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I

Planning and Designing Your Research



ONE

Theoretical Background

WHAT IS RESEARCH?

In everyday speech 'research' is a term loosely used to describe a multitude of activities, such as collecting masses of information, delving into esoteric theories and producing wonderful new products. So how can true 'scientific' research be defined?

The *Oxford Encyclopedic English Dictionary* defines it as:

the systematic investigation into the study of materials, sources etc. in order to establish facts and reach new conclusions; an endeavour to discover new or collate old facts etc. by the scientific study of a subject or by a course of critical investigation.

Leedy and Ormrod (2012) define it from a more utilitarian point of view:

Research is a procedure by which we attempt to find systematically, and with the support of demonstrable fact, the answer to a question or the resolution of a problem.

Kerlinger (1970, p. 8) uses more technical language to define it as:

the systematic, controlled, empirical and critical investigation of hypothetical propositions about presumed relations among natural phenomena.

But is social science research 'scientific' research? Some sociologists would not maintain this. In fact, they would say that there is a distinct difference between research into the natural world and research into the habits, traditions, beliefs, organizations, etc. of human beings. Being human ourselves, we cannot take an impartial view of others, and we cannot establish 'facts' as fixed eternal truths. We can only aim for interpretation and understanding of the social world.

Do: Remember that the debate about the nature of social research is a lively one and is based around the philosophical aspects of epistemology and ontology.

EPISTEMOLOGY AND ONTOLOGY

Epistemology is concerned with how we know things and what we can regard as acceptable knowledge in a discipline. In the study of social (and any other) sciences there is a choice between two ways of acquiring knowledge:

- **Empiricism** - knowledge gained by sensory **experience** (using inductive reasoning).
- **Rationalism** - knowledge gained by reasoning (using deductive reasoning).

The relative merits of these approaches have been argued ever since the time of the Ancient Greeks – Aristotle advocating the first and Plato the second.

Another polarization in the pursuit of knowledge has appeared more recently, and relates to the status of scientific methods and human subjectivity:

- **Positivism** - the application of the natural sciences to the study of social reality. An objective approach that can test theories and establish scientific laws. It aims to establish causes and effects.
- **Interpretivism** - the recognition that subjective meanings play a crucial role in social actions. It aims to reveal interpretations and meanings.
- **Realism** - (particularly social realism) - this maintains that structures do underpin social events and discourses, but as these are only indirectly observable they must be expressed in theoretical terms and are thus likely to be provisional in nature. This does not prevent them being used in action to change society.

All philosophical positions and their attendant methodologies, explicitly or implicitly, hold a view about social reality. This view, in turn, will determine what can be regarded as legitimate knowledge. Thus, the ontological shapes the epistemological (Williams and May, 1996, p. 69).

Ontology is about the theory of social entities and is concerned with what exists to be investigated. Bryman (2012, pp. 32–3) identifies two opposing theoretical attitudes to the nature of social entities:

- **Objectivism** - the belief that social phenomena and their meanings have an existence that is not dependent on social actors. They are facts that have an independent existence.
- **Constructionism** - the belief that social phenomena are in a constant state of change because they are totally reliant on social interactions as they take place. Even the account of researchers is subject to these interactions; therefore social knowledge can only be indeterminate.

Don't: Forget that the way that social research questions are formulated and the way the research is carried out is based on the ontological viewpoint of the researcher.

The objectivist approach will stress the importance of the formal properties of organizations and cultural systems, while the constructionist approach will concentrate more on the way that people themselves formulate structures of reality, and how this relates to the researcher him- or herself.

WAYS OF REASONING

The ways of reasoning behind the empirical and rationalist approaches to gaining information start from opposite ends of a spectrum. It is not possible practically to apply either extreme in a pure fashion, but the distinct differences in the two opposing approaches are easily outlined. The shortcomings of each can be mitigated by using a combination that is formulated as the hypothetico-deductive method.

INDUCTIVE REASONING - THE EMPIRICIST'S APPROACH

Inductive reasoning starts from specific observations and derives general conclusions from them. A simple example will demonstrate the line of reasoning:

All swans which have been observed are white in colour.

Therefore one can conclude that all swans are white.

