

Research methodology essay

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“ The study of man contains a greater variety of intellectual styles than any other area of cultural endeavor. How different social scientists go about their work, and what they aim to accomplish by it, often do not seem to have a common denominator ... Let us admit the case of our critics from the humanities and from the experimental sciences: Social science as a whole is both intellectually and morally confused. And what is called sociology is very much in the middle of this confusion. ” Wright Mills Images of Man Abstract

The quest for knowledge has always been at the forefront of societies mind.

What makes us tick as a society or an individual, what circumstances have to come about to lead to different phenomena to occur? Sociologists, psychologists, philosophers and social scientists have spent eons of time pondering on these questions. Research is the way in which these questions may be answered, but the question remains, as to what type of research leads us to the right answer or, if there is a right answer, what is the one true answer? If different research methods produce different answers, which is the right, the true answer and if we find it does this render all the other answers null or wrong?

These are some of the questions that I will be asking in this paper through examining concepts such as the symbolic order in research, the role of emotions in research, the grouping together of different methodologies to create a clearer picture of the research and the importance of reflexivity during the research process. Keywords; emotions, symbolic order, reflexivity.

The word research originates from the late 16th century French word *recherche*, *re* (expressing intensive force) and *cherchier* to search.

It means the systematic investigation into and study of materials and sources in order to establish facts and reach new conclusions. In this essay I will be focusing on qualitative research methods, examining some of the problems that may be encountered when conducting social research and how these problems may be overcome and used to advantage. Qualitative research takes an interpretive, naturalistic approach to its subject matter; qualitative researchers study things in their natural settings, attempting to make sense of, or interpret, phenomena in terms of the meanings that people bring to them.

This process begins by understanding that there are a variety of ways of making sense of the world and therefore focuses on discovering the meanings that are seen by those who are being researched, to better understand their view of the world. The methodology used in research will vary in accordance with the research being conducted, this can be limiting if a type of methodology is decided on and rigidly adhered to throughout the research leaving no room for reconsideration or change of view. Different Methodological Approaches. The manner in which sociologists study society varies greatly between individual sociologists.

There are many reasons for these varying views such as backgrounds, culture, family influences, religion and experiences with these experiences leading them to come to certain conclusions about certain situations. For this reason it is important not to rely on one type of sociological perspective which may constrict the researcher in the researching of certain phenomena. In research however objectively the reality of the social world was approached, its meaning was never self evident but always subject to <https://assignbuster.com/research-methodology-essay/>

interpretation with this interpretation being subject to the researchers biases formed out of the afore mentioned factors.

Some of the different methods of researching or research style are Positivism which means scientific; positivists would argue that it is possible and desirable to study social behavior in ways similar to those used by natural scientists when studying the natural world. The interpretive approach to research has been gaining attention in recent years as an alternative to the more traditional positivist approach (Lee 342). Lee describes the interpretive approach as "such procedures as those associated with ethnography, hermeneutics, phenomenology and case studies. By the positivist he refers to inferential statistics, hypothesis testing, mathematical analysis and experimental and quasi experimental design. Ethnography (Greek ?????? ethnos = folk/people and ???????? graphein = writing) is a qualitative research method often used in the social sciences, particularly in anthropology and in sociology. It is often employed for gathering empirical data on human societies/cultures. Data collection is often done through participant observation, interviews, questionnaires, etc.

Ethnography aims to describe the nature of those who are studied (i. e. to describe a people, an ethnos) through writing. In the biological sciences, this type of study might be called a "field study" or a "case report," both of which are used as common synonyms for "ethnography. Lee states that the difference between positivist and interpretive approaches has been described as objective versus subjective (Burrell and Morgan 1979), outsider versus insider (Evered and Louis 1981), quantitative versus qualitative (Van Mannen 1979) and etic versus emic (Morey and Luthans 1984).

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In literature it may seem that these 2 methods of research are opposed and irreconcilable and there is some concern over what Morey and Luthans call the “widening gap between the two major orientations to organizational research” (1984, 84). Lee puts forward the idea of joining the two methodologies together as he argues that they both have something to offer the researcher. He devised a framework called three levels of understanding. [pic]

The first level belongs to the observed human subjects, this consists of common sense and meanings which are true for these subjects and how they see themselves, which give rise to the behavior that they manifest in socially constructed settings. The second belongs to the observing organizational researcher. This understanding according to Lee is the researcher's reading and interpretation of the first level, common sense understanding where the researcher may use concepts such as subjective interpretation, the hermeneutical circle or thick description.

