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Subject Area - Sociology

Research Methods Tools

Methods of Research

The correct choice of research methods to use in answering researcher set questions investigating a topic is one of the most crucial and vital elements to the successful conduct of a research exercise, (McNeill, 2005). While much attention can be paid to theory within the methodology employed by the researcher it is also critical to consider the actual research tools which back up the theoretical decisions made and provide the raw data against which the hypotheses of the research can be tested. For much research the research tools will be a decisive factor in the success or failure of the project. In many instances the choice of research tool is not assessed correctly with the result being data is generated which is of little or no use to the researcher, (Ruane, 2005). This occurs both due to the research method not suiting the particular needs of the researcher and the improper administering of the research method itself.

For many choice of research tool is influenced however not by the objective needs of the research but by the ability and capabilities of the researcher in terms of time, cost or other related factors such as familiarity with the processes and techniques involved within specific sets of research tools. In this essay we examine three research methods, show how they can be constructed in a holistic manner to achieve triangulation in relation to a research question and illustrate ethical concerns and the manner in which they can be resolved in the successful deployment of these research methods, (Somekh and Lewin, 2005).

We discuss these methods as a process and thus relate our discussion to the manner in which they can be integrated and successfully deployed. In this sense then we examine how focus groups can provide insights into theoretical observations, how these observations can be explored within semi-structured interviews with a selected sample and how these observations from interviews can be developed into generalised into hypotheses tested against larger samples through the use of questionnaires. However it should be noted that a critical element in deciding on which methodologies should be used in a research project and the relative strengths and weaknesses of using those methodologies will depend to a large extent on the specific circumstances involved in conducting the research, (Bryman, 2004).

By this it is meant that weaknesses for example within the conduct of questionnaire may in fact be a positive element for certain projects and negative for others depending on the contextual basis for the research. We explore this and other features of research methods subsequently.

Focus Groups

Focus groups are a type of qualitative based research method based loosely on the general principles which apply to interviews. However while interviews are generally one-to-one situations involving a interviewer and interviewee relationship focus groups employ a one to many dichotomy, (Holloway and Jefferson, 2000). Indeed focus groups resemble semi or unstructured interviews more particularly than structured interviews as one of the primary objectives of the researcher within focus group interviews is as a facilitator or moderator of group discussion based on sets of general themes identified as being related to the research objectives for which the focus groups are being used to generate data,

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(Bloor et al, 2001). In particular focus groups are a very useful method to consider in the exploratory stages of research to help form ideas related to theoretical observations upon which later research can be based.

While not originally a tool familiar to the social sciences focus group methodologies have been long deployed and successful elements within business and specifically marketing research. From these origins however their utility for social scientific research has come to be recognised within many sections for specific instances for which they are useful, (Fern, 2001).

Focus groups have a number of advantages and disadvantages when applied towards collecting data in answering sets of research questions. Let us discuss the advantages of using this methodology to begin with. Perhaps a fundamental strength of focus groups is their interactive nature when designed and implemented properly. In this manner the researcher can set general themes and topics and also ask specific questions of the group related to the research topic by facilitating intra-group discussion arising out of the topics mentioned by the moderator.

Subsequently recording and monitoring the discussions and interactions which occur within the group as the issues raised by the researcher are thrashed out can provide immensely valuable qualitative data and also critically have the possibility of offering theoretical insights or considerations missed by the researcher. In terms of specifically action research or ethnographic research outlook focus groups are even more element as the interactive nature of focus groups allows the group and its participants to actively engage with the research and even when planned for adequately by the researcher allow them to shape the outcomes and processes of the research itself, (Czarniawska, 2004)

Some of the key disadvantages we can associate with the use of focus groups are internal group dynamics, participant and interviewer bias and transcription related problems in codifying and making the data generated amenable to analysis. However the primary drawback to this method is related to the interactive nature discussed above in that the researcher has much less control over the type and nature of data generated during the course of the research. Again as mentioned planning and good moderating skills are essential in the use of this method, (Litosseliti, 2003).

Internal group dynamics can play a vital role in determining the success or failure of using focus groups as a means of answering research questions. The specific disadvantages being spoke of here include a common feature of social groups whereby individual members of that group through personality and group dynamics come to lead and dominate discussions, (Vaughn, Shay, & Sinagub, 1996). An interviewer needs to be aware of such situations and develop tactics and strategies which are inclusive in terms of encouraging all of the individuals within a group to participate as equally as possible in the discussion as it is being held.

With larger groups and to some extent even smaller groups as well due to possibilities of many people answering at the same time, especially in more animated discussions the necessity of effective recording allowing for accurate transcription is essential. Bias can occur both in terms of the moderator and participants in that moderator may lead the discussion too much in their desire to gather relevant data or otherwise colour the responses of participants who in turn may desire to satisfy what they perceive to be the wishes of the moderator during the course of the discussion. Such considerations are not isolated to focus groups and should be a common concern for any research exercise, (Morgan, 1997).

Ethically similar safeguards that are used in other types of research methods need to be employed within focus groups with some specific concerns. As with other types of research informed consent needs to be adequately collected from

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the participants and in particular with focus groups if the topic is sensitive or covers material of a private nature it must be remembered that other people will be present and thus the moderator must take further care in considering the ethical implications of this feature, (Gregory, 2003).

Semi-structured interviews

If a researcher has used a focus group in order to identify common themes and concerns associated with his or her choice of questions a useful follow on from focus groups can be the use of more in depth and detailed semi structured interviews. The interviewees could perhaps be drawn from a representative sample from which the focus group was composed. Semi structured interviews are a popular form of qualitative research much relied upon within social scientific as well as other disciplinary investigations. The general purpose of such interviews is to explore in details specific topics relevant to the interviewee's knowledge and also relevant to the research questions and objectives forming the focus of the research project, (Silveman, 2004).

