

Methodology Presentation.

Positivism

- Some sociologists have tried to adopt the methods of the natural sciences. In doing so they have tended to advocate the use of quantitative methods. To use such methods in sociology is known as positivism.
- Social Facts
- First, as a positivist, Comte believed that the scientific study of society should be confined to collecting information about phenomena that can be objectively observed and classified. Comte argued sociologists should not be concerned with the internal meanings, motives, feelings and emotions of individuals. Since these mental states exist only in the person's consciousness, they cannot be observed and so they cannot be measured in any objective way.

Statistical Data

The second aspect of positivism concerns its use of statistical data. Positivists believed it was possible to classify the social world in an objective way. Using these classifications it was then possible to count sets of observable social facts and so produce statistics.

For example Durkheim collected data on social facts such as the suicide rate and the membership of different religions.

Correlation

The third stage of positivist methodology entails looking for correlations between different social facts. A correlation is a tendency for two or more things to be found together, and it may refer to the strength of the relationship between them.

In his study of suicide, Durkheim found an apparent correlation between a particular religion (Protestantism) and a high suicide rate.

Causation

The fourth stage of positivist methodology involves a search for causal connections. If there is a strong correlation between two or more types of social phenomena, then a positivist sociologist might suspect that one of these phenomena was causing the other to take place.

However this is not necessarily the case, and it is important to analyse the data carefully before any such conclusion can be reached. The example of class and criminality can be used to illustrate this point. Many sociologists have noted a correlation between being working class and a relatively high chance of being convicted of a crime.

Laws of Human Behaviour

Positivists believe that multivariate analysis can establish causal connections between two or more variables. If these findings are checked in a variety of contexts, then the researchers can be confident that they have attained the ultimate goal of positivism: a law of human behaviour.

Durkheim claimed to have discovered laws of human behaviour that governed the suicide rate. According to Durkheim, the suicide rate always rose during an economic boom or slump.

Positivists and Durkheim, then, believe that laws of human behaviour can be discovered by the collection of objective facts about the social world in a statistical form, by the careful analysis of these facts, and by repeated checking of findings in a series of contexts. From this point of view humans have little or no choice about how they behave.

Durkheim

Durkheim conceived of sociology as the scientific study of a reality sui generis, a clearly defined group of phenomena different from those studied by all other sciences, biology and psychology included. It was for these phenomena that Durkheim reserved the term social facts, i.e., "a category of facts which present very special characteristics: they consist of manners of acting, thinking, and feeling external to the individual, which are invested with a coercive power by virtue of which they exercise control over him.

Since these facts consisted of actions, thoughts, and feelings, they could not be confused with biological phenomena; but neither were they the province of psychology, for they existed outside the individual conscience. It was to define the proper method for their study that Durkheim wrote *The Rules of Sociological Method* (1895).

Durkheim

- His work on suicide, of which the discussion and analysis of anomie forms a part, must be read in this light. Once he discovered that certain types of suicide could be accounted for by anomie, he could then use anomic suicide as an index for the otherwise immeasurable degree of social integration
- Durkheim distinguished between types of suicide according to the relation of the actor to his society. When the restraints of structural integration, as exemplified in the operation of organic solidarity, fail to operate, men become prone to egoistic suicide; when the collective conscience weakens, men fall victim to anomic suicide

Experiments.

- Method of testing a hypothesis.
 - Control.
 - Low level of involvement.
 - Ability to control variables.
 - Ability to replicate.
 - High numbers of respondents.
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- Labov.

Advantages of Official Statistics

- Official Statistics can be very accurate
- Official Stats can be used to prove an argument and show important facts
- Figures can easily be compared; the difference between the achievement of boys and girls, the difference between yearly figures, etc.
- They offer a rich variety of otherwise inaccessible data
- The researcher does not need to spend time and money collecting the information and data
- 'Before' and 'After' studies can be made

Disadvantages of Official Statistics

- Stats are not always reliable
- People are likely to lie to make themselves look better, therefore can we trust the methods through which these stats are obtained?
- Stats give us generalisations; they do not reflect a reality, they impose one
- It has been argued that official stats simply show a persons judgement rather than objective facts
- The research may have been collected for a different purpose therefore the data will not necessarily reflect the truth
- The basis for the collection of stats by the governments may change over time
- Any statistical account will represent only a 'snapshot' of social interaction

Advantages of Official Statistics

- Availability – Official statistics may be the only available source in a particular sociological area (e.g. when studying suicide).
- Practicality – The researcher does not have to spend time and money collecting his/her own information. It may be unnecessary for a researcher to create some forms of data using primary methods when such data already exists
- Examination of trends/changes over time – Using statistical data drawn from a number of different years it is possible to see how something has changed over a long period.
- Comparison – Statistics can be used for inter-group comparisons (e.g. the differences between middle and working class) as well as cross-cultural comparisons (e.g. a comparative study of crime rates in different countries).
- “Before” and “after” studies – For example, you can use official data to examine the effect of changes in the law regarding divorce by seeing the number of divorces before and after.