The third level of understanding also belongs to the researcher. This understanding is one that the researcher creates and tests in order to explain the empirical reality that he is investigating. This explanation is called scientific theory is made up of constructs that belong only to the observing researcher. This explanation consists of formal positions that typically posit the existence of unobservable entities such as social structure, issues that may attempt to account for the influence of certain factors of which the observed subjects may not even be aware.

The above diagram shows the flow of ideas and understanding between the three levels of understanding and the relevance of the two methods of research in question. This illustrates the importance of varying the methods of research used, to create a legitimate piece of research work it is vital to come at the work from different angles rather than taking a blinkered approach. This is vital as there can be no definite knowledge in research as there are so many variables and researchers take the research on for so many different reasons with so many different worldviews.

Identifying applicable research strategies is almost as difficult as methodologies tend to differ according to the various factors found within the desired outcome. Yet methods cannot be orchestrated to generate this outcome from the data, but merely facilitate its collection and synthesis. Any successful research methodology does not, therefore, create knowledge, but rather is an applicable strategy for identifying and processing the information which exists.

Hathaway (1995) stresses that there are decisions embedded within the creation and conduct of research methodologies that are generated both within the research setting and within the perceptions of the researcher. The concept of an unbiased methodology is thus inherently impossible: Are we creatures of reason and logic? Or are we better characterized as the victims of unconscious drives, forces and emotions? Does the different language we use really make such a difference in what we have to say? Are we saying something better and more academic if it is considered almost too technical for the reader to understand?

Are texts considered more valid if they are difficult to understand and read? Are these technical essays and writings elitist, written by elitist academics just to be appreciated by like minded and like educated individuals? Why publish research ideas that are inaccessible to society? All researchers come to the experimentation process with preconceived opinions of how and why the research process should transpire. “ When one chooses a particular research approach, one makes certain assumptions concerning knowledge, reality, and the researcher's role.

These assumptions shape the research Endeavour, from the methodology employed to the type of questions asked. ” (Hathaway 1995). So how do we carry out the most informed research possible? It is important not to take a ‘ sat nav’ approach to the research, asking a question that you already know the answer to and not be prepared to change course along the way, the research process is the information that the researcher finds along the pathway to the research, the phenomena the researcher encounters along the pathway is as relevant as the final conclusion and it is vital to include this in the research process.

If the research question is not working is it preferable to change the question or come at the research from a different angle rather than trying to fit your research question into every area of the study? Reynolds argues that the methodologist turns research technician, in spite of himself, and becomes an aimless itinerant, moving in whatever direction his research techniques summon him, studying changing patterns of voting because these are readily accessible to his techniques rather than the workings of political institutions and organizations for which he has not evolved satisfying

techniques of investigation. Reynolds 190). In my own research on texting differences between adults and teens I will be using field work which will consist of focus groups with informal questioning and conversation, individual interviews and data analysis in the form of analyzing a number of text interactions in both focus groups. Bourdieu and the Importance of Reflexivity in Social Research. Is knowledge independent of the situation of the knower, or a product of it? Bourdieu stresses the importance in reflexivity while conducting social research.

The sociologist must at all times be aware of their own habitus, their position of thought and in life and how bringing this to research will affect the research outcome. According to Bourdieu it is impossible for our objectivity to remain unbiased and unprejudiced due to our preconceived habitus. It is only by maintaining such a continual vigilance that the sociologists can spot themselves in the act of importing their own biases into their work.

Reflexivity is, therefore, a kind of additional stage in the scientific epistemology.

If there is a single feature that makes Bourdieu stand out in the landscape of contemporary social theory', wrote Loic J. D. Wacquant (1992: 36), ' it is his signature obsession with reflexivity. ' For Bourdieu, reflexivity is an epistemological principle which advises sociologists, as ' objectifying subjects', to turn their objectifying gaze upon themselves and become aware of the hidden assumptions that structure their research. Without this reflexive move, sociology cannot escape the ' fallacies of scholasticism' and loses its chances to provide a truly scientific analysis of the social world.

Reflexivity requires an awareness of the researcher's contribution to the <https://assignbuster.com/research-methodology-essay/>

construction of meanings throughout the research process, and an acknowledgment of the impossibility of remaining 'outside of' one's subject matter while conducting research. Reflexivity then, urges us " to explore the ways in which a researcher's involvement with a particular study influences, acts upon and informs such research. " (Nightingale and Cromby, 1999, p. 228). In the rush of interest in qualitative research in the past 15 years, few topics have developed as broad a consensus as the relevance of analytic " reflexivity. " (Macbeth2001).

Macbeth argues that contemporary expressions of reflexivity have attachments to critical theory, standpoint theory, textual deconstruction and sociologies and anthropologies of knowledge and power and agency with theorists such as Bourdieu and Wacquant at the forefront of this type of thinking. Bourdieu has problematised social research in relation to his concept of habitus stating that the researcher must at all times be aware of his habitus,(prevailing and long learned personal norms and biases, formed over a lifetime) and take steps to acknowledge this habitus by looking back on himself and his research with a critical eye.

