

The importance of social research



As social beings we have a continuous need to understand actuality of our surroundings, environments and our individual and social requirements. In this paper I will be discussing why social research is important and some examples of methods to show how we use the knowledge we have gained to benefit mankind.

The human mind seeks knowledge to improve and sustain our quality of life in the present and the future; we do this by means of social research which is a process of discovery and experimentation. Research can be an educated guess or perhaps based on assumptions by researchers about human behaviour and environment and how we can most fully understand the world around us. Social research also gives us the ‘ Why’ questions which include how deviancy, poverty, crime and prejudice etc, come into being and how we can obtain results that will benefit society.

We all have knowledge. There are things that we accept as being true, for example apples grow on apple trees and apricots grow on apricot trees, we accept this and therefore accept it as fact. There are also many things we don’t have a great deal of knowledge about and we rely on other means of gaining the information we require. We can believe what an expert relays to us on an issue in which we have interest, but what makes that person an expert?, We can believe what our forefathers have passed down through generations, but what may have hold true for our forefathers doesn’t necessarily hold true for us in the present or indeed the future. Using our common sense can bring us to conclusions through observation and experience and we may be able to create a theory, but common sense has many different perceptions. Our personal experiences are just that, ours, and

we comprehend experiences in our own individual ways. For example I may see and hear a person complimenting another, you may see and hear it as a criticism. The media is an excellent source of knowledge but not without speculation and we need to use this wisely. We are able to include the above methods as well as the varied methods of social research, but the research methods provided below give us a much greater insight into human behaviour and why we do the things we do.

“ Every observation is qualitative at the outset, whether it is our experience of someone’s intelligence, the location of a pointer on a measuring scale, or a check mark entered in a questionnaire. None of these things is inherently numerical or quantitative, but converting them to a numerical form is sometimes useful” (Babbie 2010, p. 24).

Quantitative and qualitative are two types of research methods that Sociologists may apply to their research. Quantitative data emphasis data that can be measured, it uses numbers and statistics to analyse human behaviour and society. This is a very systematic and objective approach and some of the prevalent quantitative methods are outlined below.

“ Quantitative analysis involves the techniques by which researchers convert data to numerical forms and subject them to statistical analyses” (Babbie 2010, p. 445)

The first method is experimental research which involves instigating an action and observing the outcome of that action. This method tries to find a cause-effect relationship between two variables, using both an independent and dependant variable to find if something changes one variable and not

the other. An example of this is a study by (Darley and Batson 1978). where they recruited students who received some religious training and instruction and were asked to move from one building to the next. Between the buildings was a man who appeared to be injured and in obvious need of attention. Some of the students stopped and others did not. There were various outcomes but the major one being that haste was a major factor of some of the students not helping the injured man. In fact some students were so wrapped up in their own world, that they just did not see the man between the buildings.

(Barnes et al 2005). Maintain “ Discovering causal relationships is the key to experimental research. In abstract terms, this means the relationship between a certain actions, X, which alone creates the effect Y. For example, turning the volume knob on your stereo clockwise causes the sound to get louder. In addition, you could observe that turning the knob clockwise alone, and nothing else, caused the sound level to increase. You could further conclude that a causal relationship exists between turning the knob clockwise and an increase in volume; not simply because one caused the other, but because you are certain that nothing else caused the effect.”

The second method is secondary analysis which uses existing data, therefore is quite speedy due to the existing research. This method is commonly used in historical and governmental studies concerning births, cause of death, life expectancy and housing requirements. The Department of The Australian Bureau of Statistics (2010) has details of The 2006 Census of population and housing in Australia which is an example of secondary analysis.

The third method relate to surveys which use questionnaires and interviews to obtain data and is one of the most common method to obtain specific information from a large amount of people. Questions may be open or closed, with open allowing a free response and closed providing multiple choice questions. The end result may be used to work out percentages or conduct further studies with your answers. One example of a survey is by (Karen Rapaport and Barry Burkhart 1984). where they enlisted two hundred and one college men and using a questionnaire to inquire if they had ever engaged in eleven coercive acts.

The final method of quantitative research is sampling. This includes taking a small part of society so they are representing the population as a whole. Each person has an equal chance of being chosen. The use of sampling is used as it is not possible to test every single person in the population area being studied. The sample has to be typical of the population. The safest way to ensure that it is typical is to use a random selection procedure. (Random sampling). An example of sampling may be; Poverty and the elderly.

Next are qualitative research methods which make use of planned observation to view society in its natural surroundings. Through participation and/or observation we can attempt to make sense of how humans react to social actions. This method allows observation, data processing and analysis to be interwoven and can also generate theories. I have described three qualitative research methods below.

(Myers 2009) suggests that “ Qualitative research methods were developed in the social sciences to enable researchers to study social and cultural

phenomena. Examples of qualitative methods are action research, case study research and ethnography. Qualitative data sources include observation and participant observation (fieldwork), interviews and questionnaires, documents and texts, and the researcher's impressions and reactions".

The first of the qualitative methods is the use of ethnographic interviews. This is an approach where social researchers communicate with people usually from the same social group to learn about them and their behaviour. An example of this is a study of street people by (David Snow and Leon Anderson 1987) where they spent four hundred and five hours and twenty four different locations following key informants and interacting within their society.

The second method in qualitative research is participant observation . The researcher place themselves in a social situation observing people being studied and participating in social activities. The two main types of participant observation are covert and overt. Covert involves the researcher participating anonymously, so the participants have no idea they are being studied. Overt observation is where the researcher openly expresses their reasons for participation and therefore the group has given permission for study to take place. An example of covert research is when (Leon Festinger, Stanley Schachter and Henry Reicken 1956). observed a religious cult by pretending to become adherents to its beliefs. An example of overt participation is (William Whyte's 1943). study where he was protected from potential antagonism by his friendship with ' Doc', his sponsor. However,

Whyte, despite employing an overt participant observer role, did increasingly come to view himself as ‘one of the gang’ during his fieldwork research.

The last method in qualitative research includes case studies. This method involves examining closely an individual, small group or event and coming to conclusions only regarding that particular individual, group or event.

Emphasis is on exploration and description. Case studies may apply other research methods within a case study such as surveys and interviews. An example of a case study includes a study of inmates on death row to find if the inmates had any similar psychological characteristics. The researchers found evidence of brain impairment in 100% of the cases. (Lewis, Pincus, Bard, Richardson, Prichep, Feldman, & Yeager 1988).

(Yin 2002). defines the scope of a case study as follows: “A case study is an empirical inquiry that: investigates a contemporary phenomenon within its real-life context, especially when the boundaries between phenomenon and context are not clearly evident.”

In conclusion I have demonstrated the need for social research and have discussed several approaches that the social researcher may use. Research will always be crucial for human-kind to positively define social issues and human actions. The need to study matters such as health, crime, the elderly and the homeless just to name a few, will always need ongoing research to change social problems and perhaps even eliminate some of the causes.

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