Sage Research Methods

The SAGE Encyclopedia of Qualitative Research Methods

When one thinks of the social sciences, one typically envisions a group of academic disciplines that study various human aspects of the social world. The social sciences are distinguishable from the arts and humanities chiefly because social scientists employ the use of the scientific method in their studies of human groups, societies, and humanity.

Qualitative research in the social sciences involves the use of a variety of available qualitative methodologies. Qualitative research, however, is a bit amorphous to define; the most obvious definition is that it is research that uses methods that are not primarily quantitative (numerical) in nature. Qualitative research may also be viewed as using various methods that embrace the quality or essence of something, some phenomenon, or even some event. Some people believe qualitative methods are largely subjective, where the researcher is used as the instrument of data collection or at least as a filter for capturing information on some subject. Other people suggest that qualitative research in the social sciences involves historical tracing or at least some sort of historical contextualization of whatever the researcher is investigating. Those with a more theoretical stance claim that qualitative research in the social sciences is guided by the orientations set forth in symbolic interaction.

Symbolic interaction is one of several theoretical schools of thought available in the social sciences. This orientation maintains that what humans do and say are the result of how they interpret their social world to have meaning; in effect, what people do and say has specific meanings communicated through mutually shared understandings of symbols, the most common of which being language. One reason for these various nuances in meaning for qualitative research in the social sciences is that various disciplines and fields commonly thought of as comprising the social sciences have sought to incorporate their own interpretations and perspectives on the methodological frameworks by which they plan and organize their research endeavors. In this manner, they seek to capture their own discipline's theoretical perspectives and epistemological orientations while using a qualitative methodological paradigm.

The Qualitative Methodological Paradigm

The design of any research study begins with an idea for the study and selection of a methodological paradigm. A paradigm is essentially a worldview, a whole framework of beliefs, values, and methods within which research will take place. Qualitative research places emphasis on understanding through looking closely at people's words, actions and interactions, and traces or records created by people. Qualitative research examines the patterns of meaning that emerge from systematic observations of people's words, actions and interactions, and traces or records. The task of the qualitative researcher, then, is to locate these patterns in the words and actions of people and to offer interpretations of these patterns while staying as close as possi-

ble to the social constructions of the participants who originally experienced these words and actions. Thus, following a qualitative paradigm in the social sciences means seeking to allow patterns to emerge in the data in order to discover and better understand how the participants under investigation come to give meaning to things, what these meanings are, and to place into a contextual understanding what people say and do under certain circumstances or in specific situations, given the meanings attached to various objects, events, and phenomena.

What Are the Social Science Disciplines?

When one thinks of traditional social scientific disciplines, one is likely to consider anthropology, sociology, psychology, political science, and economics. During the past several decades, however, other fields and disciplines have begun to see themselves as part of the social sciences, slowly giving rise to recognizing other disciplines as part of the social sciences. These include criminology, nursing, public health, social work, education, English, history, women's studies, and even business and marketing. The lines of demarcation between fields of study and disciplines, then, have become blurred, but among the several linchpins that seem to hold them together as the social sciences, are their research methods. All of the new social sciences have incorporated the qualitative paradigm into their primary research strategies and offer discipline specific qualitative methods courses as part of their curriculums.

In truth, there are many ways to actually conduct qualitative research in the social sciences, depending on whether one considers discipline traditions or methodological orientations. For example, one can assert at least five major qualitative research traditions that are discipline related, which include cognitive anthropology, ecological psychology, ethnographic communication used in English and linguistics, holistic or naturalistic ethnography in education, and symbolic interactionism, commonly associated with sociology.

Cognitive Anthropology

The field of cognitive anthropology focuses on the study of the relation between human culture and human thought, rather than with material, artifacts, or phenomena. Cognitive anthropologists study how people understand and organize the material objects, events, and experiences that make up their world as the people they study perceive it. Consequently, cognitive anthropologists explore how people make sense of reality according to their own Indigenous cognitive categories, not the analytic creations or interpretations of the researcher.

Ecological Psychology

Ecological psychology views the world as divided into two distinct domains: the environment and the person. This perspective offers a picture of the world as consisting of matter and material objects in motion, in the environment, and as distinct from a second separate dynamic cognitive realm. One can envision this second realm as that of mental phenomenon, a realm where materialistic accounts and natural law do not apply. What one might consider phenomena of psychological interest—such as perceptual experiences, thoughts, and emotions—are located in this realm of the person, yet the causes of these psychological phenomena should be understood as occurring in the material domain—the environment. Ecological psychology is sometimes described as an analytic framework that seeks to reveal functional relationships in the ongoing reciprocal interactions between the realms of the person and the environment.

