Non-positivist Approaches to Research in the Third Sector: Empowered Policy-making

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Abstract

   This paper defines, describes and discusses non-positivism and demonstrates its application to the analysis of the structures, processes and outcomes found in and delivered by third sector non-government organisations [NGOs]. The emergence of the discipline of political science brought with it a widespread conviction that the application of the positivist approach was necessary to deliver robust and valid research findings. A parallel school of thought rejected this view, refuting positivist claims of objectivity and assumptions of a superior form of knowledge. Non-positivism is 'that which is not positivist' but has other fundamental characteristics. While positivism is wholly empirical, attributing to the researcher skills and insights not available to the research subjects, a non-positivist perspective maintains that evidenced based reasoning can be used incorporating a voice for those providing the research data. Many non-positivists reject the concept of human 'research subjects', as this implies a methodologically unsound separation of the researcher and the researched. Non-positivist data is collected transparently, emphasising ethics, and no particular data type is prioritised; no voice is given credence at the expense of another. Non-positivism as a term emerged in response to the dominance of the positivist perspective in the social sciences, but it contributes much more than simply a rebuttal of positivism and has a long and glorious history. The principles of the positivist approach to research on human social matters have always been controversial and hotly debated. Positivism has been a popular and highly influential approach to research in the natural and social sciences, contending that a rigorous and appropriate scientific research structure is likely result in the discovery of the truth [Bevir and Rhodes, 2004]. Non-positivists recognise that data collected through a positivist approach, such as empirical data, is important and relevant, but reject the positivist treatment. Several strands of this approach have emerged that emphasise particular aspects of the approach. Hermeneutics, phenomenology and interpretivism are examples [Blaikie, 1993]. More recently, the use of storytelling through a multiple perspective framework has emerged as a powerful technique for collecting and interpreting data, and constructing enlightened accounts of policy development and implementation episodes [Rhodes, 2011]. The non-positivist approach is particularly appropriate for the study of non-government organisations (NGOs), enabling a discursive empowering approach that returns value to the organisations to use at their discretion. In the case study used to illustrate a non-positivist approach in action, a range of methods and data types is used including document search, key informant interviews, observation, and secondary data in the form of statistics. This research based paper describes the theory, provides a context by exploring its historical dimension and demonstrates non-positivism in use in the case of non-government organisations.

1. __Introduction__

How are non-government organisations to be understood and evaluated accurately? NGOs have in the last decade considerably increased their role in both the design and delivery of public policy and human services. This 'third way' type of approach has arisen with an increased focus on government core business and a reducing public sector. The role of NGOs has developed to one of an extension of government yet they must also retain their independence and integrity to perform their functions appropriately. And because they have stakeholder, advisory and financial relationships with government agencies, they must also be scrutinised (Casey and Dalton, 2006). A non-positivist methodology is proposed here as the insights provided will be wide-ranging and flexible enough to encompass the different managerial and operational styles encountered in this related but nevertheless different field.

Non-positivism as a term emerged in response to the dominance of the positivist perspective in the social sciences, but it contributes much more than simply a rebuttal of positivism and has a long and glorious history. The principles of the positivist approach to research on human social matters have always been controversial and hotly debated. Positivism has been a popular and highly influential approach to research in the natural and social sciences, contending that a rigorous and appropriate scientific research structure is likely to result in the discovery of the truth. Non-positivists recognise that data collected through a positivist approach, such as empirical data, is important and relevant, but reject the positivist treatment. A post-positivist perspective has a distinctive relative view of empirical data, utilising its insights in conjunction with a range of other data types in what has come to be known as a 'multi method approach'. This paper describes the theory, provides a context by exploring its historical dimension and demonstrates non-positivism in use in the case of non-government organisations.

2. __Comparing positivism and non-positivism__

2.1 General Characteristics:

To understand what is meant by a non-positivist perspective, it is first necessary to identify what is meant by the term positivism. Positivism has its origins in the natural sciences and contends that human beings can and should be researched in the same way as natural phenomena. Positivists propose that generally speaking it is possible to conduct research with objectivity and to discover what is true through research (Marsh and Furlong, in Marsh and Stoker, 2002, 22-23). It is contended that natural science assumptions can be made about social science subjects; that people and social phenomena are not particularly distinctive from a research subject in the natural or pure sciences (Babbie, 1998, 43).

