Sociologial Methods of Research

- **Evaluate the various methods of research available to sociologist.**

This essay will focus on five of the core methods of research available to sociologists and their advantages and disadvantages as well as briefly look at the practical, theoretical and ethical issues involved in collecting and analyzing data.

'Methods of research are the actual techniques or procedures used to gather and analyse the data related to some research question or hypothesis' (Blaikie, 1993: 23). There are numerous techniques and procedures, which make up the sociological toolbox. It includes surveys, experiments, ethnography and case studies, to name but a few. These are referred to as primary data. Secondary data is also used such as official statistics, historical documents, personal life documents and the mass media. A second way of classifying research methods is 'quantitative' and 'qualitative'. The former produces numerical or statistical data and the later produces data about the personal experience and meanings of people, based on words and observations.

According to (Taylor, 1999: 23), it is possible to distinguish several 'families' of sociological research operating with a distinct set of epistemological , ontological and practical foundations. However, they are not always in complete agreement on the foundations of the discipline of sociology as a whole.

The ethnographers, also known as 'field researchers' and 'phenemenologists' are probably the biggest active researchers in the UK presently. They believe that all social action is intentional and therefore one needs to decipher the reasoning that underlies action, hence, in order to understand how people behave, research has to imitate real life and attempt to see and understand the world from the point of view of the subject or participant. Interactionists mirror this belief.

Unstructured interviews are used to collect qualitative data from a respondent, which allows them time and scope to talk about and develop their opinions on a particular subject. This technique involves the extensive uses of open-ended questions, some which are suggested by the researchers and some, which arise naturally. The objective is to establish a rapport with the respondent to obtain valid/true data.

This type of interview avoids pre-judgment of what is and is not important information since there are few, if any, 'pre-set questions'. The interviewer is able to pick up information that had not occurred to her/him. Respondent's questions can be explained and the interviewer is able to give guidance where necessary and get at what a respondent really means and believes and in consequence have greater depth of information.

However, the fact that unstructured interviews are not standardized in terms of the questions asked, means it's difficult to generalize from a set of interviews especially with a series of interviews of different people. This questions the reliability of data. Also, too much information maybe collected which may turn-out to be irrelevant to the research issue. If respondents are not articulate and forth coming and if they are not, this may lead

to bias being introduced by the researcher by using prompting/suggestive questions. Validity of the data can be questioned in that the researcher has no way of knowing whether or not the respondent is lying or remembering things differently than reality and the respondent's explanations of their behaviour with hindsight maybe very different from what they actually felt at the time. In "Talking About Prison Blues", (1977), Cohen and Taylor pointed out that researchers end-up with confirmation of the interviewer's particular definition of reality rather than the respondent's.

Observation is regarded as having a more valid picture of reality. Non-participant observation can be either covertly or overtly completed. A covert observation done by Valerie Yule of 'Why are parents so tough on children?' (New Society, Sept, 1986), when she observed the way mothers treated their children in public places. The researcher's time and energy is devoted to the precise observation and recording, without affecting the 'actors' behaviours. The observations could be easily quantified, however, the views and feelings of the 'actors' about their actions cannot be systematically accessed and therefore do not provide any qualitative information. An overt observation completed by Elton Mayo produced what is referred to as the 'Hawthorne effect' whereby the simple presence of an observer led to a change in behaviour irrespective of other variables tested by Mayo.

Max Weber argued we must use the concept of "Verstehen". (O'Donnell, 1997 : 27). Participant observation provides the researcher the ability to 'see for themselves' the behaviour that people describe in an interview or questionnaire. A researcher can test and possibly redefine hypotheses and pre-conceptions about someone's behaviour in the light of their experience in the group. He/she can empathies with the social pressures, influences of group norms and hence produce rich and high-quality information about all aspects of a groups behaviour.

Nevertheless, the small-scale quality of the observation is unlikely to be representative of any other social group and a researcher cannot generalize their findings from one study to the next. The researcher must have the ability/skill to communicate with group members on their levels and terms and needs to learn the culture of a group, which may not always be easy or possible.

Overt participation allows easy generation of data and in time it becomes almost a natural aspect of the group's interaction. W.F. Whyte ('Street Corner Society') was older than the members of the juvenile gang whose behaviour he wanted to study and through the use of this method, he gained the collaboration of the gang. The researcher is able to balance the roles of being both a participant and an observer and the chance of becoming immersed in the group is reduced.