The normal structure for such an interview is a one to one situation with an interviewer either having a list of some predetermined questions which are then used to branch further questions outwards during the conduct of the interview or alternatively the interviewer is equipped with a set of general topics from which questions are generated during the course of the interview. While not as interactive as focus groups good semi-structured interviews are however in some way reliant on participant determination for the tenor and tone of the conduct of the interview. This can be a principal strength of using this method in that it can be a highly fruitful manner of exploring topics with which participants are familiar

The advantages of semi structured interviews can be surmised under a number of headings. The first of these is the opportunity it gives to both interviewer and interviewee to explore in depth and detail the substantive issues for research within a given project mentioned above. Not only though do semi-structured interviews afford the opportunity to discuss themes in detail but the semi-structured nature also gives the interviewer freedom to dynamically adapt and respond to the flow of the discussion as it occurs. In this sense the interviewer can explore themes not suggested by the structure of the interview which was originally planned; this is an important difference from structured interviews which lack this interviewer flexibility and freedom. A semi-structured interview can thus be said to allow for frank discussion, is a flexible and adaptive means as the interviewer and interviewee can respond and explore topics as they occur during the interview and as such can be a useful source of data for any research project.

Disadvantages with semi-structured interviews again like those common to focus groups are those which need to be taken account of with the use of any research method. Some of the main disadvantages we can associate with the use of semi structured interviews include participant bias, interviewer bias and the reliability of any data generated during the course of the interview. Like focus groups the interviewer needs to be aware of their responses and comments to the interviewee so as not to colour or bias the responses given. Similarly an interviewer needs to display a manner which does not indicate to the interviewee preference supposed or otherwise for a particular set of responses. Reliability is a concern with qualitative research in general and an interviewer needs to be cognisant of the type and form of data generated during the conduct of the interview. Ethically again similar principles which applied to focus groups apply to semi-structured interviews in that the participants in such interviews give full informed consent to the interview taking place and that confidentiality is ensured on the part of the interviewer in terms of any data generated from the participant.

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Questionnaires

Perhaps the most familiar of research methods both to researchers and the general public questionnaires as part of a survey strategy have long held a dominant role in the conduct of research projects, (Frazer & Meredith, 2000). Questionnaires come in a variety of forms from postal, telephone administered, to interviewer administered and so on but they are all characterised on a reliance on a predetermined set of questions with predefined answers which make the data amenable to later statistical analysis either by hand or through the use of the many statistical computer programs which now exist. Questionnaires excel at the testing of hypothesis concretely formed and outlined as well as gathering opinion based data from large samples, (McQueen, 2002).

Questionnaires are a form of quantitative research and thus they involve many statistical elements in terms of carrying out research using them. Some of the fundamental concerns with using questionnaires include the need for sampling, ensuring effective responses and a high response rate. In turn these three elements are related to the principal advantages and disadvantages of using this method, (Oppenheim, 1992). Or in other words the success or failure and the degree to which for a particular questionnaire is determined to a large extent by the successful sampling of a target group and having a well-designed questionnaire with clear instructions for participants in order to ensure correct responses and a high number of responses from the sample.

The primary advantage of using a questionnaire lies in the amount of data which can be collected allowing for varying degrees and sophistication in statistical analyses which can be performed on the data, (Gillham, 2000). The primary disadvantage of using questionnaires is the inverse of this strength in statistical terms related to the rigid and inflexible way in which data must be collected in that the researcher is unable to benefit from any interactivity in the research and even when the questionnaire is interviewer administered there is a rigidity to the questionnaire format which must be adhered to, (Houtkoop-Steenstra, 2000). Questionnaires in terms of the triangulation discussed above could usefully be deployed in order to test hypothesis generated from the explorations and conclusions reached during the use of focus groups.

Conclusion

As can be gathered from our discussion then all of the research methods we have discussed are possessed of both positive and negative aspects in the case of their deployment in order to answer research questions set by the researcher. It is argued that perhaps the best means in which to consider the use of any of these research methods is to see them as part of a cyclical process related to the triangulation of certain research objectives, (Yen, 1990).

It can be argued that by using a combinational method then in the approach of constructing a research methodology has the benefit of playing various research methods against each other, by this it is meant that certain methods will be stronger others weaker and that a combinational approach will allow for the strongest possible methodology to emerge and thus have the best chance of generating useful data for the research questions at hand, (Gorard and Taylor, 2004).

However as mentioned in some of the limitations we discussed previously with regards to the methods each of these particular methods require certain skills of the researcher for them to be truly effective methods. Thus projects which would seek to use all of these methods as well as possible others would need to draw upon skilled researchers in terms of their ability to conduct quantitative and qualitative research in equal measure. Similarly using a combinational method

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increases the range of ethical considerations for the researcher with the possibility of there being a complex network of ethical issues that need to be resolved continuously across the range of research methods used in the project (deMarrais & Lapan 2004).

Similarly for a combinational method to be effective as well as the use of any of these methods solely also a strong methodology in terms of a plan for the research and its conduct will need to be in place in order to generate truly relevant data for the research questions which the researcher wishes to investigate, (Andrews, 2003). In conclusion the organisation of research methods in terms of their deployment is the most critical determinant of the success of the researcher in gathering data which will be of use in their subsequent and later analysis based on the research questions they have tasked themselves with answering. Organisation it can thus be argued is one of the principal determinants of whether the selection of any research methods will be successful in collecting relevant and valuable data for that project, (Ragin, 1994).

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