A non-positivist view maintains that there is no single 'true' position. As with any other theory, non-positivism is under-pinned by a set of assumptions. First, while it is indisputable that human beings exist as organisms, their roles, behaviours and meanings are social constructions: they exist only because they are interpreted by an audience (Marsh and Furlong, in Marsh and Stoker, 2002, 24). As a result social actions do not exist in and of themselves, but are dependent on their recognition and interpretation by social actors. Consequently it is through this interpretation that meaning is established. It thus follows that the meaning of a particular event, or several events that may appear similar may have utterly different meanings depending on the context and the interpretation of the social actors involved (Babbie, 1998, 45). Non-positivism as an approach has developed

somewhat organically into a diverse range of research strategies and techniques, some of which are reviewed here.

When compared to a positivist approach, non-positivist research methodologies emphasise diversity and focus on the experiences of the researched group or individual as they have experienced them, regarding this as the most important data source. In distinguishing between the natural sciences and social science, the notion of objectivity is redefined. While a positivist perspective requires that objectivity is achieved by the suppression of the researcher's values so that just facts are deduced, a non-positivist would maintain that this is at best an arrogant claim. A non-positivist contends that it is virtually impossible for a researcher to effectively remove their values from their research activities. True objectivity for a non-positivist can only be achieved by reflexively and self analytically identifying the values influencing the researcher, and this includes the choice of research topic (Marsh and Furlong, in Marsh and Stoker, 2002, 26-27). How does a researcher decide what is important or interesting, or an appropriate research subject? A non- positivist would argue that this is inextricably linked with the researcher's values and normative position, rather than any rational calculation. In the case of the evaluation of NGO performance, these values and norms will be additionally influenced by prevailing government policy (Vromen, 2005, 103-105).

A comparison of the characteristics of positivism and non-positivism helps to bring the features of non-positivism into focus. Table one below comparatively illustrates the characteristics of positivism and non-positivism. While a positivist researcher emphasises **quantitative** data, using qualitative material to illustrate a conclusion drawn from statistics of some kind, a non-positivist favours **qualitative** data such as that collected from focus groups or interviews or text sources such as transcripts, reports or qualitative surveys. Empirical data may also be considered but is not regarded as any more credible or persuasive than the direct disclosures of those researched. A positivist perspective is based on assumptions that the scientist, or social scientist in this case, is capable of suppressing his or her own views, values and experiences so effectively that **objectivity** can be achieved. A non-positivist researcher exposes their **subjectivity**, disclosing as much as possible any biases or aspects of their biography that could be regarded as influencing the research proposal, data collection or analysis. This way, the reader is informed and able to compensate for this. There is no presumption that the researcher has some superior capacity to manage their own bias.

Scientific method is the focus of positivist research, with research generally guided by a tightly structured research question or hypothesis. It is assumed that human behaviour and social phenomena can be scientifically studied in the same way as inanimate objects or non-human life forms. Hence the data collected has an **experimentalist** basis: it is collected as much as possible from experiments conducted in laboratory conditions with controls to ensure validity. Where this is not possible, for reasons of practicality or ethics, laboratory-like conditions are sought. A non-positivist approach is distinct from pure science in that it is centred on the **humanistic** view of the social sciences. From this perspective, research concerning human behaviour cannot be regarded in the same way as other scientific research: the social world is distinctive and separate from the world of nature. Rather than experiment to test theories, non-positivists take an **interpretivist** stance, maintaining that experimenting on human behaviour, particularly social situations is virtually impossible to replicate reliably. Responses and observations are interpreted to become data: the theory

may or may not pre-empt the research activity. While positivist research protocols have their origins in a long **tradition** of robust procedures regarded as failsafe if adhered to, a non-positivist approach is more inclined to be internally referential: a non-positivist researcher is **reflexive**, likely to be constantly on the alert for procedural problems. These might include the identification of additional sources of data, bias in the analysis or excessive intrusion of the researcher's perspective in the interpretation, to name a few. Fundamentally the positivist and non-positivist research approaches are diametrically opposed in what they regard as truth and knowledge, in how validity can be assured, and the role of the researcher in the research process.

