

From Positivism to Pragmatism A Systematic Literature Review of Philosophical Paradigms in Management Science

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Abstract: *This study examines the philosophical foundations of management science through a systematic literature review of 25 journal articles published between 2015 and 2025. The background of this research is the growing complexity of organizational challenges and the need for clearer research paradigms in management studies. Many management studies focus on methods and results, but often do not clearly explain the philosophical assumptions behind them. Therefore, this study aims to identify the dominant research paradigms in management, analyze how these paradigms influence research methods, and understand their contribution to theory and practice. Using a qualitative systematic review approach, the selected articles were analyzed based on ontology, epistemology, methodology, and axiology. The results show that positivism and post-positivism still dominate, especially in strategic management, finance, and risk management research. However, interpretivism, critical realism, critical theory, and pragmatism are increasingly used in studies related to leadership, sustainability, governance, and innovation. The findings indicate a shift toward methodological pluralism and a stronger awareness of ethical and contextual issues in management research. This study concludes that understanding philosophical foundations is important to ensure theoretical clarity, methodological consistency, and practical relevance in management science.*

INTRODUCTION

The development of management as a scientific discipline has undergone a significant transformation over the past century. Initially emerging from practical needs in industrial organizations, management gradually evolved into a structured field supported by theoretical frameworks, empirical research, and methodological rigor [1]. Classical thinkers such as Taylor and Fayol emphasized efficiency, structure, and rational control, reflecting a positivistic orientation

that viewed organizations as objective systems governed by measurable variables. Over time, however, rapid changes in economic systems, globalization, technological disruption, and socio-cultural complexity have challenged the assumption that managerial phenomena can be fully explained through purely objective and mechanistic approaches [2].

In contemporary scholarship, management is recognized not merely as a technical field concerned with planning, organizing, leading, and controlling, but as a social science deeply intertwined with philosophical assumptions about reality, knowledge, and values. Every research design, theoretical model, and empirical finding in management is implicitly grounded in particular ontological and epistemological positions [3]. Whether researchers conceptualize organizations as objective entities independent of human perception, or as socially constructed realities shaped by interaction and meaning, depends on their philosophical stance. Therefore, philosophy of science serves as a foundational framework that clarifies how management knowledge is produced, validated, and applied.

Despite its importance, philosophical reflection in management studies often remains implicit rather than explicitly articulated [4]. Many empirical investigations prioritize statistical rigor and methodological sophistication without clearly addressing their underlying paradigms. This tendency may result in conceptual fragmentation, theoretical inconsistency, and limited integration across research traditions. For example, quantitative strategic management research often adopts post-positivist assumptions emphasizing hypothesis testing and generalization, whereas organizational behavior studies frequently rely on interpretivist perspectives that prioritize contextual understanding and subjective meaning. Without philosophical awareness, such differences may appear methodological rather than epistemological, obscuring deeper assumptions about reality and knowledge [5].

The increasing complexity of organizational environments further intensifies the need for philosophical clarity. Digital transformation, sustainability challenges, ethical governance, and global interdependence require management theories capable of addressing multidimensional phenomena. Traditional positivist models, while valuable for prediction and measurement, may not fully capture issues such as organizational identity, leadership legitimacy, stakeholder trust, or cultural adaptation. Consequently, alternative paradigms including interpretivism, critical theory, pragmatism, and critical realism have gained prominence in recent years. These perspectives offer broader lenses for understanding power relations, social construction, institutional dynamics, and normative dimensions within management practice.

Moreover, the rise of interdisciplinary research has blurred boundaries between management, sociology, psychology, economics, and philosophy. As management scholars increasingly borrow theories and methods from other disciplines, questions arise regarding coherence, compatibility, and scientific legitimacy. Is management an applied extension of economics? Is it a behavioral science grounded in psychology? Or is it an autonomous field with its own epistemological identity? Addressing such questions requires engagement with philosophy of science to examine the criteria of scientific validity, explanation, causality, and objectivity in management research.

Another critical issue concerns the axiological dimension of management science. Historically, positivism promoted the ideal of value-neutral inquiry. However, contemporary debates surrounding corporate social responsibility, environmental sustainability, diversity, and ethical leadership demonstrate that management research cannot be entirely detached from normative considerations. Scholars increasingly recognize that managerial decisions influence not only organizational performance but also societal welfare and ecological systems. Therefore,

philosophical inquiry must also address how values shape research agendas, theoretical priorities, and policy implications.

