
Social Research Methods and Methodologies

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Abstract

This article examines the methods and methods of social research. Social research is an activity carried out to search for explanations of a particular social situation. This article involves systematic data collection to understand patterns and changes in social conditions. The purpose of social research as a project is to transform the researcher's social science knowledge into social science skills. Social research, in-depth interviews, participant observation, non-participant observation, focus group discussions, case studies, grounded theory, etc. are some of the data collection methods in social research.

The paper describes the nature of the study, theoretical stance, and research design including action research, naturalistic research, and ethnographic research, research design, interpretation, and ethical considerations. In this article, we considered case studies and participant observation as more reliable methods than other methods. Direct involvement of researchers in the subject area increases the level of reliability and usefulness of data in social research.

Key Words: Social Research, Data, Participation Observation, Case Study

Introduction

Why do researchers prefer qualitative research methods in social research? Research is an activity in which researchers explore new facts and information. Information is available in both numerical and verbal form. To explore new and reliable information, researchers use a variety of research methods. A method is a process of exploring something new. It refers to scientific inquiry in response to social phenomena. This is a helpful pathway for researchers to conduct their research. Methodology refers to the entire strategy and procedure that consists of building a picture of the empirical world, asking questions about phenomena, and transforming them into researchable problems and finding out the best research method. This includes selecting methods and data to search, developing and using ideas, and interpreting results (Blumer, 1969, p. 23). Hence, methods are only the miniature segment of the methodological venture. Bernard (2013) has stated, "Social research is also affected by the increasing prevalence of cross-disciplinary pilot or applied projects that serve as tools to develop solutions to social, economic and environmental problems" (p. 4). Social research often uses the qualitative research methodology. This method has become so popular that it has coincided with new theoretical trends that can be termed in many ways.

The constructionist approaches have gained ground from scientific realism and structural sociology. Social research performs a strategic role in society as it is the sole determinant of developments in all kinds of research methods used so far. Therefore, the social scientists or

researchers need to be conscious of the social conditions of their respective professions (Bernard, 2013, p. 6). Greene argued that in some applied field like evaluation, the different methodologies have always coexisted comfortably (Lisle, 201, p. 87). The Greene's argument showed the messiness of complexity that demands various investigative tools and techniques. Normally there are three methods used in social research such as qualitative method, quantitative method and mixed method. These methodologies are frequently used and observed applicable in the field study of the social issues.

Discussion

The research comprises of defining and redefining. The steps to undertake the research are: a. identifying problem, b. formulating hypotheses based on the existing literature, c. gathering relevant and valid data, d. organizing and evaluating data, e. drawing an inference. These steps contribute to accomplishing the research task. There are diverse types of research. Generally, research can be categorized based on the application and objectives. When categorizing the research based on the application, there are two kinds of research such as pure research and decisional research. The pure research involves developing and testing theories and hypotheses. The purpose of the decisional research is to explore solutions to an immediate problem. While categorizing the research based on the objective, there are four kinds of research: a. descriptive research—tries to explain a situation, problem, phenomenon, service or program, b. co-relational research—in this type of research, the researcher measures two variables, understands and judges the statistical relationship between these variables, c. explanatory—its objective is to explain why events occur so that it can elaborate a theory, d. exploratory research—helps determine the best research design, data—collection method and selection of subjects. Whatever the type of research it is, the researchers usually follow either qualitative or quantitative or mixed research method.

Along with qualitative and quantitative research methods, mixed methods have become widely popular in the social research. Mixed methods researchers seem to adopt either a single or diverse mental models. They have tended to employ pragmatism that has emerged as the most frequently chosen mental model as it provides the support upon which a practical, multi-perspective and liberal research philosophy is constructed (Lisle, 2011, p. 91). However, the transformative-emancipatory paradigm is more valuable in sociology and education as it argues knowledge is not neutral. The methodologies and not the methods are mixed. Johnson et al. (2007) provide a synthesis of 19 definitions:

Mixed methods research is the type of research in which a researcher or team of researchers combines elements of qualitative and quantitative research approaches (e.g., use of qualitative and quantitative viewpoints, data collection, analysis, inference techniques) for the broad purposes of breadth and depth of understanding and corroboration. (p. 123)

Johnson et al. have distinguished among three subtypes of mixed research methods such as qualitative dominant, pure mixed, and quantitative dominant. Any research design addresses

different aspects of the research procedure, from philosophical assumptions to data analysis. The design can be considered mixed when it uses qualitative and quantitative approaches at any stage such as research questions development, sampling strategies, data collection approaches, data analysis methods, or conclusions.