Table One: Characteristics of Positivist and Non-Positivist Research Compared*

characteristic	POSITIVIST	NON-POSITIVIST
Dominant data type	Quantitative	Qualitative
perspective	Objectivist	Subjectivist
focus	Scientific	Humanistic
methodology	Experimentalist	Interpretivist
context	Traditionalist	Reflexive/ reactive

*developed from Hussey and Hussey (1997) cited in Barker etal (2001)

2.2 Methodologies and Research Approaches:

Triangulation

Triangulation is described in non-positivist social sciences as the use of multiple methods to ensure validity. Some claim this is a misleading use of terminology acquired from the physical sciences. Blaikie proposes that it is commonly assumed to mean 'the measurement of some concepts by the use of two or more measurements or methods', but does not include any notion of compensating for bias (Blaikie, 2000, 264-5). Others though are confident that a triangulated methodology, using a multi-method strategy 'is simple but powerful. …[I]f various methods have weaknesses… then their convergent findings may be accepted with greater confidence than any single method's findings'(Brewer and Hunter, 1989, 17, in Blaikie, 2000, 265). This would seem to be a common sense view: if the use of several methods produces consistent results, or at least findings that are not contradictory, then it seems reasonable to conclude that the validity of such findings is strengthened by this. This kind of validation is internally referential- it is based on reflexive non-positivist assumptions. There is no single 'true' position that can be identified under these circumstances, so a self referential validity based on three or more sets of findings provides security. It is important to note here that triangulation is a metaphor rather than a detailed calculation to arrive at a given point. Data triangulation is achieved through the use of multiple data collection technologies, and these result in 'mutual confirmation of measures and validation of findings'(Berg, 2007, 6). Denzin extended this concept to include three different types of data triangulation and categories of triangulation in addition to methodology: investigators, theories and methods (Denzin, 1978, 295). These categories are based on a conception of 'lines of action', for use as an additional and related theoretical check. 'Lines of action' are the result of individual decision-making processes through which courses of action are decided; these single lines of action combine to form the basis of a joint action. While these lines of action may individually be flawed or incomplete, in combination they form a 'package of meanings' that allows insights (Denzin, 1969, 924; Denzin, 2010, 424). The use of multiple 'lines of action' in all four triangulation types assures a high level of validity (Denzin, 1978, 292).

Empiricism
A positivist research design depends heavily on quantitative findings and the establishment of statistical significance. In a positivist project, findings are numerically represented and analysis employs such methods as chi square tests to ensure the research is robust. It has been argued that empiricism should be avoided in an authentic non-positivist project, but this is not necessarily the case. Frequently empirical techniques are used in a --positivist context: it is how they are used that is important. Most mixed method projects encompass some empirical elements. It is after all fundamental to human behaviour to count and measure as a means to establish the strength and intensity of a phenomenon. Empiricism is inconsistent with non-positivism when assumptions are made regarding its meaning. The choice of what is measured and how the measurement is conducted is however important, and cannot be done without the intrusion of the researcher's values. But quantitative representations of findings and conclusions are valuable tools for the researcher: if research can be depicted visually it is more likely that it will be understood by more people. Empirical translations of non-empirical data facilitate this. In addition, simplifying data sets into crudely expressed tables and graphs assists the analyst to identify broad trends. These can then be checked and validated using comparison, triangulation and deeper thematic analysis.

Comparative methodology and case studies
The use of a comparative method in a non-positivist research project is a means to test the validity of findings. Other tests, available to positivists and those researching in the natural sciences, include statistical checks, experimentation in laboratory conditions and replication of the circumstances in which the data was collected. Non-positivist researchers contend that such checks are neither appropriate nor possible with human subjects in day to day social situations. In the absence of these, the rigorous use of comparison is regarded as an effective check for validity.

Comparisons can be made of similar cases in which a systematic study is conducted to identify common elements and differences. It allows a deeper understanding of similarities and contrasts, and may direct the researcher to possible explanations for this. It enables social scientists to identify patterns and relationships that are similar or at least resemble each other (Prezworski and Tuene, 1970, 4). As a methodology, comparative analysis also has the capacity to 'help a person overcome ethnocentrism, which is defined as the inability to understand other countries except through one's own rose-coloured glasses' (Wiadra, 1993, 16). Comparison as a method is consistent with non-positivism, and interpretivism in particular, allowing for deep insights and an unravelling of the meaning. For this to occur, an empathetic approach must be used, '…to know thoroughly from the inside' (Wiadra, 1993, 16). When combined with a case study, the depth of analysis is further enhanced. A research project organised on non-postitivist principles is likely to employ several methods of data collection and analysis, designed and constructed to meet the requirements of the task at hand, rather than the stipulations of a hegemonic research tradition.

