European Journal of Social Sciences
ISSN 1450-2267 Vol.28 No.3 (2012), pp. 320-325
© EuroJournals Publishing, Inc. 2012
http://www.europeanjournalofsocialsciences.com

Doing Sociological Research: Standard Methods and Fallacies and Methodological Pluralism

Kingsley Ufuoma Omoyibo
Department of Sociology & Anthropology, Faculty of Social Sciences
University of Benin, Benin City, Edo State, Nigeria
E-mail: ufuomaomoyibo@hotmail.com
Tel: +234-803-3542467

Ogaga Ayemo Obaro
Department of Sociology & Anthropology, Faculty of Social Sciences
University of Benin, Benin City, Edo State, Nigeria
E-mail: ogagaobaro@yahoo.com
Tel: +234-806-4542633

Abstract

The main argument of the paper is three fold. One, that actual sociological research is very different from what is found in standard textbooks on social research methods. The real purpose of common textbooks on research methods is to provide 'some' standard, 'some' set of procedures, 'some' method by which research practice can be evaluated. Yet, it is common knowledge that there has always been considerable divergence between how social research has actually been done and how it should be done. Two, that accounts of doing sociological research show that there are a variety of methods, and there are no clear ways of choosing between them. There cannot be only one style of sociological research with one method that is to be 'the' method. Rather, there are many methods. The third is that politics, defined widely to include micro and macro politics pervade all sociological research: idiosyncrasies of persons and circumstances are at the heart of social research. The paper is necessarily dedicated towards methodological pluralism.

Keywords: Fallacies, Methodological Traditions, Pluralism, Research Methods, Sociological Research, Standard

1. Introduction

Any academic subject requires a methodology to reach its conclusions: it must have ways of producing and analyzing data so that theories can be tested, accepted or rejected. Without some systematic way of producing knowledge, the findings of a subject can be dismissed as guess work, or even as common sense made to sound complicated (Yomere & Agbonifoh, 1999).

Data derived from either quantitative or qualitative researches play an extremely important role in all types of human activity, and it is only necessary to scan the pages of a large daily newspaper in order to appreciate the full significance of this fact. The results of a large number and variety of quantitative and qualitative investigations find their way into widely circulated newspapers, periodicals, and books, but these investigations constitute only a minor portion of all such work that is done. The remainders are aimed at specific audiences and appear only in government reports, journals,

technical publications, or reports which are within a company or other organization (Guido, 2005; Mason et al., 1999).

The final results of researches depend upon the collection, analysis, interpretations, and presentation of quantitative and qualitative data. Moreover, these and similar investigations usually have a more serious motivation than the mere satisfaction of idle curiosity. This implies that decisions and actions will be based, at least in part, upon these data, for example, to stimulate further research in a particular direction, to guide a government or company in developing a programme of action, or to advance knowledge in a subject-matter field. Under such circumstances, both the producer and the consumer of the data - and these may be the same individuals or organizations - have an important stake in knowing that the data have been correctly collected, analyzed, interpreted, and presented. Since any set of tools or methods may be correctly or incorrectly applied, it is vital that both producers and consumers of research data have a thorough understanding of the methods. Doing research demands knowing what the methods are and appreciating their weaknesses and strengths (Yomere & Agbonifoh, 1999; Neuman, 2003).

2. Statement of the Problem

Research methodology, like most other areas of sociology is riven with controversy (Gray, 2006; Haralambos et al.; 2004). One of the main areas of disagreement concerns, in the most general terms, whether sociology should adopt the same methods or similar methods to those employed in science. Many early sociologists chose to turn to science for a methodology (Comte, 1853, 1986; Durkheim, 1970; Pareto, 1963). However, not all sociologists have agreed that it is appropriate to adopt the methodology of the natural sciences. For these sociologists studying human behaviour is fundamentally different from studying the natural world. Unlike the subject matter of the natural sciences, people possess consciousness, which means, from the point of view of some sociologists, that sociology requires a different type of methodology from science (Weber, 1949; Strauss, 1977).

Has it, then, reached a situation where either you believe or you don't? Should these different methodological stances be seen as anomie or anarchy? Are there ways to adjudicate between the various methodological stances that we have outlined? These are the basic questions this paper sets out to discuss.

3. The Concept of Research

To research, according to Seltiz et al. (1976) is "to search again, to take another look or to find out more". Research or information gathering has become an integral part of contemporary society, with various research philosophies, methodologies, methods and techniques or procedures used to collect data before logical and /or statistical manipulation.