Theory is a bit different from methodology. Theory is formulated based on observations and insights. It is a series of faltering premises about ideas and concepts that build up the foundation for empirical research about a social world. In fact, theory serves as a wide foundation and worldview for explaining a process. A commendable theory works as a fountain of possibilities from which investigators can create a number of hypotheses that are tested in a scientific method (Crano et al 2015, p. 5). Indeed, theories present a framework to lead research. Theories explain the similar phenomenon by using different conceptual perspectives. Crano et al have defined a research hypothesis as:

A conceptual hypothesis is a prediction about relationships involving the theoretical constructs, and therefore guides the purpose of a research study. At a finer level of specificity is a research hypothesis, which is an empirical specification of the concerned hypothesis and is therefore a testable directional prediction about specific relationships in a study that ends with a question mark. (p. 5)

The researcher's knowledge on theory, concept, and hypothesis and research question is significant in the sense that these contribute to building the methodological framework of the research. The hypothesis or hypotheses that the researcher formulates can answer the research questions mentioned in the research proposal. The entire dissertation or research work becomes an intelligibly logical answer to the research questions. Therefore, the researcher must work on making questions and formulating the hypothesis that can be tested across the research.

Methodologies and Methods

The role of methodologies and methods in research is crucially relevant in this paper. Both methodology and method hold different concepts. Methodology presents a blueprint and method tells the process of doing research. Wahyuni (2012) defines methodology as a model to undertake a research within a social context of a specific paradigm. It embodies the principles, which lead an investigator to select one set of methods. A research method consists of a set of particular procedures, tools and techniques to collect and analyze data. Nonetheless, a method is a theoretically independent from methodologies and paradigms. A method is a practical application of doing research while a methodology is the theoretical and ideological ground of a method (p. 72). As this paper focuses on the qualitative research, the methods used in social research are significant when dealing with them. The approaches to the social research are, though, relevant are not discussed in this article.

When analyzing the qualitative data, dismantling, segmenting and reassembling data is accomplished to structure meaningful findings so that inferences can be drawn. The research questions and research are used to lead the process of categorizing the texts into logical segments and finally reorganizing them. Content analysis is a common approach to the

interpretation of meanings from textual data. Both quantitative and qualitative investigators use this technique. Quantitative investigators change qualitative data into numerical figures (Wahyuni, 2012, pp. 75--76). Quantitative researchers establish a set of segments. The characteristics of segments allow researchers to draw results. David Barono (2012) has stated, "Within the social sciences, the notion of truth and the methods used to uncover it have for centuries undergone—and continue to undergo—constant reflection and revision. How best to investigate the social world remains an open question" (p. 2). The development of scientific inquiry within the social sciences has greatly been the product of enlightenment and its legacy of positivism.

a. Social Surveys

Anna J. Secor in her chapter, Social Surveys, Interviews, and Focus Groups states, "Survey data lends itself to statistical analysis, whether *descriptive* or inferential. This is because survey data usually take a numeric form or, more often, are translated into numeric codes" (2010, p. 198). Survey information is gathered without using statistical sampling techniques can be used to summarize characteristics of research participants.

b. In-depth Interviews

The purpose of interview is to answer questions about the ways in which specific events, practices or knowledge are constructed and enacted within special contexts. Interviews provide opportunities for in-depth, flexible business with respondents. Interview is coded and recoded throughout the entire process of designing and undertaking the research. We transcribe the interview conversations, conduct analyses. Hence, coding is a systematic process, in which themes, words, phrases, and interpretations are done within and across interview transcripts. Content analysis is another approach in which themes, words, and phrases are explored and analyzed within and across transcripts. Similarly, narrative analysis in qualitative research is significantly useful that is used to examine the stories within the interviews. These methods are used in social research (Secor, 2010, p. 202).