Eclectic nature of non-positivist research
Importantly, a non-positivist approach does not reject absolutely the use of empirical material, and nor does positivism reject the use of opinionative material as data in analysis. In fact '…the view is that it is possible for both positivists and non-positivists to use both qualitative and quantitative methods in the same research project in any combination without privileging one or the other' (Marsh and Stoker, 2002, 240). The substance of the

data is unimportant: it is the way it is regarded, the meaning that is attributed and the relevance it is presumed to have.

Hermeneutics and phenomenology
Early non-positivist thought refuted the imposition of scientific methodology in studies of human behaviour, proposing that objectivist assumptions and the techniques of research design and data collection flowing from them be replaced by other radically different ones. Hermeneutics and phenomenology were regarded as alternatives with rigour and the potential to provide insights of a higher level. These two related techniques are somewhat polarised.

Hermeneutics is the study and analysis of language in texts in a bid to identify where there are socially shared concepts and experiences visible through such an examination. Classical hermeneutics has its origins in the Protestant tradition of studying and interpreting the Bible. More recently the technique has been extended to include the discovery of language and meaning in other texts and subsequently any word-based data (Blaikie, 1993, 28). In its most sophisticated form, exponents adopt a version of 'method acting', striving through researching the circumstances surrounding the production of the text and the lives of the individuals involved to experience the text as closely as possible to the author(s). There is no role for an empirical analysis in a hermeneutic project.

Phenomenology while not a quantitative method, claims an objective status. Meaning in the phenomenological tradition is regarded as more likely to be pure if 'liberated from the relativism of social and historical entanglements' (Blaikie, 1993, 33). As Blaikie further explains, positivism is enslaved and hoodwinked by the empirical; research cannot fail to be enhanced by removal of this dominance. But phenomenology goes further. In much the same way, the disfiguring aspects of history and culture must also be removed if analysis is to be robust. A phenomenological perspective seeks to encompass and analyse all perceived phenomena, whether they are classified as objective or subjective, and then to sift through and rigorously exclude elements arising from the intrusion of the researcher's norms and values (Babbie, 1998, 281).

Interpretivism
It is now possible to see that interpretivism falls somewhere between the two: language, and that which is, or can be, text-based, forms the basis of data. It is nevertheless appropriate on occasions when employing interpretivism to utilise the empirical data and methods. With its origins in sociology, interpretivism does not revile from the impact of culture and history, but acknowledges these two factors will necessarily be definitively influential in determining social outcomes: it is simply unavoidable that this is the case. There is therefore little point in attempting to remove this influence as to do so would be unrealistic. It is far more appropriate to acknowledge and account for this influence. Meaning then is paramount and contingent on social networks of shared meaning. It is the role of the interpretivist to identify and explain this.

2.3 Origins & exponents
A key early exponent of the non-positivist approach was Max Weber. His approach to research is regarded as being hermeneutic, but his later work and theoretical considerations were also consistent with interpretivism. He sought to interpret meaning of acts and then to establish a causal relationship and to explain social phenomena in terms of meaning. This he did in a scientific frame: rather than identify actual individual social explanations, Weber

used a means of approximating a generalised view, in order to form a collective understanding of what had caused the phenomenon under examination:

[Weber] was not particularly interested in the specific meanings social actors gave to their actions but with approximations and abstractions (Blaikie, 1993, 41).

An example of this is Weber's landmark study of professed Christian denomination and attitude to work. A positivist study might have established the link, some kind of statistical relationship between the two, but not a causal explanation. Weber's approach was a systematic methodology of classifying findings and through the use of empathy and common sense forming an approximated generalised view representing the shared social understanding of particular phenomena.

Building on the non-positivist perspective, post-positivism has been proposed and its characteristics debated since the late twentieth century. Fischer (1993) has been particularly influential in drawing together the important threads of this approach. In devising a post-positivist policy analysis approach, he has referred to the important perspectives proposed by Hawkesworth:

Theoretical presuppositions shape perception and determine what will be taken as fact; they confer meaning on experience and control the demarcation of significant and trivial events; they afford criteria of relevance according to which facts can be organized, tests envisioned, and the acceptability of scientific conclusions assessed; they accredit particular models of explanation and strategies of understanding; and they sustain specific methodological techniques for gathering classifying and analysing data (Hawkesworth, 1988, 49).