Induction was the earliest and, even now, the commonest popular form of scientific activity. Every day, our experiences lead us to make conclusions, from which we tend to generalize. The development of this approach in the seventeenth century by such scientists as Galileo and Newton heralded the scientific revolution. The philosopher Francis Bacon summed this up by maintaining that in order to understand nature, one should consult nature, and not the writings of ancient philosophers such as Aristotle, or the Bible. Darwin's theory of evolution and Mendel's discovery of genetics are perhaps the most famous theories claimed (even by their authors) to be derived from inductive reasoning.

Three conditions must be satisfied for such generalizations to be considered legitimate by inductivists:

- 1 There must be a large number of observation statements.
- 2 The observations must be repeated under a large range of circumstances and conditions.
- 3 No observation statement must contradict the derived generalization.

Induction's merit was disputed as long ago as the mid-eighteenth century by Hume. He demonstrated that the argument used to justify induction was circular, using induction to defend induction. This has traditionally been called the

'problem of induction'. Two further serious problems for the naive inductivist remain. The first is how large the number of observation statements must be; and the second is how large a range of circumstances and conditions must they be repeated under in order that true conclusions can be reached?

Do: Despite its shortcomings, you use inductive reasoning every day quite successfully without even thinking about it. But be aware that what at first seems obvious may not be so with further systematic research.

DEDUCTIVE REASONING - THE RATIONALIST'S APPROACH

Deductive reasoning was first developed by the Ancient Greeks. An argument based on **deduction** begins with general statements and, through logical argument, comes to a specific conclusion. A syllogism is the simplest form of this kind of argument and consists of a major general premise (**statement**), followed by a minor, more specific premise, and a conclusion that follows logically. Here is a simple example:

All live mammals breathe.
 This cow is a live mammal.
 Therefore, this cow breathes.

Research is guided in this case by the theory that precedes it. Theories are speculative answers to perceived problems, and are tested by observation and experiment. While it is possible to confirm the possible truth of a theory through observations that support it, theory can be falsified and totally rejected by making observations that are inconsistent with its statement. In this way, science is seen to proceed by trial and error: when one theory is rejected, another is proposed and tested, and thus the fittest theory survives.

In order for a theory to be tested, it must be expressed as a statement called a **hypothesis**. The essential nature of a hypothesis is that it must be falsifiable. This means that it must be logically possible to make true observational statements that conflict with the hypothesis, and thus can falsify it. However, the process of **falsification** leads to a devastating result of the rejection of a theory, requiring a completely new start.

Don't: Forget that it is not practically possible to be either a pure inductivist or deductivist as you either need some theoretical ideas in order to know what information to look for, or some knowledge in order to devise theories.

HYPOTHETICO-DEDUCTIVE REASONING OR SCIENTIFIC METHOD

The **hypothetico-deductive method** combines inductive and deductive reasoning, resulting in the to-and-fro process of developing hypotheses (testable theories) inductively from observations, charting their implications by deduction and testing them to refine or reject them in the light of the results. It is this combination of experience with deductive and inductive reasoning that is the foundation of modern scientific research, and is commonly referred to as **scientific method**.

A simple summary of the steps in scientific method could go like this:

- Identification or clarification of problems.
- Formulation of tentative solutions or hypotheses.
- Practical or theoretical testing of solutions or hypotheses.
- Elimination or adjustment of unsuccessful solutions.

Problems are posed by the complexity of testing theories in real life. Realistic scientific theories consist of a complex of statements, each of which relies on assumptions based on previous theories. The methods of testing are likewise based on assumptions and influenced by surrounding conditions. If the predictions of the theory are not borne out in the results of the tests, it could be the underlying premises which are at fault rather than the theory itself.

Do: Take note that it was only by the beginning of the 1960s that Popper (1902-92) formulated the idea of the hypothetico-deductive method, even though it must have been used in practice for decades before.

There are certain assumptions that underlie scientific method, some of which are regarded by interpretivists as unacceptable when doing social research:

- Order
- External reality
- Reliability
- Parsimony
- **Generality.**

THE POSITIVIST/INTERPRETIVIST DIVIDE

There is an important issue that confronts the study of the social sciences which is not so pertinent in the natural sciences. This is the question of the position of the human subject and researcher, and the status of social phenomena. Is human society subjected to laws that exist independent of the human actors that make

up society, or do individuals and groups create their own versions of social forces? The two extremes of approach are termed **positivism** and **interpretivism**. Again, as in the case of ways of reasoning, a middle way has also been formulated that draws on the useful characteristics of both approaches.