Nevertheless, there is no way of measuring how the presence of the observer influences the behaviour of the group members and there is the problem of the interpretation of the data. Which observation is significant and which insignificant? A researcher cannot observe everyone in the group at the same time. This casts doubt on the reliability of studies of this kind because they cannot be replicated.

In covert participation, the problem of the 'Hawthorne effect' is avoided and the researcher can assume they really are observing people's 'normal behaviour'. The personal involvement as a member of the group gives the researcher personal experience of incidents and events that happen and is therefore able to understand the meanings and motivations behind behaviour. Erving Goffman conducted a mostly covert study named 'Asylums', 1968, in an attempt to discover 'unofficial reality' of mental institutions. He was able to discover the 'tricks and strategies' employed by staff and patients in order to cope with their situation.

Gaining access may pose a problem such as groups involved in illegal or deviant behaviour. The researcher's age, gender or profession being investigated, may not allow covert participation. Interpretations of what actually happened are highly subjective and dependent on memory and may not represent the reality of the situation from the group's point of view. 'Going native' is a risk, where the researcher is trying to be two different people at the same time and it becomes difficult to remember which role is appropriate at different times and perhaps ceases to accurately record data. In Howard Parker's study 'A View from the Boys', he frequently found himself in the position of engaging in criminal activity to gain trust, respect and friendship of the group, which raises ethical concerns; one is seen as encouraging people to commit criminal acts. Having entered a group the researcher needs to insure he/she is not exposed as a spy as this could be dangerous and it may be difficult to get out, which brings up the ethical question of should the researcher be deceiving people?

The surveyors, also known as 'quantitative researchers' and 'social statisticians' explore 'regularities', 'tendencies' and 'dominant patterns', which constitute social life. (Steve Taylor, 1999: 25). Data analysis aims to find 'causality' and 'correlations' between 'variables'. Functionalists favour this approach.

Research using questionnaires can either be postal or verbal (structured interview). Either 'closed ended' questions with suitable response provided by the researcher or 'open ended' questions, where the respondent answers 'in their own words', or a mixture of both can be used. Questions are coded and given a numerical value to allow easy interpretation, quantification and standardization. Completion is quick and simple for the respondent and the researcher is able to contact large numbers of people. Anonymity allows the researcher to explore potentially embarrassing areas such as sexual and criminal matters.

Conversely, the researcher can never be certain of who completed the questionnaire for example, answered by a man when it was aimed at a woman and it's also difficult to know if the actual if the actual question has been understood and means the same to everyone surveyed. The format of questionnaire design makes it difficult for the researcher to examine complex issues and opinions and therefore the depth of answers, even open-ended ones, is limited. Another consideration is the response rate of the sample targeted. If it's low, it's deemed a 'self-selecting' sample where only those with strong opinions reply and if it's 20 – 25% response, which is the norm, the sample could be unrepresentative of a target population.

The comparative researchers also known as 'cross cultural researchers' make use of secondary data, which is any information that has not been generated personally 'first hand' by the researcher who uses it. This saves time, money and effort because it is readily available and therefore practical. Sources can be both contemporary and historical. 'Centuries of Childhood' : Philip Aries, 1962 used a variety of historical accounts and resources to test his theory that 'Childhood' was a relatively recent phenomenon. Durkheim's 'Suicide' study would have not been possible without the use of statistical data. (Giddens, 2001:10) It allows the examination of trends/changes over time and comparisons, as it is not possible to collect primary data about the past. Scott's 'Documents in Social Research' (Social Studies Review, 1990) identified four crucial concepts in the evaluation of secondary sources: -

- Authenticity
- Credibility
- Representativeness
- Meaning
- Purpose

The uncritical use of secondary data is a potential source of bias due to particular 'definitions' of meanings, for example, the government recently changed the way it defined unemployment and hence the way in which it collected data 25 times! Historical and personal documents are liable to be incomplete, inaccurate or simply reflect one particular point of view and sometimes, especially in the mass media, highly opinionated and deeply subjective and therefore not representative.

Each research method has its strengths and shortcomings. Observations, both overt or covert and unstructured interviews provide high validity through qualitative data, however, they raise ethical problems and cannot be replicated. Questionnaires and surveys provide high reliability through quantitative data, however, they give no indication of individual meanings and are difficult to verify. Secondary sources are cheap and easily accessible but are often subjective and produced for other purposes. The amount of funding, the timescale, the nature of topic to be investigated, legal and moral considerations and theory are all factors that affect the researchers' choice of method.

Bibliography

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