Here the circularity of the normative underpinnings of positivism is identified. In pin-pointing the role and function of theoretical presuppositions, this statement also exposes the weak foundations upon which some positivist research in the social sciences tends to be based. While the tests adopted to ensure validity are successful in checking the mathematics, they do nothing to examine the factual status accorded to assumptions. Post-positivism is not immune from this: it too has a catalogue of theoretical presuppositions. The difference here is that Fischer recognises these and advocates that they must be identified and addressed:

…[P]ost-positivism offers an understanding of social science based on the recognition that all human knowledge depends on theoretical assumptions whose congruence with nature cannot be established conclusively through empirical encounters (Fischer, 1993, 334).

The feminist research movement, developing in critical perspective in parallel to the consciousness-raising women's movement of the 1970s stridently supported non-positivist research perspectives. Positivist methods were critically analysed and found to be disadvantageous to women, and moreover likely to generate inaccurate or incorrect findings. 'A deep suspicion of quantitative methods as having concealed women's real experience has motivated…preoccupation with and advocacy of qualitative methods as methods which permit women to express their experiences fully and in their own terms' (Jayaratne and Stewart, 1991, 89). Feminist writers reject the claims of objectivity and value neutrality made by positivist science. Feminists therefore sought and found a set of research methodologies consistent with feminist values 'that could be advocated for general use in the social sciences' (Jayaratne and Stewart, 1991, 89).

2.4 Strengths

Non-positivist approaches are not driven by a hypothetically based deductive methodology, but by inductive research process. This is significant because it reduces the predetermined nature of research questions resulting from hypothesis. As a result real experiences not obscured by slavish adherence to a scientific methodology or statistical process. The tendency to self fulfilling prophecies and the blinkering effect of hypothesis is avoided in that it is possible to find things that are unanticipated. The research questions are thus lead by the research and subsequent findings, rather than the reverse.

2.5 Weaknesses

A widely cited difficulty with non-positivist research is the lack of an accepted means of objectively validating findings that is convincing to the scientist. While a mixed methodology such as might be used in a post-positivist project, would allow use of traditional statistical testing, this is usually not possible, and in any case the principles upon which such validation is based is not consistent with a non-positivist view. Validation is possible through a number of means such as triangulation, or the use of detailed case studies and comparative analysis, between like and unalike cases. Another form of validation particularly favoured by feminist researchers is achieved by returning to the research subjects with the data collected to confirm that the data collected and interpreted by the researcher is an accurate reflection of the perspectives expressed. Nevertheless, validation is regarded as a problem with this approach, especially when the goal is to influence policy-makers whose experience with research and objectivity has been a positivist one.

Is it always appropriate to privilege the research subject's perspective? Possibly not- this depends on what it is you want to know. It is therefore crucial to adopt the policy strategy that is most suitable to the project at hand. If the purpose is to ensure a particular policy is successful in terms of a cost benefit analysis, then clearly a more positivist approach is implied. If however the goal is to meet the requirements of a 'triple bottom line' of economic, environmental and social measures, some non-positivist data collection may well be necessary.

Bevir and Rhodes identify nine commonly expounded criticisms of interpretivist research.(Bevir and Rhodes, 2004). These points which they refute have equally been levelled at other non-positivist approaches. They are:

Table 2: Bevir and Rhodes' Common Criticisms of Interpretivism*

• **Not science but mere common sense**	• **Must accept actors' own accounts of their beliefs**
• **Excessive focus on beliefs and discourses rather than actions or practices**	• **Insensitive to the ways in which power constitutes beliefs**
• **Ignores concepts of social structure**	• **Incapable of producing policy relevant knowledge**
• **Seeks to understand actions and practices but not explain them**	• **Incapable of producing objective knowledge**
• **Concerned exclusively with qualitative techniques**	

* Based on Bevir, Mark and R.A.W. Rhodes. *Interpretation and Its Others* conference paper presented at Australian Political Studies Association Annual Conference, University of Adelaide, September 2004.

3. A Non-positivist comparative analysis of NGOs in Australia and the USA

Non-positivist approaches to public policy analysis frequently occur as agenda-setting explorations to identify issues, as action research projects, and in the evaluation of policy implementation and outcomes. Its diversity and use of techniques that directly reflect the perspectives of those researched make such projects resonant and persuasive. Such projects frequently have an agenda of empowerment and recognition. The project discussed below was undertaken to fulfil the requirements of a PhD, but also gave expression to individuals and groups whose voices would not often be heard. These findings were further strengthened by an insightful power analysis utilising a relevant counterfactual technique.