Positivism

According to Hacking (1981, pp. 1–2), the positivist approach to scientific investigation is based on realism, an attempt to find out about the one real world. There is a sharp distinction between scientific theories and other kinds of belief, and there is a unique best description of any chosen aspect of the world that is true regardless of what people think. Science is cumulative, despite the false starts that are common enough. Science by and large builds on what is already known. Even Einstein's theories are a development from Newton's.

There should be just one science about the one real world. Less measurable sciences are reducible to more measurable ones. Sociology is reducible to psychology, psychology to biology, biology to chemistry and chemistry to physics.

Interpretivism

Although scientific method is widely used in many forms of research, it does not, and never has, enjoyed total hegemony in all subjects. Some of the world's greatest thinkers have disagreed with the tenets of positivism contained in scientific method. The alternative approach to research is based on the philosophical doctrines of idealism and humanism. It maintains that the view of the world that we see around us is the creation of the mind.

This does not mean that the world is not real, but rather that we can only experience it personally through our perceptions, which are influenced by our preconceptions and beliefs; we are not neutral, disembodied observers. Unlike the natural sciences, the researcher is not observing phenomena from outside the system, but is inextricably bound into the human situation which he or she is studying. In addition, by concentrating on the search for constants in human behaviour, the researcher highlights the repetitive, predictable and invariant aspect of society and ignores what is subjective, individual and creative.

In order to compare the alternative bases for interpreting social reality, Cohen and Manion (2011, pp. 8–9) produced a useful table that they had adapted from Blaxterfield (1975) as shown in Table 1.1.

Don't: Just because the differences in perspective between positivist and interpretivist approaches are so radical, don't think that you need to espouse purely one or the other approach. Different aspects of life lend themselves to different methods of interpretation.

Table 1.1 Comparison between positivist and interpretivist approaches

<i>Dimensions of comparisons</i>	<i>Positivist</i>	<i>Interpretivist</i>
Philosophical basis	Realism: the world exists and is knowable as it really is. Organizations are real entities with a life of their own.	Idealism: the world exists but different people construe it in very different ways. Organizations are invented social reality.
The role of social science	Discovering the universal laws of society and human conduct within it.	Discovering how different people interpret the world in which they live.
Basic units of social reality	The collectivity: society or organizations.	Individuals acting singly or together.
Methods of understanding	Identifying conditions or relationships which permit the collectivity to exist. Conceiving what these conditions and relationships are.	Interpretation of the subjective meanings which individuals place upon their action. Discovering the subjective rules for such action.
Theory	A rational edifice built by scientists to explain human behaviour.	Sets of meanings which people use to make sense of their world and human behaviour within it.
Research	Experimental or quasi-experimental validation of theory.	The search for meaningful relationships and the discovery of their consequences for action.
Methodology	Abstraction of reality, especially through mathematical models and quantitative analysis.	The representation of reality for purposes of comparison. Analysis of language and meaning.
Society	Ordered. Governed by a uniform set of values and made possible only by these values.	Conflicted. Governed by the values of people with access to power.
Organizations	Goal-oriented. Independent of people. Instruments of order in society serving both the society and the individual.	Dependent upon people and their goals. Instruments of power which some people control and can use to attain ends which seem good to them.
Organizational pathologies	Organizations get out of kilter with social values and individual needs.	Given diverse human ends, there is always conflict among people acting to pursue them.
Prescriptions for change	Change the structure of the organization to meet social values and individual needs.	Find out what values are embodied in organizational action and whose they are. Change the people or change their values if you can.

Source: Cohen and Manion, 1994, pp. 10-11

Critical realism

Critical reasoning can be seen as a reconciliatory approach, which recognizes, like the positivists, the existence of a natural order in social events and **discourse**, but claims that this order cannot be detected by merely observing a pattern of events. The underlying order must be discovered through the process of **interpretation** while doing theoretical and practical work in the social sciences. Unlike the positivists, critical realists do not claim that there is a direct link between the

concepts they develop and the observable phenomena. Concepts and theories about social events are developed on the basis of their observable effects, and interpreted in such a way that they can be understood and acted upon, even if the interpretation is open to revision as understanding grows.