Social research may involve some definite approaches and steps: induction, deduction, verification and/or falsification (Onwuejeogwu, 2005; Popper, 1959, 1963). In the first, the researcher collects inductive statement, that is, generalized statements relating to the research topic or problem. These inductive statements are hypothetical. They are subjected to testing in order to sift out the facts from speculations. Induction begins from particular observations from which empirical generalizations are made. These generalizations then form the basis for theory building. In the second, the researcher deduces the facts from the raw data collected from the people studied and discards the rumors and speculations. Deductive statements are specific statements about a particular group of people or events studied. Deduction begins with theory, then hypothesis, derived from the theory, and then the test(s) of hypothesis via prediction and observations. This approach to testing and theory is often referred to as the hypothetico – deductive method. The third approach deals with the researcher verifying and/or falsifying theories as society experiences social change. Verification and/or falsification is the act of

collecting new facts to enable the researcher decide whether the theory still holds, is supported, or refuted in the society.

4. Methodological Traditions within Sociology

It is possible to identify two broad traditions of research methodology within sociology or social science. There are those who advocate the use of scientific, usually, quantitative or numerical statistical methods (positivists). There are those who subscribe to the use of more humanistic, usually, qualitative and non-numerical statistical methodology (phenomenologists). Positivists claim that science uses established or standard methods and procedures and that these methods and techniques can be applied to the social sciences. They believe that social facts can be observed objectively, measured and quantified. Analysis of statistics can reveal correlations, causes and ultimately, laws about human behaviour (Popper, 1959). In doing so, they advocate the use of quantitative methodology: experimental, comparative and survey research; and methods: sampling, statistical analysis and questionnaire (Isuigo-Abanihe, 1999). In quantitative research, analysis is done using sophisticated statistics to test hypotheses, establish the existence of relationships between variables, and the extent of relationships, for example, analysis of variance and multiple regression.

The philosophical base of positivism is engulfed with the problem of converting social actions and behaviour into measurable things (social facts). It assumes that certain phenomena are uniform. It is an attempt to convert complex world into a simple unitary one. The positivist's simplification of social action in order to achieve measurable entities Jeopardizes results and findings and endangers validity.

By comparison, qualitative research is used to refer to any study which does not produce purely quantitative data. It is concerned with obtaining people's own accounts of situations and events and reporting their perspectives and feelings. Phenomenological research and qualitative data are usually obtained through observation, interview, focus group discussion and case study, and presented in words. These may be description of a group of people or a community providing a full and in-depth account of their way of life, or a transcript of an interview in which people describe and explain their attitudes towards an experience (Neuman, 2003; Bryman, 2001). Phenomenologists emphasize insight and understanding of social action. Since it is impossible to know the mind of the actor unless expressed, the discovery of meaning should be based on intuition and interpretation.

5. Fallacies of Standard Research Methods

What may be referred to as normative methodology or standard method, be it ever so positivistic-quantitative or phenomenological-qualitative, frequently, would seem as if much, if not all, sociological research is context-free, carried out by non-people in non-places. The fundamental questions are: does the quantitative research measure what it intends to measure? How does the researcher determine the degree of intensity that is useful for the purpose of the survey without applying qualitative research? How does the researcher obtain answers about sensitive questions concerning human motivations, attitudes and meanings without sound observation and participation?

Almost invariably, sociological research takes place in some sort of political context: the organizational contexts of research, the personal relationships of the researchers and the reaction of the reading public, both lay and academic, fashion the 'finding', no less than the selection of a particular research strategy, sample or method of data analysis (Bell & Newby, 1977).

The sociologists who advocate the qualitative methodology argue that the whole basis of sociology is the interpretation of social action, which can only be understood by interpreting the meanings and motives on which it is based. Compared to quantitative data, qualitative data of this sort are usually seen as richer, more vital and as having greater depth and as more likely to present a true picture of a way of people's experiences, attitudes and beliefs (Neuman, 2003).

Interpretive or phenomenological sociology would argue that causal explanation of human behaviour is impossible without some understanding of the subjective state of the individuals concerns: their consciousness, values, motives and beliefs. Thus the positivist might be content to discover what external factors led to a certain type of human behaviour, while the interpritivists would be interested in the meaning attached to the behaviour by those engaging in it (Brannen, 1992).

Moreover, researchers play significant role in the construction and interpretation of the social system, which they study. They define and redefine research problems in a way that would enable them measure investigator's effects. Researchers are not passive observers who simple collect data from their environment. Rather, they actively construct the data observed and collected (Creswell, 1994; Gordon et al., 2000).

6. The Rise of Methodological Pluralism

In recent years, some sociologists have questioned the need for such a rigid division between quantitative and qualitative methodology, and have instead advocated methods associated with critical social science (Harvey, 1990) or with post modernism (Harvey, 1990; Lyotard, 1984). The central feature of critical social science is that it links research with trying to transform society. It therefore rejects the views of many of the advocates of the quantitative and qualitative methodologies that researchers should be impartial. Instead, it takes sides with those it sees as the disadvantaged and oppressed groups in society. It seeks to develop any methods that will help to liberate these groups from their oppression (Gordon et al, 2000).