Non-profit organisations have enjoyed growing prominence in the development, implementation and delivery of public policy in Australia since the last century. While non-profit organisations have traditionally been involved in service delivery, particularly human services, the prevalence of first managerialism in the public sector, and more recently contractualism, outsourcing, competitive tendering together with 'small government' ideology have had a dramatic impact. How have the structures and processes of these organisations been affected? A non-positivist research design to investigate this is highly illuminating. It facilitates an understanding of what has occurred, but importantly it also allows deeper insights regarding why, how and with what consequences. The following is a demonstration of the range and depth of insights that are possible through a non-positivist analysis (Alessandrini, 2001).

3.1 Research Design and Methods Used:
This project adopted a non-positivist perspective and displayed many of the characteristics of the more general interpretivist approach (Berg, 2007, 304). It was somewhat eclectic in its selection of methods, and used triangulation to ensure validity (Blaikie, 2000, 264). The comparative case study method also ensured validity was tested. Conclusions were also drawn through thought experiment, as proposed by Weber, and recommended by Lukes as a test for the existence of the third dimension of power (Lukes, 2005, 48-9). Data used was collected through interviews, observation, content analysis through document search, historical analysis and secondary research.

The research for this project incorporated a 'mixed methods' approach consistent with a non-positivist design protocol. The adoption of a number of methods investigating the same area enables triangulation and therefore ensures validity. It also provides an opportunity for as many stakeholders as possible to have a voice. This research design incorporated case studies, semi-structured interviews, historical comparison, typology construction and power analysis. The analysis was interpretivist-based, seeking to discover and understand the meanings and experiences of individuals and organisations from whom the data was collected. The use of five different research activities as a means of collecting data allows for validation. All the advantages of non-positivist triangulation are present and further strengthened. In addition the power analysis is a further check for validity in that it represents the thought experiment recommended by Lukes as a means of testing results and findings.

The comparison of apparently radically unalike cases is effective in identifying the respects in which the case sites are similar. The comparison of the human service environments in Texas and Tasmania provides the mechanism of 'most different system' design as a technique to identify the respects in which the two sites are related. The 'phenomen[a] under investigation', in this instance the response to an externally driven imperative for competition and market behaviour, is the same (Sartori, 1991, 245). When it is assessed in

locations with radically differing political and social traditions, the findings are illuminating. Comparison is also identified by the interpretivist school as a further means to ensure validity.
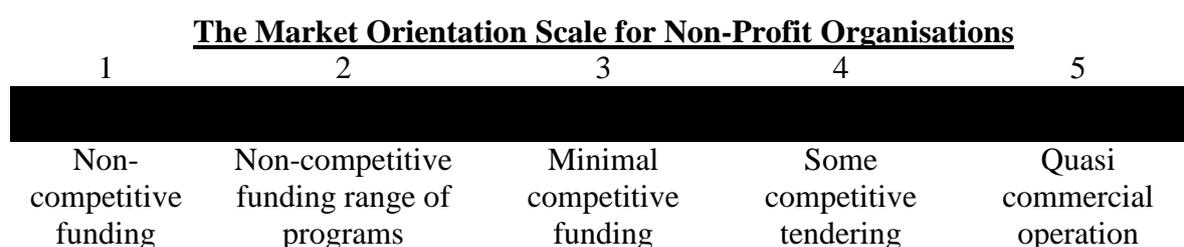
3.2 The Findings:

Research was conducted from 1996 to 1998 and commenced with a broad exploration of the lived experiences of -government organisation boards and managers, and the issues facing these groups. As a result of this research the operational and funding arrangements were identified as the field in which human service non-government organisations in Australia were experiencing most difficulties. The dramatic policy changes introduced by the federal government arising from National Competition Policy, were having far-reaching, disruptive and quite negative impacts on their operations. As the predominant funding body for these organisations, either directly via federally managed programs or indirectly through programs delivered by state governments the federal government had ultimate power.   The fundamental change of approach from a charity model involving secure recurrent [if sometimes miserly] funding to a competitive tendering model represented an enormous change, often threatening the viability of organisations, particularly small ones with limited resources.   Hence, research about the impact of this changed approach to policy implementation would provide insights for public sector policy makers and managers, for an academic audience following the fortunes of reforms, and particularly for those at board and program management level within the human service organisations.