The belief that there are underlying structures at work that generate social events, and which can be formulated in concepts and theory, distinguishes critical realists from interpretivists, who deny the existence of such general structures divorced from the specific event or situation and the context of the research and researcher.

Take it further

Social science, a brief theoretical history

As with any subject, some knowledge of its history provides a deeper perspective of why things are how they are at present, and how they come to be so. As you are not actually studying social science as such in this course, the history of the subject is not of central importance, but does show how research methods developed and were used in different contexts.

Social science, the study of human thought and behaviour in society, is a very large area of study that is divided into a range of interrelated disciplines. According to Bernard (2012), the main branches are anthropology, economics, history, political science, psychology and social psychology, each with their own subfields. Other disciplines also involve social research, such as communications, criminology, demography, education, journalism, leisure studies, nursing, social work, architecture and design and many others. A wide range of research methods have been developed and refined by the different disciplines, though these are not specific only to them.

Positivist beginnings

Social science, understood here as the study of human society in the widest sense, is a rich source of research problems. This important, and sometimes controversial, branch of science was first defined and named by Auguste Comte (1798-1857), the nineteenth-century French philosopher. Comte maintained that society could be analysed empirically, just like other subjects of scientific enquiry, and social laws and theories could be established on the basis of psychology and biology. He based his approach on the belief that all genuine knowledge is based on information gained by experience through the senses, and can only be developed through further observation and experiment.

The foundations of modern sociology were built during the end of the nineteenth century and beginning of the twentieth century. Prominent thinkers were Marx (1818-83), Durkheim (1858-1917), Dilthey (1833-1911) and Weber (1864-1920). Marx developed a theory that described the inevitable social progress from primitive communism, through feudalism and capitalism to a state of post-revolutionary communism. Durkheim is famous for his enquiries into the division of labour, suicide, religion and education, as well as for his philosophical discussions on the nature of sociology.

Unlike Marx, who tended to define the moral and social aspects of humanity in terms of material forces, Durkheim argued that society develops its own system of phenomena that produce collectively shared norms and beliefs. These 'social facts', as he called them, for example, economic organizations, laws, customs, criminality etc., exist in their own right, are external to us and are resistant to our will and constrain our behaviour. Having 'discovered' and defined social facts using scientific observation techniques, the social scientist should seek their causes among other social facts rather than in other scientific domains such as biology or psychology. By thus maintaining sociology as an autonomous discipline, the social scientist may use the knowledge gained to understand the origins of, and possibly suggest the cures for, various forms of social ills.

In summary, this approach looks at society as the focus for research, and through understanding its internal laws and establishing relevant facts, we can in turn understand how and why individuals behave as they do. However, not all philosophers agreed that human society was amenable to such a disembodied analysis.

The rise of interpretivism

Another German philosopher, Wilhelm Dilthey, agreed that although in the physical world we can only study the appearance of a thing rather than the thing itself, we are, because of our own humanity, in a position to know about human consciousness and its roles in society. The purpose here is not to search for causal explanations, but to find understanding. As a method, this presupposes that to gain understanding there must be at least some common ground between the researcher and the people who are being studied. He went on to make a distinction between two kinds of sciences: *Geisteswissenschaften* (the human sciences) and *Naturwissenschaften* (the natural sciences).

Max Weber, developing and refining Dilthey's ideas, believed that empathy is not necessary or even possible in some cases, and that it was feasible to understand the intentionality of conduct and to pursue objectivity in terms of cause and effect. He wished to bridge the divide between the traditions of positivism and interpretivism by being concerned to investigate both the meanings and the material conditions of action.

Three main schools of thought can be seen to represent opposition to positivism in the social sciences: **phenomenology**, as developed by Husserl (1859-1938) and Schutz (1899-1959); **ethnography**, developed by Malinowski (1884-1942), Evans-Pritchard (1902-73) and Margaret Mead (1901-78); **ethnomethodology**, pioneered by Garfinkel (1917-87); and **symbolic interactionism**, practised by members of the Chicago School such as George Herbert Mead (1863-1931) and Blumer. They all rejected the assertion that human behaviour can be codified in laws by identifying underlying regularities, and that society can be studied from a detached, objective and impartial viewpoint by the researcher.