Ethnographic Communication

Ethnographic communication examines language and its use. At the societal level, ethnographic communication examines what functions language serves. For example, many languages contain terms that serve a social identification function in society by providing linguistic indicators that may be used to reinforce social stratification or to maintain differential power relationships between groups. Linguistic features are often employed by people consciously or unconsciously to identify themselves and others and thus serve to mark and maintain various social categories and divisions. At the level of the individual and the group, then, ethnographic communication examines groups interacting with one another to understand how the function of communication may be directly related to the participants' purposes and needs. These may include categories of functions such as *expressive terms* (conveying feelings, sentiment, or emotion), *directive terms* (requesting or demanding), *referential terms* (true or false statements, with propositional content), *poetic terms* (connoting a sense of aesthetics), *phatic terms* (offering notions of empathy and solidarity), and *metalinguistics* (referring to language use itself).

Holistic or Naturalistic Ethnography

Holistic or naturalistic ethnography has commonly become part of the research repertoire in the study of schools and education. This ethnographic process seeks to provide holistic and scientific descriptions of educational systems, processes, and phenomena within their specific contexts (as applied to educational research). It is loosely based on classical ethnography that tends to focus on an entire social group or organization; the goal of a holistic ethnography is the description of an entire cultural system, or in the case of its

use in education, an entire educational process, school, or a classroom experience.

Symbolic Interactionism

Symbolic interactionism, or interactionism for short, as mentioned above, is one of the major theoretical perspectives in sociology. Interactionists focus on the subjective aspects of social life rather than on objective, macrostructural aspects of social systems. This forms the substantive basis for symbolic interactionism as a theoretical approach whose orientation is generally acknowledged to derive form the works of John Dewey, Charles Horton Cooley, George Herbert Mead, and Herbert Blumer, the last often considered the primary founder of symbolic interactionism. Interactionists base their theoretical perspective on the idea that humans account for meaning in two basic ways. First, meaning may be seen as intrinsically attached to an object, event, phenomenon, and so forth. Second, meaning may be understood as a psychological accretion imposed on objects, events, and the like by people. Thus, meanings are attached to objects, events, phenomenon, and so forth as part of the social process in which these items take place.

For interactionists, humans are pragmatic actors who continually adjust their behavior to the actions and reactions of other actors. People can adjust to these actions only because humans are able to interpret the actions of others; that is, humans are capable of denoting actions symbolically and treating these actions, and those who perform them, as symbolic objects. This process of adjustment is aided by humans' ability to imaginatively rehearse alternative lines of action before acting—as if performing before an imaginary audience. The process is further aided by the ability to think about and to react to one's own actions and even oneself as a symbolic object. Thus, the interactionist sees humans as active, creative participants who construct their social world, not as passive, conforming objects of socialization.

Methodological Considerations

Methodologically, one can suggest a variety of traditional data collection technologies used by an assortment of social science disciplines; among the more common are biographical and autobiographical methods, case studies, participant observation, interviewing, oral histories and historical tracing, grounded theory approaches, and phenomenological discovery. Today, a number of innovative data collection strategies that once were considered splinter or off the mainstream have begun to appear in greater frequency; these include action research, photo-voice, visual ethnography and other photographic and visual recording techniques, and e-interviewing. Given the breadth and depth of qualitative research in the social sciences, it would be inappropriate

to explain in detail all of these techniques here or try to associate any of them with a particular discipline or field of study in the social science. However, it would seem appropriate to at minimum briefly define each of the traditional strategies, and these definitions are offered below.

Biographical and Autobiographical Methods

Autobiography is perhaps the most widely accepted form of personal document in the social sciences. Most sources will suggest there are actually three major types of autobiography: comprehensive, topical, and edited. The comprehensive autobiography spans the entire life of an individual and includes detailed descriptions of one's life experiences, personal insights, and anecdotal reminiscences. Topical autobiographies, unlike the more well-rounded and complete description of experiences offered in a comprehensive autobiography, provide a more fragmented picture of an individual's life. The typical topical autobiography is more of an excision from the life of a subject than is the full life description. The edited autobiography involves the researcher serving as a kind of editor and commentator who eliminates any repetition in descriptions, shortens lengthy discourse to more direct and crisper statements, and amplifies selected portions of the biography while deleting others.

Case Studies

Case studies can be defined in a number of ways. Some sources will define case studies as attempts to systematically investigate an event or set of related events with the specific aim of describing and explaining the phenomenon. Other sources may suggest case studies seek to examine a single setting, single subject, single event, or even a single depository of documents. Regardless of one's personal favorite, most definitions will indicate it is a method that involves systematically gathering enough information about some particular individual, social setting, event, group, or organization sufficient to permit the researcher to effectively understand how the subject of the study experiences things as he, she, or they operate and function in their group or setting.

Participant Observation

In general, participant observation involves the process of immersing oneself into the natural setting of some group of people from whom the researcher is not too different or from which the researcher may already be a member. Research is undertaken either covertly (where the researcher's identity as an investigator is kept secret) or overtly (where the group is informed that the researcher is undertaking a study of the group). The goal of participant observation is to gain an understanding of the various activities and experiences of those

being observed in their natural setting. The research methods literature frequently describes includes at least three roles a researcher may take when undertaking observational research:

Complete participation, where the researcher is an active member of the group and participates in the full gamut of activities and social relationships available to him or her in the group being studied. Frequently, this orientation is undertaken covertly.