Fourteen organisations were examined in Texas and Tasmania, seven in each.   The organisations case-studied were all human service providers and non-government organisations delivering programs designed to meet the need of one or more client groups. Apart from the deeper insights and understandings gained from observing the organisational operations, seven defining characteristics that related to their mode of operation [the extent to which they ran on market principles] were identified inductively through the analysis of research findings:

- Management type
- Number of paid staff
- Strategic planning orientation
- Budget process
- Dominant funding structure
- Utilisation of volunteers
- Client orientation/ program eligibility

The analysis of this data illuminated another aspect of organisational function. To measure this, a scale of market orientation was developed. Organisations exhibiting particular levels of the defining characteristics could also be located on the market orientation scale (see figure 1 below) at a particular point. In other words, the types of organisation identified through particular combinations of characteristics were entirely predictable in their market orientation scale location.

Figure 1: market orientation scale

The Market Orientation Scale for Non-Profit Organisations

1	2	3	4	5
Non-competitive funding	Non-competitive funding range of programs	Minimal competitive funding	Some competitive tendering	Quasi commercial operation

Application of this scale led to the development of a typology of human service organisations (figure 2, at the conclusion of the paper).

It is thus possible to see that each of these collections of data does in fact reinforce the other. The organisational case studies allow for the development of the defining characteristics upon which the organisational typology is based. These in turn reveal the powerful market orientation perspective, leading to the development of the market orientation scale. The historical analysis gives a social context for the distinct organisations and individuals from which data was collected. This context facilitates an enhanced understanding of the norms and values that influence the meanings attributed by the various social actors. When a comprehensive power analysis is overlaid and the 'thought experiment' of imagining the two national examples without the influence of government and bureaucratic administrative organs is conducted, the picture is considerably enhanced.

This layered analysis gave rise to insights arising from an appreciation of the meanings and web of experiences of the volunteers and staff in organisations and their managers, as well as policy-makers in state agencies. The policy initiatives flowing from government were couched in terms of reform, efficiency, responsive market mechanisms, empowerment and the benefits of community involvement in policy delivery. Those subject to these policy changes report quite different experiences: empowerment for example was in reality considerably reduced. Organisations were now required to compete for contracts let at a fixed price with little or no discretion allowed for the service provided. Efficiency for the funding body, government, was not experienced as efficiency for organisations who if unsuccessful in the tendering process would be compelled to lose staff with valuable skills, organisational memory and experience. The introduction of market mechanisms translates to a mode of behaviour involving new costs. Competing with other charitable organisations for the contract dollar required marketing and administration capacity of an order not previously called for.

A major result of this research was a power analysis utilising Lukes' three dimensional schema (Steven Lukes, 2005). With Texas as a comparator, this application of power theory provides an insightful analysis.

Figure 3: Lukes' Power Analysis in Texas and Tasmania (based on Lukes, 2005)

DIMENSIONS OF POWER			TEXAS	TASMANIA
first	*second*	third		
Decision-making ⟶			Much decision-making power devolved to government appointed committees giving an appearance of distance and impartiality	Emphasis on 'big picture' decisions about NCP and accountability as a pretext for imposition of managerialist and neo-liberal measures
	Nondecision-making ⟶			
		Control over the political agenda ⟶	Funding foundations, corporations and government agencies determine	Government and bureaucratic departments control the agenda

(key) issues ──────────────→

Potential issues ──────────→

Observable (overt) conflict ──────────→

Covert conflict ──────────→

Latent conflict ──────────→

Subjective interests and preferences ──────────→

grievances ──────────→

Real interests ──────────→

	the agenda	
	Evidence of issues and potential issues	Evidence of issues and potential issues for human service organisations
	Conflict often managed through formal processes so overt and observable.	Considerable concealed and latent conflict
	Subjective and real interests converge	Real interests of human service organisations threatened by loss of self-determination and self-definition arising from managerial methods applied to funding

These findings demonstrate that the distribution of power in Texas human service organisations was in fact consistent: it was more pluralist and far more evenly shared between the market state and community sectors, with market and state relatively dominant. As human service organisations developed to behave more like market sector participants, the power imbalance was redressed. Policy though was still found to be defined by the state, predominantly elected representatives, appointed commission members and elected officials in departments. From a one-dimensional perspective, Tasmanian human service organisations could be regarded as attaining greater power through contractualism, but this is not realised in effect because of two-dimensional factors such as the retention by the state of decision-making capacity and the power to define the terms of contracts. And as the sole financial support for these organisations in a market that exhibited failure because of a lack of competition and realistic budgeting, the sharing of power was likely to remain at a low level. These insights were possible because of the range of data sources and the disclosures of those who participated in the research project: without them the statistics would have painted quite a different picture. This is explained more fully in the following section.