c. Participant Observation

Barbara B. Kawulich (2005) has defined participant observation as a hallmark of anthropological and sociological studies. Qualitative studies include participant observation as a method of collecting data. Marshall and Rossman (1989) take observation as "The systematic description of events, behaviors, and artifacts in the social setting chosen for study" (p.79). Observations make researchers able to describe the extant situations by using their five senses. They can get a written photograph of the situation which is being studied (Erlandson, Harris, Skipper, & Allen, 1993). Similarly, participant observation is defined as the primary method employed by anthropologists who are doing fieldwork. Fieldwork includes "active looking, improving memory, informal interviewing, writing detailed field notes, and perhaps most importantly, patience" (Dewalt & Dewalt, 2002, p. vii). Thus, participant observation is a research method that enables investigators to learn about the ongoing life world of the target group in the natural context. It results in getting a context for developing sampling guidelines (Dewalt & Dewalt, 2002). In this way, participant

observation can be taken as “the process of learning through exposure to or involvement in the day-to-day or routine activities of participants in the researcher setting (Schensul, Schensul & Lecompte, 1999, p. 91). Bernard defines participant observation as the way of developing social rapport within the target group and learning to immerse in the very community so that the researcher can understand the ongoing affairs. However, the researcher should not be disturbing the people. Instead, they should be free to lead their naturalistic life. The researcher needs to include observation, natural conversations, interviews, checklists, questionnaires, etc. Besides, the researcher should play nonjudgmental role when observing actions of the people (1994). Participant observation allows the researcher to describe the situations in details so that they can be recognizable to the target group. The evidence from the detailed description helps the researcher to bring complex types of the world for methodologies seeking and investigating common characteristics.

d. Non-participant Observation

Non-participant observations are conducted in inpatient and community services using a qualitative observational structure. Non-participant observation is employed as the research method by the researcher to reduce biases and to reveal differences between what people say and what they do. This method can be overt or covert. Overt refers to the condition when the target group knows that the researchers are present although they do not interact with them. Overt non-participant observation can be biased due to the effect of the observer. It may happen when the target group wants to change their behavior over the time. Meanwhile, they are aware of the presence of the researcher. Contrarily, covert non-participant observation takes place when observing research subjects without them knowing what are being observed.

e. Focus group discussion

Focus group discussion refers to the act of collecting people from similar category of experiences together to express personal opinions and observations on the topic chosen for the study. There are a number of research questions posed among the participating members to discuss the topic freely. The members are asked to express their perceptions, attitudes, and beliefs. The researcher encourages the members to stay active and free when discussing the topic. There are around from 8 to 12 people participating in the discussion. The interviewer plays the role of a moderator and a set of questions is loosely structured. The researcher should be flexible and unbiased.

f. Case Studies

Case study is a qualitative research methodology that is used in humanities and social sciences. In fact, a case study can be seen as a rigorous study about a person, a group of people or a unit, aimed to generalize over several units. Social researchers describe how case studies examine complex phenomena in the natural setting to increase understanding of them. In case study, the researcher collects qualitative or quantitative data about the phenomenon to gain a more in-depth insight into the phenomenon. Case studies are one the

first types of qualitative research. They are largely used in the social sciences which are valuable in practice-oriented fields. In accordance with the *Encyclopedia of Case Study Research*, only a few texts deal with case studies as a main subject (Mills et al, 2010).

g. Grounded theory

Mead has stated that grounded theory can be understood in terms of symbolic interaction, where the individual enters as such into her/his own experience based on the social relations and interactions. Grounded theory builds on this understanding and considers that research should be grounded out of reality and that the researcher should enter into the field and comprehend what is going on. As a matter of fact, people have an active role in shaping the world and through interrelationships in terms of meaning, action and conditions. In the qualitative methodology, grounded theory is an interpretative method and phenomenology underpins it so that it can describe the world of the target group of the study. Grounded theory is used in building theory through the collection and analysis of rich data. The researcher can ask questions such as what research problem should be studied, how the project may be undertaken and which methods should be used in the collection of rich data.

Conclusion

In this article, I have considered various aspects of qualitative research methods used in social research. Emotions, feelings, attitudes, beliefs, perceptions, and opinions are the main elements of qualitative data. According to research, techniques used in qualitative research methodology include content analysis, in-depth interviews, participant observation, non-participant observation, case studies, and grounded theory. Identifying a problem, formulating a hypothesis, collecting data, organizing and evaluating the data, and drawing conclusions constitute qualitative research. Philosophical approaches to qualitative research are not discussed in this paper. Research is an activity in which researchers discover new facts related to the subject of research. Knowledge of research methods and methodologies makes it easier for researchers to conduct research in any field of research. Therefore, researchers need to develop research methodological skills to enhance both academic and professional research.

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