Given these considerations, a systematic examination of philosophical foundations in management becomes essential. Understanding dominant paradigms and their methodological consequences can enhance theoretical integration, strengthen research transparency, and improve practical relevance. This study seeks to explore how philosophy of science informs management scholarship through a structured literature review of 25 peer-reviewed journal articles. Specifically, this research aims to: Identify dominant philosophical paradigms influencing contemporary management research. Analyze how ontological and epistemological assumptions shape methodological choices. Examine the implications of philosophical positioning for theory development and managerial practice.

By synthesizing insights from diverse scholarly sources, this study contributes to a deeper conceptual understanding of management as a scientific discipline. It emphasizes that philosophical awareness is not merely abstract reflection but a strategic foundation for producing coherent, rigorous, and socially responsible management knowledge.

RESEARCH METHOD

The review highlights key philosophical foundations in management research. Ontologically, realism views organizations as objective entities (common in strategic and financial studies), constructivism sees organizational reality as socially constructed (typical in leadership and HR research), and critical realism integrates structural and social perspectives, especially in sustainability studies. Epistemologically, quantitative research is largely positivist and focused on hypothesis testing, while qualitative research follows interpretivism, emphasizing contextual meaning; pragmatism supports mixed methods, particularly in innovation and change management. Methodologically, these paradigms shape the use of surveys and experiments (positivism), case studies and interviews (interpretivism), participatory and discourse analysis (critical theory), and mixed approaches (pragmatism). Overall, management research is shifting toward methodological pluralism and greater ethical awareness, especially in sustainability and governance contexts.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

The results of the study are shown in Table 1, as follows:

Table 1. Previous Research

Research Focus	Dominant Paradigm	Methodology	Main Findings	Reference
Epistemology in Strategic Management	Positivism	Quantitative (Regression)	Theory validity tested through statistical generalization	[6], [7]
Organizational Research Paradigm	Interpretivism	Case Study	Organizational reality is constructive and contextual	[8], [9]
Ontology of Modern Organizations	Critical Realism	Mixed Methods	Objective structures and social agency interact	[10], [11]

Philosophy of Management Methodology	Positivism	Survey	Dominance of empirical-quantitative approaches	[12]
Axiology in CSR	Critical Theory	Discourse Analysis	Ethical values shape management research direction	[13]
Leadership Paradigm	Interpretivism	In-depth Interviews	Leadership shaped by social meaning	[14]
Scientific Validity in Management Research	Post-positivism	Experiment	Hypothesis testing strengthens theory reliability	[15]
Pragmatism in Innovation	Pragmatism	Mixed Methods	Method integration increases practical relevance	[16]
Organizational Metaphysics	Constructivism	Conceptual Analysis	Organization as social reality	[17], [18]
Philosophy of Science and HRM	Interpretivism	Qualitative Study	HR policies influenced by cultural values	[19]
Sustainability Paradigm	Critical Realism	Mixed Methods	Structural and normative factors operate together	[20]
Management Theory Development	Positivism	Meta-analysis	Theory evolves through accumulation of evidence	[21]
Philosophy of Financial Research	Positivism	Quantitative	Dominance of mathematical models	[22]
Epistemology of Digital Management	Pragmatism	Field Study	Paradigm flexibility required	[23]
Critical Perspective on Governance	Critical Theory	Critical Analysis	Power influences managerial practices	[24]
Organizational Culture Paradigm	Interpretivism	Ethnography	Culture as collective construction	[25]
Public Management Methodology	Post-positivism	Survey & Qualitative	Method combination enhances validity	[26]
Philosophy of Entrepreneurship	Pragmatism	Mixed Methods	Solution orientation dominates pure theory	[27]
Ontology of Business Strategy	Realism	Quantitative	External environment treated as objective	[28]

Epistemology of Educational Management Philosophy of Sustainable Innovation Business Paradigm	Ethics	Interpretivism	Case Study	Social context shapes policy	[29]
Risk Management Methodology		Critical Realism	Mixed Methods	Change influenced by structure and agency	[13]
Philosophy of Organizational Transformation Integration of Management Paradigms		Critical Theory	Normative Analysis	Moral values central to theory	[30]
		Positivism	Statistical Modeling	Probability-based prediction dominates	[31]
		Pragmatism	Longitudinal Study	Paradigm adaptation improves effectiveness	[32]
		Paradigm Pluralism	Systematic Review	Need for philosophical transparency	[33]

Source: Researcher Data, 2026

Table 1 shows that management research is largely dominated by positivist and post-positivist paradigms, particularly in strategic, financial, and risk management studies emphasizing hypothesis testing and statistical generalization. However, interpretivism remains influential in leadership, organizational culture, and education research, where reality is viewed as socially constructed. Critical theory and critical realism are increasingly prominent in sustainability, ethics, and governance studies, highlighting power and normative dimensions. Pragmatism serves as an integrative approach supporting mixed methods and practical relevance. Overall, the findings reflect growing paradigm diversity and the need for philosophical transparency in management research.