Husserl argued that consciousness is not determined by the natural processes of human neurophysiology, but that our understanding of the world is constructed by our human perceptions about our surroundings - we construct our own reality. In order to cope with this, Schutz believed that in social intercourse, each person needs to perceive the different perspectives that others have due to their unique biographies and experiences in order to transcend individual subjectivity. This constructed intersubjective world produces 'common sense'. He saw everyday language as a perfect example of socially

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derived preconstituted types and characteristics that enabled individuals to formulate their own subjectivity in terms understandable by others.

The work of anthropologists in the ethnic tribes of the Pacific (Malinowski, M. Mead) and Africa (Evans-Pritchard) developed the ethnographic techniques of studying society. By employing the method of participant observation, knowledge can be gained of the complexities of cultures and social groups within their settings. The central concern is to produce a description that faithfully reflects the worldview of the participants in their social context. Theories and explanations can then emerge from the growing understanding gained by the researcher thus immersed in the context of the society.

Garfinkel developed a method of studying individual subjectivity by observing interaction on a small scale, between individuals or in a small group. He maintained that people were not strictly regulated by the collective values and norms sanctioned by society, but that they made individual choices on the basis of their own experiences and understanding. It was they that produced the social institutions and everyday practices, developing society as a social construction. The analysis of conversation is used as the main method of investigation.

Language was seen by G.H. Mead to be central to human interaction. Human beings are able to understand each other's perspectives, gestures and responses due to the shared **symbols** contained in a common language. It is this symbolic interaction that not only defines the individual as the instigator of ideas and opinions, but also as a reflection of the reactions and perceptions of others. To be able to understand this constantly shifting situation, the researcher must comprehend the meanings that guide it, and this is only possible in the natural surroundings where it occurs. This approach was developed in the University of Chicago from the 1920s and was used in a large programme of field research focusing mostly on urban society in Chicago itself, using interviews, life histories and other ethnographical methods.

The reconciliatory approach

Weber disagreed with the pure interpretivists, maintaining that it is necessary to verify the results of subjective interpretative investigation by comparing them with the concrete course of events. He makes a distinction between what one can perceive as facts (i.e. those things that are) and what one can perceive as values (i.e. those things that may, or may not, be desirable). A differentiation must be maintained between facts and values because they are distinct kinds of phenomenon. However, in order to understand society, we have to take account of both of these elements.

Weber maintained that in order to describe social practices adequately we must understand what meanings the practices have for the participants themselves. This requires an understanding of the values involved, but without taking sides or making value judgements. This understanding (often referred to as *Verstehen*) is the subject matter of social science. It is then possible to investigate the social practices rationally through an assessment of the internal logic of the situation. In this way, one can make a meaningful formulation of the elements, causes and effects within complex social situations, taking into account the values inherent in it.

It is argued that it is impossible for the social scientist to take this detached view of values, as he or she is a member of society and culture, motivated by personal presuppositions and beliefs. Accordingly, any analysis of social phenomena is based on a 'view from somewhere'. This is inescapable and even to be desired.

The philosopher Roy Bhaskar has provided an alternative to the dichotomous argument of positivism versus interpretivism by taking a more inclusive and systematic view of the relationships between the natural and social sciences. His approach, known as critical realism, sees nature as stratified, with each layer using the previous one as a foundation and a basis for greater complexity. Thus physics is more basic than chemistry, which in its turn is more basic than biology, which is more basic than the human sciences. The relationships between these domains, from the more basic to the more complex, are inclusive one-way relationships - the more complex emerging from the more basic. While a human being is not able to go against the chemical, physical and biological laws, he or she can do all sorts of things that the chemicals of which he or she is made cannot do if they are following only their specific chemical laws rather than biological laws that govern organisms, or social 'laws' which govern society.

Bhaskar also has a profoundly integrationist view of the relationship between the individual and society, called by him the transformation model of social activity. Rather than, on the one hand, studying society to understand individual actions or, on the other hand, studying individuals to understand the structures of society or, somewhere in between, checking the results of one study against that of the other, Bhaskar argues that the reciprocal interaction between individuals and society effects a transformation in both.