The postmodern condition is such that there are no certainties in social research as norms and values become intertwined, identities and culture intermingle and clash as do gender and sexualities, power is gained and lost through means of popularity alone and social researchers can only strive to explore every avenue of their research subject reflexively in the quest for knowledge and answers.

In research this reflexivity can be put into two categories, personal reflexivity, which involves the researcher acknowledging their own habitus and how this is affecting their research and in turn affecting the researcher carrying out the research. The second is epistemological reflexivity which requires us to ask questions of the research such as: " How has the research question defined and limited what can be 'found? ' How have the design of the study and the method of analysis 'constructed' the data and the findings?

How could the research question have been investigated differently? To what extent would this have given rise to a different understanding of the phenomenon under investigation? Thus, epistemological reflexivity encourages us to reflect upon the assumptions (about the world, about knowledge) that we have made in the course of the research, and it helps us to think about the implications of such assumptions for the research and its findings. " (Willig, 2001). The Use of Emotion in Social Research.

Williams and Bendelow (1996), map the field of sociology of emotions onto the concerns of sociology: " emotions have fundamental implications for a range of pertinent sociological themes and issues including social action, agency and identity; social structure; gender, sexuality and intimacy; the embodiment of emotions across the life-course (from childhood to old age); health and illness; and the social organization of emotions in the workplace (formal and informal). Emotions play an important part in the field at a number of levels. It is important to realize that the researcher's identity and experiences shape the ideas with which they go into the field, their political and ideological stance, and there is an analytic cost if this interplay of person

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and research is not taken into consideration. The researcher takes assumptions and emotions into and generates emotions in the field about the researched.

Kleinman and Copp (1993) suggest that if a researcher experiences negative emotions about their participants they would prefer to ignore, or repress those feelings, since to admit them might constitute a threat to their professional and personal identity. But these can be the very feelings (anger and disappointment perhaps) that could help the researcher to understand their own assumptions and their participants. It is clear to me that emotions are very important in fieldwork, both those of the participants and of the researchers.

The researcher's emotions can have effects at the personal and professional levels, in relation to their understanding of their self and identity, and their capacity to perform in a fashion that they would themselves regard as professional, and these effects can be long term. A considerable amount of emotion work is called for in qualitative research, and often the dangers consequent on this are not recognized. In some instances researchers have been made quite ill (physically or emotionally) through their experiences of denying, ignoring or managing emotions.

The emotions experienced by respondents in the field are data and need to be drawn into analysis and interpretation. It has been suggested here that emotions are important in the production of knowledge from a number of perspectives. In most cases, despite some unpleasant experiences, researchers value the extra power in understanding, analysis and

interpretation that the emotions they experience in the field can bring to the research. In his article *Hidden Ethnography: Crossing emotional Borders in Qualitative Accounts of Young People's Lives*.

Shane Blackman concludes that different ethnographic episodes show how powerful feelings of emotions from love to hate grip both the researcher and the researched. He states that his fieldwork consisted of constant negotiation and respect with participants who allowed him access to their public and private spaces. He advises that to advance more open, reflexive approaches that explain how research is conducted and written, sociology needs greater disciplinary understanding and recognition of the real challenges and opportunities faced by qualitative research, which demands emotion.

The Symbolic Order in Social Research. "The "Symbolic Order" achieved its currency in Anglo-Saxon human sciences by way of Jacques Lacan's psychoanalytic theory but originated in Claude Levi-Strauss's *Les structures elementaires de la parente* (1949) [translated into English as *Elementary Structures of Kinship*, 1969] which used the term to group the many different codes which constitute human societies—from social identities and kinship relations to cooking and feasting rituals and religious observances—in short all cultural practices and inscriptions, whatever their language.

Levi-Strauss showed that patterns we can observe in one level are invariably linked to and determined by similar patterns in other levels". (Clark 2004)

How important is the symbolic order in social research? There are many factors to take into account when discussing the symbolic order in relation to

research. Gusfield and Michalowicz argue that in recent years, sociologists and anthropologists have conducted “ significant studies of modern life using concepts and perspectives derived from symbolic anthropology.

Among anthropologists words like ritual, myth, ceremony and symbolism are central to the study of social life in primitive societies. In contemporary society they have been peripheral terms and the activities they denote have not usually been studied in modern societies. ” (Gusfield and Michalowicz 1984). The symbolic is of huge importance in social research and cannot be separated from it. When researching we must ask, what is happening here? Recognizing the potentially multiple responses to this question illuminates the way in which meaning is mediated by cultural categories and structures of thought.