Disadvantages of Official Statistics

- Definitions used by the collector of the official statistics may not be the same as those used by the sociologist.
- The basis for the collection of statistics by governments may change over time. E.g. Between 1980 and 1990 the government changed the way it defined unemployment (and hence the way it collects official data) approximately 25 times.
- The purpose of official statistics – Collection of data is affected by political and economic considerations.
- Statistical accounts are a “snapshot” of social interaction- as it was at the moment the statistics were compiled.
- It may not represent reality – It’s a partial picture of it, you only see the tip of the iceberg e.g. not all crimes are notified to the police, the self-employed don’t declare all of their work to the inland revenue.

Advantages of Closed Q

- Can be given to a lot of people
- Can be given out over long distances
- Useful in gaining information that is easily determined e.g. sex, age, marital status etc.
- Not as expensive or time consuming as other research methods like longitudinal studies and participant observation.
- Results are easier to record than open questionnaires where many different answers can be given

Disadvantages of Closed Questionnaires

- Postal questionnaires often return in low numbers which may not be representative of the subjects being surveyed.
- The results are often distorted because the people replying do not get much choice e.g. when questions require a yes/no answer the respondent may want to answer yes, but...
- The method of research would be sampling and would therefore require the researcher to make assumptions for everybody else.
- Some of the respondents will lie, especially when you are researching a sensitive subject.

Thus Ends Positivism.

- And Quantitative methodology.

Anti-positivism.

- Rejection of
 - A) Positivism.
 - B) Positivist Quantitative Methodology.
- Founding father – Weber.
- Verstehen.
- Empathy.
- Look with eyes that see ...
- As I sat + listened I learnt the answers to the Qs that I wouldn't have had the sense to ask. WFW.

Interpretivism

- Qualitative Methodology.

Interpretivism

- Rejects scientific sociology.
- Verstehen – empathy.
- Interpret human behaviour from within the phenomena.
- Can we understand other people's motives \ actions?

Max Weber

- Verstehen AKA Empathy.
- Weber believed that before the cause of a social action could be found, it was necessary to understand the meaning attached to it by the actor.

Longitudinal studies.

- This involves the gathering of data on a particular group of people or person over a period of time. Information is gathered at the outset of the study and subsequent developments are traced in an attempt to isolate those social factors that affect person's life chances or to monitor change in their behaviour. A recent example would that of the 7 up study.
- Longitudinal studies were first used in the USA in the 1940's to measure changes in public attitudes.

Advantages

- It's unstructured.
- You can see changes over time.
- It shows trends over a period of time.

Disadvantages

- It can be very time consuming.
- It can be expensive
- People may drop out of the study.
- It could have an affect over the participants life.
- One's recollection can be swayed.

MCA GUMG

- Media Content Analysis is the deconstruction of pieces of media with a tendency towards either qualitative or quantitative research methods.
- Qualitative methods involve a viewing of the clip and then unstructured open discussions and debate on the themes and effects of the clip.

MCA 2

- Quantitative research methods within Media Content Analysis point to a far more structured and consequently restricted form of gathering information from clips of media.

Open Qs.

- Respondents define phenomena.
- How much does it hurt?
- Difficult to quantify results.
- Creates empathy.
- Dobash + Dobash.
- British Crime Survey.
- Involvement on the part of the researcher can be controlled.
- Validity

Phenomenology's criticisms of Open Qs.

- Politics of wording.
- Researchers define phenomena
- Operationalisation of concepts – possible?
- Halo effect?
- Researcher does not gain true empathy with phenomena being studied.
- Qualitative answers are approximated into quantitative responses for codification.

Participant Observation.

- P.O is a method of research in which the observer joins the group being studied and participates in their activities.
- Examples of this method include James Patrick's study 'A Glasgow Gang Observed' and Laud Humphreys' 'Tearoom Trade'

ADVANTAGES

Because a researcher doesn't pre-judge the issue by deciding in advance what is / is not important when studying social behaviour, they can react to events / ideas, follow leads, pursue avenues of research that had not occurred to them before their involvement with a group. In this respect, a researcher can test hypotheses and may be able to redefine possible personal pre-conceptions about someone's behaviour in the light of their experience in the group.

The quality and depth of information the method provides.