4. Benefits and Limitations of this Approach

There is no doubt that a non-positivist research design provides insights that would not be available from a positivist design. In fact the examination of every day experiences and meaning reported by individuals and groups researched would not traditionally be regarded as an appropriate subject for positivist research. As an example, a positivist analysis of the introduction of competitive tendering for human services may well have concluded that the objective of reducing costs, cutting levels of government infrastructure and compelling non-government organisations to compete for contracts in order to survive had been successful. The numbers would certainly indicate this. It is only when a closer examination is conducted, focussing on the impact on the sector rather than purely on the strategic objectives that deeper insights are possible.

Non-positivist research has its limits. Because it is internally referential, many would contend that it is resistant to criticism and attack. The relative view of truth as being multiple and contingent on the standpoint of the actor claiming the truth is comforting but

problematic in the field when choices need to be made. While views may differ, it is usually necessary to decide whose interests are the most important and should prevail. Non-positivist research gives a voice to those whose views might otherwise not be heard, but how then should the policy-maker proceed? It is likely that a positivist perspective might well provide greater clarity here, indicating the most prudent course of action.

The value and meaning of non-positivist research may often be recognised, but at times it is unlikely that any appropriate response will be forthcoming. This can usually be attributed to power imbalance and institutional resistance to change. The power imbalance is such that the concerns of those with a weaker voice even when heard may not pose a sufficient threat to result in change. Furthermore, non-positivist findings may be discredited as not statistically robust. While arguably such research has an important social role to fill, the chances of finding the appropriate audience and persuading them are often not good.

Possibly the most prohibitive limitation of non-positivist research is its complexity. To be effective, multiple methods must be used and a wide range of views must be sought without fear or favour. Testing and validation are not a matter of running a statistical procedure that is irrefutable: because the process is so internally referential rather than imposed by an external protocol, it is vital to remain acutely self-conscious. Critical analysis must be rigorous and refining of the project in question is likely to be required. Consequently the findings and conclusions, unlike those arising from hypothesis-driven research, may be entirely unexpected, as opposed to simply confirmation or refutation of a pre-determined proposition.

Non-positivist approaches, especially interpretivism, have the potential to gain momentum as the demand for knowledge and moreover insightful understanding increases. In Australia, the development and evaluation of public policy has benefited from interpretivist research findings. Many examples of this are available on the public record. It is interesting to note that frequently when competitive tendering processes are used for the delivery of human services, there is a requirement that the tendering organisation engage an independent reputable evaluation team as part of the contracted service. Such evaluations do not emphasise the statistics of the policy implementation, which are readily available to the funding body, but focus on the perceptions of program clients- in other words a non-positivist perspective, in most cases utilising an interpretivist methodology. The corporate sector too is moving towards a more eclectic mixed method approach, with a focus on empirical material expanded through interpretivist analysis. (See Barker, Nancarrow and Spackman, 2001, 3).

There is considerable potential for this approach to be extended in the field of policy analysis as agency structures and processes move increasingly to stakeholder involvement and partnership models. As policy delivery moves increasingly to an emphasis on clients or customers rather than citizens as a focus, perceptions become reality: the 'facts' about the outputs of a particular program are outweighed by client demand and feedback that determines the future directions of the program. Client perceptions become a significant component of the evidence collected for evidence-based policy-making. This has been accompanied by a recognition that the implementation phase of policy development and delivery is the most crucial, but to date possibly the least studied. Non-positivist approaches have the potential to provide the depth and nuance to understand what is occurring and also why, thus allowing timely and appropriate contingency policy-making to correct problems and enable smooth policy delivery. One ground-breaking example of this in practice is the

Social Exclusion Unit established in Britain under the leadership of Prime Minister Tony Blair. This unit examines the multiple causes that combine to exclude individuals from mainstream society, and examines causes, demographics and canvasses solutions (Burchardt, Le Grande and Piachaud, 1999).

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