

CHALLENGES OF METHODOLOGICAL ISSUES IN SOCIAL SCIENCE RESEARCH

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Abstract

Research methods are a central part of the social sciences. They constitute an important part of their curricula and provide a means through which their intellectual development is enhanced. Indeed, their status as 'sciences' is often justified by alluding to the technical aspects of research methods, while the very term 'science' carries with it ideas of areas of study which are accessible only to those who have undergone a lengthy training process in order to understand their inner workings. At the same time there are also those within these disciplines who might characterize themselves as 'theorists' rather than 'researchers'. The latter concentrate on the process of research, while the former might argue that they gain an advantage in having a distance from the empirical world in order to reflect upon those processes and their products.

A narrow attitude to research practice perpetuates the idea that theory, ethics, values and methods of social research are distinct topics and that researchers, despite living and participating in the societies that they study, are somehow distinct from the social world which is the object of their investigations. This distance between them and the subjects of their study permits a limited notion of value-freedom to be maintained. As will become evident, this is open to considerable debate for our very membership of a society, it can be argued, is a necessary condition for understanding the social world of which we are a part, as well as being a fact of life from which we cannot escape. Indeed, such participation may be a prerequisite of objectivity. In having an understanding of these debates and the applicability of different methods of research, improved research and more inquiring and confident researchers will be the end result. To this

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extent, it is important to be aware of not only the strengths of particular methods of social research, but also their limitations.

There is a degree of confusion over the relationship between the concept of methodology and methods. Most of the time new researcher use both terms interchangeably but methodology, however, is prior to method and more fundamental. It provides the philosophical groundwork for methods.

Key Words

Methodological Issues, objectivity, Positivistic, Human Science, Description, Explanation

Introduction

Research methods are a central part of the social sciences. They constitute an important part of their curricula and provide a means through which their intellectual development is enhanced. Indeed, their status as 'sciences' is often justified by alluding to the technical aspects of research methods, while the very term 'science' carries with it ideas of areas of study which are accessible only to those who have undergone a lengthy training process in order to understand their inner workings. At the same time there are also those within these disciplines who might characterize themselves as 'theorists' rather than 'researchers'. The latter concentrate on the process of research, while the former might argue that they gain an advantage in having a distance from the empirical world in order to reflect upon those processes and their products.

There is merit in both of these views for they are not the opposites that their respective protagonists often claim them to be. As we shall see, both innovative thinking and a meticulous attention to the detail of data gathering inform the practice of social research. Theory, methodology and methods are all part of the issues and processes that surround and inform the discipline. These differences, however, frequently lead to disputes, as well as confusions, over the nature of research and the methods which it should employ in pursuance of its aims. For this reason, in the first three chapters of this book, there is an examination of the ways in which we gain our knowledge of the social world, the relationships that are held to exist between theory and research, and the place of values and ethics in research practice. While these issues are

complicated, they are also fundamental to an understanding of research methods. Without this, issues and methods can become separated and practitioners left with the impression that they simply have to learn various techniques in order to undertake research. The purpose of this first part, therefore, is one of clarification.

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Methodology is the technique by which researcher approaches the problem and seek answer. Ram, Ahujal says, "Methodology means description, explanation, and justification of methods". It inquires into the potentialities and limitations of the techniques. It is very important to know the assumptions underlying various techniques and the criterion by which researcher can decide what certain technique and procedure will be applicable to certain problem. Methodology is an approach to understand the phenomenon. "It is not a research model employed in a particular project but is a technique which entails theoretical principles as well as a framework that provides guidelines about how research is done in the context of a particular paradigm"².

Views on Paradigm

The term paradigm is gaining popularity among researcher and they are realizing that distinction between qualitative and quantitative method is not as critical as the distinction between paradigms for inquiry. Lincoln and Guba³ quoted Reese that “Paradigm is the blue print of certain sets of basis or metaphysical believes, which give us some judgment of reality which we cannot prove. Paradigm represents conceptualizations of the nature of reality, the relationships between the person trying to know something and the role of values in inquiry. “To state one’s methodological position is to describe one’s view of the nature of reality. Kuhn gave the term paradigm that means ‘paradigm is a set of propositions that explain how the society or a social phenomenon is perceived.”

Lincoln and Guba⁵ stated in their book that inquiry in physical and social science has passed through a number of paradigm eras. He named then-

- Pre positivistic
- Positivistic
- Post Positivistic

Pre positivistic era had nothing peculiar except that this period was before the commencement of positivistic era.

Positivistic era: As Reese defined it in Lincoln and Guba⁶ as a family of philosophers characterized by an a family of philosophers characterized by an extremely positive evaluation of science and scientific method. The major philosophy of this era was logical positivism they believe that knowledge has obtained by only sensory experience. This school of thought, dominated social science researches for a long period but with the demand that human sciences need their own method of doing research weakening the positivistic methodology.

Post positivistic Era: This era is dominating with qualitative research methodologies. Various research methodologies come under this Umbrella term. Rom Harre⁷ says, “Positivism is concerned with surface events or appearance, but new paradigm takes a deeper look. Where positivism is atomistic, the new paradigm is structural. Where positivism establishes meaning operationally, the new paradigm establishes meaning inferentially. Where positivism sees it central purpose to be prediction, the new paradigm is concerned with understanding. Finally,

where positivism is deterministic and bent on certainly, the new paradigm is probabilistic and speculative”.