Participant observation generates a rich source of highly-detailed, high-quality, information about people's behaviour. In short, this type of research produces a depth of detailed information about all aspects of a group's behaviour.

The opportunity for understanding (empathy) it encourages.

The researcher can understand the social pressures / influences / group norms etc., that may create particular forms of behaviour. This gives a researcher insights into individual and group behaviour and it may allow researcher to formulate hypotheses that explain such behaviour

DISADVANTAGES

- The researcher's level of participation / involvement in a group.

A researcher has to learn the culture of a group if he / she is to participate fully in their behaviour and this may not always be easy or possible. If a researcher is too young, too old, too male or too female for the group they want to research this will cause problems of participation.

As we will also see, if a researcher is involved in covert participant observation their ability to blend seamlessly into a group is absolutely crucial to the success or failure of the research project...

- Participant observation requires a great deal of skill and commitment from the researcher. The success or failure of the research will hinge on such factors as the ability to fit-in with the people being studied and the ability to communicate with groups members on their level and terms. It will also, at different times, require tact, clear and careful observation, the ability to separate the role of participant from that of observer and so forth.

In other words, before committing yourself to participant observation you need to be certain you have the time, money, resources and skills required to carry this type of research through...

The general scope and scale of observational studies.

Most participant observation is restricted to fairly small-scale studies carried out over a long period and the group being studied is unlikely to be representative of any other social group.

It's also unlikely a researcher will be able to generalise their findings from one study to the next (for example, is Goffman's study of a mental asylum applicable to all mental institutions?).

Reliability

- Participant observation (whether overt or covert) is not the most reliable research method. Such studies are, by their very nature, impossible to repeat and the data they produce is, when all's said and done, simply the opinion of one observer. In addition, the reliability of overt participant observation can be further questioned in terms of the extent to which the presence of the observer actually changes of behaviour of those being studied.
- However, while such studies may lack reliability it is evident that the validity of the data gained can be impressive.

Validity

Participant observers study people in their natural environment, gaining a depth of insight into behaviour that comes not simply from close, detailed, observation but also from the researcher's own experiences within the group being studied - a technique that provides first hand insights into why people behave as they do. In addition, participant observation does not prejudge issues and events (in the way a questionnaire may, for example) and, for these reasons it is possible to argue that such a method provides data that has a high level of validity.

Factors that lead to one's choice of method ...

- Theoretical perspective. Quant Vs Qual.
- Time
- Money.
- Ads + dis. of methods
- Some methods lend themselves to the phenomena
- Previous research.
- Ethics.
- Triangulation.

Postmodernism

- Postmodernism is a complicated term, or set of ideas, one that has only emerged as an area of academic study since the mid-1980s.
- Postmodernism is hard to define, because it is a concept that appears in a wide variety of disciplines or areas of study, including art, architecture, music, film, literature, sociology, communications, fashion, and technology.

P.M. Cont.

- Modern theories and postmodernism use different theoretical approaches to studying sociology. For example, Weber, Marx and Durkheim, believe that it is possible to find out the objective truth about society, whereas postmodernism does not.
- They reject the meta-narrative

Ethics

- Voluntary participation – not coercion.
 - Informed consent.
 - Risk of harm.
 - Confidentiality.
 - Anonymity.
 - Research should not have negative consequences on those being studied.
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- Rosenthal + Jacobson.
 - Lombroso.

Random Questions

1. How does one achieve Verstehen?

By observing

2. What does Sui Generis mean?

Society exists above and beyond a collection of individuals.

3. What did Karl Popper advocate?

The falsification theory- you should try to disprove what you believe to be true.

4. What's the difference between suicide and Para- suicide?

Para-suicide is an attempted suicide.

Is media content analysis quantitative or qualitative?

It can be both.

5. What are the four types of suicide?

- Altruistic suicide- committing suicide for the benefit of others. E.g. Kami Kaze
- Anomic suicide- committing suicide because one isn't regulated.
- Egoistic suicide- an ineffective regulation of society causes a person to commit suicide.
- Fatalistic suicide- One's future is pitilessly blocked (BBC- 2 people commit suicide each week in the UK).

6. Which method would you use to uncover the true extent of crime?

Self Report study \ Victimisation Study

7. Who spoke of the 'Tea room trade' (60s) and what was it about?

Laud Humphreys studied sexual casual gratification between men in public toilets.

8. Why do 'Victimisation' and 'self-report' studies use questionnaires?

They use questionnaires to determine the extent of reported and unreported crime. E.g. The BCS used this type in 1983.

What factors would influence your choice of Research Method?

- Time
- Money
- Previous research.
- Ontological assumptions.
- The phenomena being researched.
- Tri-angulation.
- Ethical considerations.