Structuralism, post-structuralism and postmodernism

Based primarily on the view that all cultural phenomena are primarily linguistic in character, **structuralism** gained its label because of its assertion that subjectivity is formed by deep 'structures' that lie beneath the surface of social reality. Lévi-Strauss used a geological metaphor, stating that the overt aspects of cultural phenomena are formed by the complex layering and folding of underlying strata. These can be revealed by semiotic analysis. 'Cultural symbols and representations are the surface structure and acquire the appearance of "reality"' (Seale, 1998, p. 34).

Post-structuralism was developed by French philosophers such as Derrida and Foucault in the latter part of the twentieth century. Through the method of 'deconstruction', the claims to authority made in texts and discourses were undermined. According to Seale (1998, p. 34), **postmodernism** subsequently developed and became more widely accepted through the appeal of its three basic principles:

1. **The decentered self** - the belief that there are no human universals that determine identity, but that the self is a creation of society.
2. **The rejection of claims to authority** - the idea of progress through scientific objectivity and value neutrality is a fallacy and has resulted in a moral vacuum. Discourse must be subjected to critical analysis and traditions and values should be constantly attacked.
3. **The commitment to instability in our practices of understanding** - as everything is put to question there can be no established way of thinking. Our understanding of the world is subject to constant flux, all voices within a culture have an equal right to be heard.

In view of the diverse range of theoretical perspectives, it is probably inappropriate to search for and impossible to find a single model of social and cultural life.

Ask yourself

What role do epistemology and ontology play in understanding social research?

They form the theoretical basis of how the world can be experienced, what constitutes knowledge, and what can be done with that knowledge. Social research has been carried out subject to varied epistemological and ontological stances, so it is important to know what assumptions have been made at the outset of the research. You can explain this by outlining the main approaches and describing how these affect the outcomes of the research.

What is the difference between inductive and deductive thinking? Why is this distinction important in the practical aspects of doing a research project and in theory development?

Inductive thinking - going from the specific to the general. Deductive thinking - going from the general to the specific. You can explain this in greater detail. This distinction is important because it determines what data you collect and how you collect them. You can give examples of these. An inductive approach is used to generate theory, whereas a deductive approach is used to test theory.

In what ways does the interpretivist approach particularly suit the study of human beings in their social settings?

Because humans are reflective beings, they are not simply determined by their surroundings. Cause-and-effect relationships are complex and difficult to determine, so a less deterministic approach can provide useful understanding about society, without the need for the kind of verifiable facts aimed for in the natural sciences. It is also impossible for a researcher to take a completely detached view of society, so investigation is necessarily dependent on interpretation.

Further reading

You can go into much greater detail about the philosophy of knowledge and the history of social research if you want to, but I suspect that you will not have enough time to delve too deeply.

For the theoretical background to social research, it might be worth having a look at these for more detail:

Hughes, J. (1997) *The Philosophy of Social Research* (3rd edn). Harlow: Longman.
Seale, C. (ed.) (2012) *Researching Society and Culture* (3rd edn). London: Sage.
Chapter 2 by Miran Epstein deals with the philosophy of science and can be accessed free online at www.uk.sagepub.com/upm-data/45990_Seale.pdf.

Jarvie, I. and Zamora-Bonill, J. (2011) *The SAGE Handbook of the Philosophy of Social Sciences*. London: Sage.

For topics that are more into scientific method see:

Chalmers, A. (2013) *What Is This Thing Called Science?* (4th edn). Indianapolis, IN: Hackett Publishing.

Medawar, P. (1984) *The Limits of Science*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

For a simple general introduction to philosophy, seek this one out. This approachable book explains the main terminology and outlines the principal streams of thought:

Thompson, M. (1995) *Philosophy, Teach Yourself Books*. London: Hodder and Stoughton.

And here are books that deal in more detail with some aspects of philosophy - for the real enthusiast!

Husserl, E. (1964) *The Idea of Phenomenology*. Trans. W. Alston and G. Nakhnikian. The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff.

Collier, A. (1994) *Critical Realism: An Introduction to Roy Baskhar's Philosophy*. London: Verso.

If you are doing a course in one of the disciplines associated with social research (e.g. healthcare, marketing, etc.), delve into the specific history that has led up to the present state-of-the-art thinking. You will have to make a library search using key words to find what is easily available to you.