This awareness of the social construction of reality, which Richard Brown calls symbolic realism (Brown 1977), implies that any segment of human, social activity can be experienced in different and in multiple ways by diverse actors and observers. David Blacker in his thesis argues that for Gadamer, all understanding — whether of a text or of another person — is interpretive. This means is that, whatever else it is and does, understanding moves in what Heidegger called a “ hermeneutic circle. ” This circle is productive of meaning.

To generate meaning from a text, for example, one must always move around from whole to part and back again. The “ whole” may be the language in which the text was written, the literary tradition to which it belongs, its historical period, the life circumstances of its author, and so on.

This “ whole,” then, provides the backdrop against which one gives significance to the “ part,” e. g. , the particular words comprising the text, the individual work in question or the specific period of the author’s life. A helpful analogy is with understanding an ambiguous word within a sentence.

If the meaning of the word itself is not immediately obvious, one must find it in its larger context. The newly appreciated meaning of the part (the word) then alters to a degree the meaning of the whole (the sentence). One never escapes “ outside” this whole-part circuit — even the dictionary only relates words to other words. In my own research on ‘ the difference in meaning of texting between teens and adults’ the symbolic order plays a large part. The mobile phone will mean different things to these two groups and these issues must be taken into account when formulating the research.

Mobile telephone has been widely adopted by many people in society. As it integrates into daily life, it alters the way people communicate, identify their personalities and relate to others in social system. It affects socio-economic structures as well as individual life. Mobile telephone enables accessibility, emancipation, security and micro-coordination and serves as a symbol of prestige, pride and self-identity. The aim of this study is to explore the symbolic factors influencing the use of mobile telephone among teens and adults where in the case of adults the phone may be vital for communication; the teen may find it impossible to function socially without the use of the phone and the texting facility. Conclusion There is no way of determining a sure path for arriving at sociological knowledge; there is unlikely to be, just over the horizon, a new approach, paradigm or perspective to rescue us from the intellectual difficulties involved in a sociological theorizing which can give

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us a better understanding of our social world. Reynolds 339) As researchers we must be aware of our limitations in the social world in so much that we cannot really promise to theorize in a way that explains everything. This is not possible in life as there are too many different collective and individual ideas that are thousands of years in formation. In social research these variables and ideas must be acknowledged and given importance within the research area and with their relevance acknowledged the researcher may move on to the findings of her own particular studies.

Karl Mannheim answers critics in letter to the members of a seminar on the sociology of knowledge, by stating that “ if there are contradictions and inconsistencies in my paper this is, I think, not so much due to the fact that I have over looked them but because I make a point of developing a theme to its end even if it contradicts some other statements. I use this method because I think that in this marginal field of human knowledge we should not conceal the inconsistencies, so to speak covering up the wounds, but our duty is to show the sore spots in human thinking at its present stage.

In a simple empirical investigation or straightforward logical argument, contradictions are mistakes; but when the task is to show that our whole thought system in its various parts leads to inconsistencies, these inconsistencies are the thorn in the flesh from which we have to start. The inconsistencies in our whole outlook, which in my presentation only become more visible, are due to the fact that we have two approaches which move on a different plane. (Mannheim in Reynolds 1970) David Hume held that we can never be absolutely sure that what we know is true. (Bernard 2006).

He argues that we come to understand what is true from what we are exposed to. This reiterates the fact that research is personal even when we try our best to avoid this being the case. We can never be sure according to Hume what we know is true, Humes brand of skepticism is a fundamental principle of social science according to Bernard, “ the scientific method, as it is understood today, involves making improvements in what we know, edging towards the truth, but never quiet getting there and always being ready to have yesterday’s truths overturned by today’s empirical findings.. ” (Bernard).

In the social sciences we can see sociologists, philosophers and social psychologists such as Michael Foucault, Fredriech Nietzsche, Pierrie Bourdieu and others changing their views on subjects and seemingly contradicting themselves but I would consider that this is paramount when conducting any type of research, as society evolves, technology changes and people become more individualized the world is changing rapidly so we as researchers must be open to change and not be afraid to re-examine our research and research motives to ensure that we are generating the most informed and comprehensible research possible.

In the case of Foucault , Tom Keenan argues that “ these contradictions and paradoxes do serve a very important strategic purpose since they allow to articulate a critique of the juridical discourse on a theoretical level.

Foucault’s work produces paradoxa since it struggles against doxa, it seeks to place in question orthodoxies of political thought and leftist critique. It is contradictory since it contradicts dominant forms of critique that itself functions as a constraint for imagining political alternatives (Keenan 1987)”.
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