Ram Ahuja⁸ says that for some social scientists, there are as many paradigms as there are groups of social scientist (like functionalism, Marxism, Phenomenology, symbolic interaction, feminism, post modernism) while other groups use only three paradigm with regard to the major theoretical directions in social science. There are :

- Positivist paradigm
- Interpretive paradigm
- Post positivist or critical paradigm

Positivist Paradigm: According to this paradigm goal of knowledge is simply to describe the phenomena that one experiences. In this paradigm, purpose of the research is explaining social life and predicting the events. It regards reality as objective and can be perceived through senses and exist independently of consciousness and experience.; For the positivist, the methodological position is that the facts of the world represent real objects and reality exists outside of our perception of things. It assumes the unity of the scientific method (methodological monism)-all phenomenon's are ultimately understood by a scientific method. Positivist paradigm assumes that human society is subject to laws like natural world.

Interpretative paradigm: According to this paradigm, purpose of the research is understanding and interpreting social life and discovering meaning behind people's behavior. There is no objective reality as well as knowledge; reality is subjective and lies in people's mind, which is interpreted differently by people. Key theories in this paradigm are symbolic interactions, Ethno-methodology, phenomenology, and ethnography. It assumes that consciousness plays an active role in the act of knowing. It seeks to understand phenomena as human beings experience them within specific social context.

Post positivistic paradigm: Karl Marx developed this perspective in the second half of nineteenth century. 'This perspective is combination of conflict, theory, critical theory, and feminism. Here purpose of research is explaining, interpreting and elucidating social life, disclosing myths, and illusions. It considers human beings as creator of destiny, oppressed, alienated, exploited, and hindered from realizing their potential. It regards reality as created by people and not by nature and which is based on oppression and exploitation..⁹

Historical background of the Debate-: in addition to paradigm the debate over methodology is very old. Donald Polkinghorne.¹⁰ says that the traditional debate which remains essentially is that: Should the human sciences emulate the method of the natural sciences or should they develop their own method. Those who believed that human science should develop their own method argue that human beings are different from the objects of study in physical world. Therefore they require different methods.

Before the 19th century questions about human beings were sought from Bible, Church or Philosophers. It was Thomas Hobbes who expressed that human could be studied with the new methods of sciences.¹¹. Hobbs felt that there was no need for a separate study of human phenomenon because they are no different from any other phenomenon. He proposed that mind is part of nature and need not be seen as second basis substance. Auguste Comte also proposed that study of human phenomenon should be brought in conformity with the methods used in natural sciences.

John Stuart Mill Provided firm philosophical and logical foundations for empiricism as the ground of knowledge¹². Richard Avenarius and Ernst Mach tried to establish that 'pure experience' is the single source of knowledge. Positivistic movement took momentum as members held that all human problems would finally be solved by only one correct method. Donald¹³, says that combination of naturalism, empiricism and positivism continued to dominate the methodological framework for the behavioral and social sciences. According to Donald six thinkers held a position that methodology of the natural sciences was inadequate for studying human phenomena,. There were Wilhelm Dilthey, Wundt, Frenz, Brentano, Edmund Husserl, Max Weber and William James. According to Max Van Manon 'The Distinction of 'Human' Science versus natural science is often attributed to Wilhelm Dilthey. His notion *Geisteswissenschaften* gave rise to term human science and natural science. Dilthey argued that human science includes mental social and historical phenomena while natural sciences include physical Chemical and behavior phenomena. Human phenomena require interpretation and understanding. Donald¹⁴ describes that individual life is not an isolated monad. It is merged and integrated into levels of intensity with various group lives, including the group life of humankind. Individuals do not exist in isolation. They cannot be studied as isolated units. They need to be understood in the context of their connection to cultural and social life. Natural science requires external observation and explanation. Natural Science studies objects of nature;

things, natural events and the way that objects behave. Human science in contrast studies persons or beings that have consciousness, preferred method for natural science has been detached observation, controlled experiment and quantitative measurement but human science involves description, interpretation and critical analysis, 'Donald'¹⁵ says as a positivist had declared that knowledge should be derived from perception. Dilthey emphasized his belief that there is another type of 'perceptual' experience and that human science must use it. When an individual perceives a physical object, he sees more than that object and that understanding is true legitimate knowledge.

Donald¹⁶ says that logical positivistic or empirical approach produces knowledge which is theoretical, formal, functional and quantitative. In this type of approach researcher remains an outsider and overcomes personal biases and perspectives. Knowledge is derived from the observation of facts and this type of knowledge is formal in the sense that it obstructs elements from the whole. Phenomenological and hermeneutic approaches provide two other contexts of knowledge. The phenomenological (descriptive) approach focuses on the structure of experience while hermeneutic (interpretive) approach concentrates on the historical meaning of experience. Michael Haralambos¹⁷ says that there is a fundamental difference between the subject matter of social sciences and natural science. The natural sciences deal with matter. Since matter has no consciousness, its behavior can be explained simply as a reaction to external stimuli. Unlike matter, man has consciousness. He interprets and expresses the world in terms of meaning and activity in his own terms.

Likewise, Peter Freebody¹⁸ quoted Hepp that he described two large families of inquiry. These are Natural Science and Human Science. Hepp further divided human sciences into social and cultural science. In natural science objects of inquiry are naturally occurring observable phenomena whereas in social sciences main interest is in documenting the normative grounds of human action. In cultural science objects of inquiry are a group of shared history of actions and the shared available interpretations of those actions.

This debate is endless. Positivistic and post-positivistic paradigms employ different research methodologies. They both have different assumptions of social reality as well as on other aspects too. For the sake of convenience it can be broadly differentiated into qualitative and quantitative researches. And it depends upon the researcher to decipher his/her basic paradigm by which research question can be tackled judiciously.

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