Postmodernists on their part have developed their approaches to methodology tending to reject the belief that researchers can ever discover some objective truth about the social world. Instead, they believe that all that can be done is to examine the social world from the viewpoint of the different actors within it, and to deconstruct or take apart existing explanations of society. They reject the claims of traditional quantitative, qualitative and critical social science researchers that it is possible to determine the truth about society. Whatever methods are used, researchers will be left with many different accounts of the social world, and no particular account can be singled out as being better than the others.

Are there ways to adjudicate between the various epistemological stances that we have outlined? In the light of this question it is interesting to see how philosophers of various persuasions have faced a somewhat similar problem. In order to arbitrate between various epistemological disputations in the natural sciences philosophers have investigated actual natural scientific practice.

There was a time when the problem of the philosophy of science appeared to be that of setting down the principles of inductive logic in such a way that they would bear comparison with the logic of deductive argument. But those days are surely past. What characterizes the philosophy of empirical science today is its increased humility. It is widely recognized that the arguments of empirical science can never have the same sort of certainty as the rational demonstrations of deductive logic do. Science is not thought of as the search for a set of final and absolute truths. Rather it is seen as an always relatively imperfect and incomplete attempt to explain and to predict the events which we experience. And, because this is recognized, the philosophers have abandoned any attempt to legislate to the scientist. Instead they turn to the man whose work has led to relatively successful prediction and adjustment, and ask him what his methods and arguments were, in order to discover which arguments and methods really work. And it is always to be expected that new sorts of argument and method will be found, which may have uses elsewhere (Tisthammer, 2007; Giedymin, 2007).

If one thing unites Karl Popper (1959, 1963), Thomas Kuhn (1962) and Paul Feyerabend (1975), it is in their appeal to the history of natural science to establish their positions and to falsify those of their antagonists. They, at least, have agreed on the importance of our knowledge of what scientists actually do as a basis for formulating an epistemological position on how science should be done.

It is possible, at least, that an analysis of methodological pluralism could help us to overcome epistemological disputations. It is also possible that an analysis of methodological pluralism would reveal that there is no method, in which case our epistemological anomie would be perpetuated. It may be that sociologists set out to follow certain procedures, whether positivists or anti-positivist, whereas in practice they do not. However, a potential lesson that could be learned from such pluralism is that any method is potentially crippling or blinding: that, methods produce trained incapacity, or unfit fitness. Such for example, is the conclusion drawn by Paul Feyerabend from descriptive accounts of natural scientific practice (Feyerabend, 1975). The audacity of Feyerabend's work is in his argument that there can be no single research technique, no method: indeed his book argues 'against' method. For his examination of how scientists actually proceed, he demonstrates that they had no method; they frequently changed what they were doing and how they did it. Feyerabend concludes that the hitherto accepted accounts, like those by K. Popper (1959, 1963), T.S. Kuhn (1962) and I. Lakatos and M. Musgrave (1970), are more honoured in breach than as accurate descriptions of how natural scientists worked.

A close examination of actual social practice along the lines pioneered by Baldamus (1972) will probably show a wide variety of in-commensurate procedures. There is at least a possibility that we will find a degree of epistemological anomie similar to that which Feyerabend seems to have discerned in the natural sciences. However, in line with the thesis of this paper, we should merely retreat to a more cautious epistemological pluralism, rather than anomie, and face the consequences of that both for our own practice and how we teach our students (Slife & Gantt, 1999).

7. Conclusion

The philosophical base of the paper is methodological pluralism. The social context of science and research suggests such a plurality of methodologies (Brannen, 1992). Kaplan's (1964) distinction between 'reconstructed logics' and 'logics in use' corroborates the objective of the paper. Reconstructed logics consist of the methods and procedures scientists claim to use. Both positivism and Popper's methodological approach represent reconstructed logics. However, there is no guarantee that scientist actually do follow such guidelines. Logics in use refer to what scientists actually do during their research, and this may depart considerably from their reconstructed logics.

The discussion so far suggests that positivism (quantitative) and phenomenology (qualitative) occupy two extreme positions in a theoretical continuum. Both quantitative and qualitative researches have their own advantages and disadvantages, and neither can produce totally valid and completely reliable data. Generally, quantitative data tend to produce rather static pictures, but they can allow researchers to examine and discover overall patterns and structures in society as a whole. Qualitative data are less useful for discovering overall patterns and structures, but they do allow a richer and deeper understanding of the process of change in social life.

