management by translating them into empirical hypotheses based on observable indicators such as employee engagement, ethical recruitment practices, and social dialogue mechanisms.

The case study is based on a qualitative approach using semi-structured interviews with human resources managers from Moroccan companies certified as CSR-compliant by the CGEM, supplemented by an in-depth documentary analysis. The methodological framework describes in detail the population concerned and the criteria for selecting the sample.

This approach makes it possible to test hypotheses in the field, strengthen the consistency between the conceptual framework and the realities observed, and anchor the research in both an empirical and operational perspective.

3. Illustrative Theme Case

Currently, the number of certified companies, according to the General Confederation of Moroccan Enterprises, is approximately 108 companies in 2021. In other words, those that have taken the initiative to integrate the links of sustainable development through CSR.

The concept of sustainable development is certainly based on three pillars (economic, social, and environmental). Corporate social responsibility is clearly reflected in the implementation of sustainable development principles within the company, including its relationship with its stakeholders. The renewal of HR approaches is currently moving towards the integration of this concept into corporate practices. The term "Responsible Human Resource Management" has recently become commonplace to describe the impact of this shift in managerial approaches based on the idea of sustainable development. It remains challenging, even for HR professionals, to clearly define this change in human resource management practices.

Companies have every interest in implementing responsible human resource management to ensure their performance. This responsible management of recruitment, compensation, careers, training, and other HR activities promotes employee retention and better talent management in an ever-changing environment, where companies are increasingly required to be responsible actors in their environment. This demonstrates their ability to voluntarily address all aspects of social responsibility concerns. Human resources play a key role in positioning the company in the

economic market as an integral part of it. In this context, we address the theme of "Responsible Human Resource Management Practices" as a practical example.

3.1. Constructing the Research Object for Our Theme

By choosing this theme, we aim to demonstrate that the subject is not only a current topic but also one of managerial utility for Morocco. The objective of this research is to provide answers to the questions that business leaders have regarding the evolution of responsible HRM (Human Resource Management) practices. This will help guide professionals toward practices most likely to generate positive outcomes for employees and their organizations.

Indeed, we reveal that the goal of our research is threefold. It aims to make both a managerial and empirical contribution to the field of management sciences and the entrepreneurial world in Morocco. After justifying the theoretical foundation and the objective of our subject, we can now present the research problem and the central question. Taking into account the effects of the environment on HR management practices and also considering the significance of internal management within Moroccan companies, we seek to understand whether the influences described and the integration of CSR (Corporate Social Responsibility) into the management approach of Moroccan companies allow for the analysis of sustainable and effective HR management practices, as well as the transformation of these practices.

In this context, the integration of CSR into the strategy of accredited companies represents ambition, vision, and promises, while managerial practices represent the reality, the realm of possibilities, and practical resistance. The context of globalization, on the other hand, necessitates thinking about sustainability and performance.

In light of this, we can formulate the central research question as follows: How are responsible HR management practices evolving in Morocco? In short, the aim is to arrive at an interpretation and analysis of practices, to create a scientific platform that traces the managerial transformations of HR management practices in the context of sustainable development.

3.2. The main hypotheses and derived hypotheses of the research.

After presenting the objectives and the research problem, it is essential to specify the main hypothesis of this empirical research, which is: "The transformation of human resource management practices towards more responsible practices in Morocco." From this hypothesis, we can derive several related hypotheses to better understand the aspects and boundaries of our research. These hypotheses will be closely related to human resource management practices:

- Companies are more oriented towards recruitment that reflects CSR (Corporate Social Responsibility).

- Companies are more focused on training that meets CSR requirements.
- Companies provide more career opportunities in the context of responsible career management.
- Companies promote communication and social dialogue that reflect CSR.
- Companies offer a compensation policy that meets CSR requirements.

3.3. The theories to be mobilized

Before delving into some of the theories that contribute to the foundation of our research – stakeholder theory, sustainable development theories, and corporate performance theories – it is essential to specify that the overall framework of the research will be limited to human resource management practices, including compensation, training, job and skills management, career management, recruitment, and communication and social dialogue. It should be noted that companies operate within an international context and are subject to international CSR standards (ISO 26000) and national standards (CGEM's CSR Label).

The block of mobilized theories asserts that several measures are being taken to incorporate a societal dimension into human resource management practices. This highlights the impact of responsible human capital management on a company's performance and competitiveness in the market, emphasizing workers as stakeholders and the HR function as a linking and influencing actor in the company's management practices. To provide some clarity, we propose revisiting the origins of the described developments, particularly by analyzing the shift from HRM to Responsible HRM based on recent changes in corporate governance and the concept of performance.

4. Conclusion and prospects

In light of the fieldwork, the research subject tends to become clearer and expand once again. As we have shown, it is influenced by the research environment and several variables related to the research process itself. However, adhering to all the requirements of its development (terminology and process) allows the researcher to specify the studied phenomenon, the questions that arise from it, and to deeply delineate the interactions between the field and the literature. As "For a scientific mind, all knowledge is an answer to a question. If there were no questions, there can be no scientific knowledge. Nothing is self-evident. Nothing is given. Everything is constructed." (Bachelard, 1938, p.14).

Generally, there is not only the hypothetico-deductive approach, which is the most commonly used; constructivism is also considered one of the famous scientific paradigms in management sciences, with its different postures (post-positivist, interpretive, or projective/transformational).

In short, it is highly recommended for the researcher to conduct a historical review of the epistemology of the research, to identify and understand the different paradigms and methods before finalizing the specification of the research subject. This is done with the aim of avoiding any confusion and conducting scientific research based on solid foundations.

This article offers a clear distinction between conceptual contributions and empirical elements (a mixed study: qualitative and quantitative). The theoretical framework can be used to define the foundations and hypotheses of responsible human resource management, while empirical analysis can illustrate these dimensions using data from the field. This articulation aims to strengthen the consistency between scientific thinking and organizational reality.

By drawing on this complementarity, the study seeks to anchor the research in both an empirical and operational perspective. It can thus help identify the mechanisms through which responsible human resource management contributes to social and organizational performance and create new conceptual models, while offering concrete courses of action for companies engaged in CSR initiatives and useful theoretical guidance for the scientific community.

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