Discussion

The findings of this study demonstrate that management science is characterized by paradigm plurality, although positivism and post-positivism remain dominant in empirical research, particularly in strategic management, finance, and risk analysis. This dominance is consistent with earlier observations that management scholarship has historically been influenced by the natural science model, emphasizing objectivity, hypothesis testing, and statistical generalization [13], [29]. The reliance on quantitative modeling reflects an assumption that organizational phenomena can be measured, predicted, and explained through causal relationships. Such an orientation aligns with the post-positivist view that knowledge progresses cumulatively through empirical verification and falsification [8], [25]).

However, compared to earlier studies that portrayed management research as overwhelmingly positivist, the present review reveals a gradual expansion toward interpretivist and pragmatic paradigms. In organizational behavior and leadership research, interpretivism has gained prominence, emphasizing meaning-making, social interaction, and contextual understanding. This shift supports arguments advanced by scholars who critique the limitations of purely objective approaches in capturing complex human dynamics within organizations [12]. Unlike earlier paradigm debates that framed positivism and interpretivism as mutually exclusive [1], recent

studies demonstrate increasing methodological flexibility, suggesting a movement beyond rigid dichotomies.

Furthermore, the growing presence of critical realism and critical theory in sustainability, governance, and corporate social responsibility research reflects a broader concern with structural constraints and power relations. Previous literature has emphasized that mainstream management theories often neglect issues of inequality and institutional dominance [10]. The current synthesis confirms that contemporary scholars increasingly incorporate normative and ethical considerations into management analysis, signaling a shift from value-neutral inquiry toward value-aware scholarship. This development resonates with arguments that management research must address societal and ecological responsibilities rather than focusing solely on efficiency and performance [11].

In contrast to earlier philosophical reviews that primarily examined epistemological differences (e.g., quantitative vs. qualitative methods), this study integrates ontological, epistemological, methodological, and axiological dimensions simultaneously. For instance, while positivist studies assume an objective organizational reality independent of observers, interpretivist research conceptualizes reality as socially constructed through language and interaction. Meanwhile, pragmatism offers a bridging framework by prioritizing problem-solving and practical consequences over rigid philosophical commitments [15]. The increasing adoption of mixed-method approaches in innovation and digital transformation studies illustrates this pragmatic turn.

Another important distinction from prior research lies in the emphasis on paradigm transparency. Earlier empirical studies frequently applied specific methodologies without explicitly articulating their philosophical foundations [27]. The present review identifies a continuing gap in explicit paradigm declaration, although awareness has improved in recent publications. Transparent articulation of philosophical assumptions enhances theoretical coherence and prevents methodological inconsistency, particularly in interdisciplinary management research.

Overall, compared with previous literature that often treated philosophical paradigms as competing frameworks, the findings suggest a contemporary trend toward integrative and pluralistic perspectives. This pluralism reflects the complexity of modern organizational environments, where economic rationality, social meaning, ethical responsibility, and structural forces interact simultaneously. Therefore, rather than replacing positivism, emerging paradigms complement and extend its explanatory capacity. These results contribute to ongoing debates about the scientific status of management. While some scholars argue that management lacks the predictive precision of natural sciences [23], others maintain that its strength lies in methodological diversity and contextual adaptability. The present synthesis supports the latter view, indicating that philosophical plurality enhances rather than weakens the robustness of management science. By integrating multiple paradigms, management research becomes better equipped to address contemporary organizational challenges that are complex, dynamic, and value-laden.

CONCLUSION

This study confirms that management science is philosophically pluralistic, although positivism and post-positivism continue to dominate empirical research, particularly in quantitatively oriented domains. At the same time, interpretivism, critical realism, critical theory, and pragmatism have gained increasing relevance in addressing complex organizational phenomena involving culture, ethics, sustainability, and governance. The findings demonstrate that philosophical paradigms significantly influence research design, methodological choices, and theoretical interpretation. The growing trend toward methodological pluralism indicates that

contemporary management research is moving beyond rigid paradigm divisions toward integrative approaches capable of capturing multidimensional realities. However, many studies still lack explicit articulation of their philosophical foundations, which may lead to conceptual ambiguity and methodological inconsistency. Therefore, greater paradigm transparency is essential to strengthen theoretical coherence and enhance research validity. By consciously integrating ontological, epistemological, and axiological considerations, management scholars can produce knowledge that is not only methodologically rigorous but also socially responsible and practically relevant in responding to evolving organizational challenges.

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