Partial participant or participant as observer, where the researcher may or may not be a full member of the group and where he or she may participate in many or even all activities of the group under study, but need not participate in any. In most cases, the researcher's presence and identity as a researcher is known by the group (an identified researcher), and thus the researcher can bow out of certain activities if he or she chooses.

Nonparticipant observation involves an identified researcher intentionally not taking part in any of the usual activities of the group under investigation, maintaining instead a kind of watchful and professionally distant role and relationship with members of the group during observations.

Interviewing

This method may involve one-on-one or face-to-face type endeavors or groups of individuals simultaneously being interviewed by a single researcher or facilitator. Such groups are sometimes referred to as focus group interviews, whereas the face-to-face interviews are frequently described as in-depth interviews. Face-to-face interviews are sometimes placed along an imaginary continuum of rigidity of structure and are described as unstructured, semi-structured, and structured, where the least amount of formal structure is required of the unstructured interview and the greatest amount of formal structure is found in the structured interview format. Although face-to-face interviews encourage individuals to speak about their personal experiences and understandings of their social lives, the group interview makes use of the synergistic energy of the group to encourage people to talk about and to discuss their views and experiences, sometimes negotiating different understandings than some may have held prior to the group interview.

Oral Histories and Historical Tracing

Oral histories are literally the stories and eyewitness descriptions of individuals who have personal life experiences with certain events, phenomena, settings, and so forth. Although the ideal way to learn about this information is by listening to an oral historian, many researchers have recorded and/or transcribed the words of oral historians and created more permanent records of these oral histories. Given the growing accessibility

of oral history archives on the internet, a kind of revitalization of this orientation has begun to occur in the social sciences during the past 10 years. It is now possible to locate and actually listen to—via the internet, for example—archived interviews with jazz musicians, fishermen, townsfolk, and an assortment of other individuals making up a vast variety of social roles one might be interested in researching. Historical tracings tend to draw out their research investigation by examining various types of data typically classified as either primary or secondary.

Primary data are derived from sources such as oral historians, or their transcribed statements, or written testimony of other types of eyewitnesses. These tend to be the original artifacts, documents, and items related to some direct event, or outcome of an event, or some experience of an individual.

Secondary data are sources that include oral or written statements from people who may not have been immediately present during the event or phenomenon being described, but they convey information provided by others who were present or have knowledge about some specific research interest or subject.

Grounded Theory Approaches

Grounded theory is frequently described as a method where the theory emerges from the data itself rather than a priori. Grounded theory is sometimes described as a method that separates theory and data, but in fact, it should be more accurately described as a method that combines the two. Data collection, analysis, and theory formulation are intricately and reciprocally related, and the grounded theory approach incorporates explicit procedures to guide and ensure this. Thus, theory literally springs from and is anchored to the data.

Phenomenological Discovery

Phenomenology is generally understood as designating a philosophical movement that arose during the turn of the 20th century that proposed a radically different grounding for scientific study and theoretical construction. Originally applied to psychology, phenomenology has been adapted to most other disciplines of the contemporary social sciences. The original work on phenomenology is generally attributed to the writings of Martin Heidegger, Edmund Husserl, and George Wilhem Friedrich Hegel, all of whom wrote at the turn of the 20th century. Methodologically, phenomenological discovery is the study of structures of consciousness as experienced from the first-person point of view of those experiencing some activity, event, or phenomena. Phenomenological discovery, then, literally can be described as the study of phenomena—the appearance of things, or things as they appear, in one's own experiences, or even the way one experiences things. Thus, phenomenological discovery seeks to examine the meanings things have in one's personal experience and

how these meanings may be shaped and/or used.

Future Directions for Qualitative Research in the Social Sciences

There are several fairly conspicuous similarities in all of the methodological technologies described in this entry, which tend to bind together all of these procedures under the qualitative paradigm. First, all of them tend to examine experiences of individuals under study—regardless of what specific data they seek to collect. Second, all of these orientations and methods seek to explain meanings. And third, none of these orientations or methodological strategies is restricted to any particular social scientific field of study or discipline. Rather, these orientations are extremely flexible and provide a means for being adapted and applied not only in different disciplines, but also over time as technology expands the horizons of qualitative research.

Although most people tend to associate computer technology and the internet with more quantitative number-crunching activities, in fact, qualitative research in the social sciences has reached out to embrace technology as well. Self-administered interviews, laptop computers, or e-interviews conducted entirely in real time and over the internet are fast becoming more common. Explorations of blogs permit investigators to conduct phenomenological explorations of the social worlds of people involved in a wide assortment of areas, fields, and occupations. Even participant observation can be undertaken in a high-tech fashion through the use of digital cameras either attached to a computer or connected by way of wireless transmissions to monitor a particular setting, individual, or group. As qualitative researchers in the various social sciences continue to move forward through the current millennium, it seems clear that they not only will continue to expand their orientations and strategies for data collection, but also will remain tied to the overall qualitative paradigm.

- social science

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See also

Conversation Analysis

Ethnography

Naturalistic Inquiry

Phenomenology

Symbolic Interactionism

Further Readings

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