But it seems that a sound sociological research would attempt to bridge the gap between qualitative and quantitative researches. The combination of both may provide useful insights and a better understanding of social phenomenon than if one method had been used. It may also frequently enhance our confidence in our own or others' findings. The standard methods (field experiment, comparison, survey, interview, observation, case study) should be combined, and their analyses and findings reflecting the specific social-cultural contexts of the research (Onwuejeogwu, 2005; Bryman, 2001; Brannen, 1992).

References

[1] Baldamus, W. (1972), *The Role of Discoveries in Social Science,* in T. Shanin (ed), The Rules of the Game. Tavistock, London, pp. 276-302.

[2] Bell, C. and Newby, H. eds. (1977), Doing Sociological Research, London: George Allen & Unwin.
[3] Brannen, J. ed. (1992), Combining Qualitative and Quantitative Approaches: An Overview in J. Brannen, ed., Mixing Methods: Qualitative and Quantitative. www.npi.uda.edu/qualquant/mixed.htm
[4] Bryman, A. (2001), *Social Research Methods*, Oxford University Press, Oxford.
[5] Comte, A. (1853, 1986), The Positive Philosophy, London: Bell & Sons.
[6] Creswell, J.W (1994), Research Design: Qualitative and Quantitative Approaches.www.amazon.com/research-design.
[7] Durkheim, E. (1970), Suicide: A Study in Sociology, London: Routledge & Regan Paul.
[8] Feyerabend, P (1975), *Against Method,* New Left Editions: London.
[9] Giedymin, J. (2007), Science and Convention: Essays in Henri Poin Care's Philosophy of Science and Conventionalist. http: //bjps.oxfordjournals.org/cgi/reprint/24/30/ 307.pdf.
[10] Gordon, D. et al. (2000), Poverty and Social Exclusion in Britain. York: Joseph Rowntree Foundation.
[11] Gray, D. E. (2006), Doing Research in the Real World. London: Sage.
[12] Guido, I. (2005), Applied Statistics, http://www.ig.harvard.edu
[13] Haralambos, M., Heald, M., & Holborn, M. (2004), Sociology: Themes and Perspectives. London: Collins.
[14] Harvey, D (1990), *The Condition of Post modernity*, Blackwell, Oxford.
[15] Harvey, L. (1990), *Critical Social Research,* Unwin Hyman, London
[16] Isuigo-Abanihe, U.C. (1999), "Quantitative Research Techniques" in U.C. Isuigo-Abanihe, A.N. Isamah and J.O. Adesina, eds., Currents and Perspectives in Sociology. Lagos: Malthouse Social Sciences Studies.
[17] Kuhn T.S. (1962), *The structure of scientific Revolution,* University of Chicago Press Chicago and London.
[18] Lakatos, I and Musgrave, A. (1970), *Criticism and the Growth of Knowledge*, Cambridge: CUP
[19] Lyotard, J.E. (1984), *The Postmodern condition,* Manchester University Press, Manchester.
[20] Kaplan, A. (1964), *The conduct of Inquiry*, Chandler Publishing, New York.
[21] Mason, R. D. Lind, D. A. & Marchal, W. G. (1999), Statistical Techniques in Business and Economics. Boston: Irwin/McGraw-Hill.
[22] Neuman, W.L. (2003), Social Research Methods: Quantitative and Qualitative Approaches. www.amazon.com/social-research-methods.
[23] Onwuejeogwu, M.A. (2005), Report of Population and Family Welfare Education. Geneva: ILO.
[24] Pareto, V. (1963), A Treatise on General Sociology. A Livingstone, (ed.), New York: Dover Publications.
[25] Popper, K.R. (1959), The Logic of Scientific Discovery, London: Hutchinson.
[26] Popper, K. (1963), *Conjectures and Refutations.* Routledge & Kegan Paul, London.
[27] Selltiz, C., Wrightsman, L.S. and Cook, S.W. (1976), Research Methods in Social Relations, New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, Inc.
[28] Slife, B.D. and Gantt, E.E. (1999) Methodological pluralism: a framework for Psychotherapy research. Journal of clinical psychology, 55(12), pp. 1453-1465
[29] Strauss, A. (1977), Negotiations: Varieties, Contexts, Processes and Social Order. San Francisco: Jossey Bass.
[30] Tisthammer, W.A. (2007), The Nature and Philosophy of Science. http://evans-experientialism.freewebspace.com/tisthammer.htm.
[31] Weber, M. (1949), The Methodology of the Social Sciences, New York: The Free Press.
[32] Yomere, G. O. and Agbonifoh, B. A. (1999), Reseacr Methodology, Benin City: University of Benin Press.