

PhD Research in Humanities & Social Sciences: Methods & Approaches

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Abstract

This paper discusses philosophical approaches usually employed in undertaking research in general and PhD research in particular in Humanities and Social Sciences. The role of qualitative research that focuses on feelings and opinions collected through different research methods and tools is paramount in disciplines like History, Economics, Sociology, Linguistics, Literature etc. The article underscores the approaches rather than methods. In addition, the paper demonstrates how approaches including positivism, constructivism, interpretivism, critical theory, and so on rest on the ontological, epistemological, and axiological postulates. The objective of the paper is to inform the researchers and scholars about the philosophical approaches used in conducting research in different disciplines in general and in Humanities and Social Sciences in particular. Besides, the paper brings quantitative research method into discussion to comprehensively present differences and purposes of both qualitative and quantitative approaches. The knowledge of both approaches and paradigms can help to employ the most appropriate approach in undertaking qualitative research. The finding shows that the philosophical approaches including positivism, post-positivism, interpretivism, constructivism, and critical theory are widely employed in social sciences. These pervade in almost all disciplines for analyzing both qualitative and quantitative data. However, interpretivism, constructivism, and critical theory are paramount in undertaking qualitative research.

Keywords: Disciplines, research, positivism, post-positivism, interpretivism, constructivism, critical theory

Introduction

This paper discusses diverse philosophical approaches usually employed in conducting research in Humanities and Social Sciences. Research is a rigorous task that demands a lot of patience and concentration. Researchers/scholars usually take the research as a complex process that it seems to be futile to reduce its complex dynamics into stable categories. Martyn Hammersely (2012) presents four basic categories of research orientations, “positivist /postpositivist, interpretive /hermeneutic, critical, and constructionist. Positivism is one of the research methods which is scientific, explanatory, predictive, evidence-based, objective, logical and numerative /quantitative, value-free, operationist and verificatory (William, 2006 p. 231). In Hammersely’s view, interpretive

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/hermeneutic research method emphasizes the role of inner life experience, culture and/or imagination on the part of the interpreter (2012). Hence, it studies the phenomena of human behavior. Its task is to understand how people see, think, and feel about the world around pursuing to grasp diverse perspectives in their own words. Besides, critical research sees social science as playing a principal oppositional role in political terms, for example as being able to capture the real social forces involved, whereas commonsense views are regarded as frequently distorted by ideology, by misconceptions that are socially generated so as to disguise injustice and its causes (Hammersley 2012). Indeed, critical research is different from other research methods as it takes unequivocal political position; it is interventionist, and works with some liberating issues and social renovation. Constructionism is an orientation to research that considers facts, descriptions and other features of objectivity to be inescapably conditional and rhetorical (Hepburn, 2006, p. 38). In Hepburn's view, people are seen as constructed through social interactions rather than through genetic programming and biological maturation. Hence, human beings are the social constructs.

Barbara E. Lovitts (2007) characterizes disciplines along a number of dimensions including "hard/soft, pure/applied, and paradigmatic/nonparadigmatic" (p. 60). The sciences like physics, as classified by Lovitts (2007, p. 60), are positioned at one end of the continuum, humanities like literature at the other end. The social sciences like sociology lie somewhere in the middle. Biology, physics, mathematics are hard and pure sciences, and engineering and medical sciences are hard and applied. Economics, sociology, English, history are soft and pure. Law, education, and social work, rural development are soft and applied. Pure sciences are concerned with theoretical knowledge, whereas applied sciences with practical knowledge. Applied disciplines are more amenable to trial and error approaches than pure ones. The hard applied disciplines focus on mastering the physical world. Hence, the nature of disciplines determines the philosophical approach when undertaking research in a specific discipline.

Discussion

The article discusses some of the overarching philosophical approaches employed as historical background when undertaking research in Humanities and Social Sciences. Mostly, qualitative research method is used for quality data in the disciplines like economics, culture, sociology, anthropology, social work, language and literature, and history and so on. Denzin and Lincoln (2013) assert that qualitative inquiry is as "a field of inquiry in its own right" (p. 5), qualitative research pervades disciplines. Furthermore, it is depicted in diverse areas of scholarship. I focus here on literature and language, but distinguish the considerable work done in related disciplines including sociology, anthropology, social work, humanities, and history.

In their *Research methods in social sciences*, Somekh and Lewin bring several scholars to discuss research methods used in social sciences. The common research methods discussed in that anthology include case study, research for impact, postmodern research, critical race theory, feminist research, research through observation,

deconstruction, experimental, empirical, positivist, activity theory, social semiotics, semiotics, life history, narrative, research diaries, ethnography, participatory, interview, grounded theory, ethical responsibility, queer, lesbian and gay approaches, policy research, discourse analysis, hermeneutic, naturalistic inquiry, qualitative and quantitative methods, comparative, and phenomenological. In addition to the typologies of common research methods listed above, there can be diverse types of research methods depending on the disciplinary expectations, their protocols and regimes.

Roberts states that quantitative research is designed basically for the identification and description of variables with a view to establishing the relationship between them (qtd. in Wagner and Okeke, 2009, p. 61). It uses descriptive, correlational, experimental methods. Data analysis is usually executed through descriptive and inferential statistics and is often computer aided. Inferences are then drawn from a sample to the population based on the processed data. The purpose of quantitative method is to test hypothesis or hypotheses, analyze cause and effect and finally make prediction. It is primarily concerned with numbers, frequency, distribution patterns, and statistics, close questions. This technique studies larger population sample randomly selected as a prerequisite for valid, reliable and easily generalizable findings. Quantitative data are based on precise measurements using structured and validated data collections instruments. Researchers and their biases are not known to participants and participant characteristics are deliberately hidden from the researcher. Generalizable findings can be applied to other population. Human behavior is considered regular and predictable. It just describes, explains and predicts (Johnson and Christensen, 2007, p.34; Lichtman, 2006, pp. 6-7). Researchers claim to be objective, neutral and suppose to speak from nowhere.

The purpose of qualitative research is basically to interpret and understand human behavior and social interaction. The sample size is smaller and is not randomly selected. Its emphasis is on capturing or obtaining an in-depth understanding of the interactional processes as manifested during a particular study. The qualitative data use open ended questions and responses, interviews, participant observation, field noted. It is contingent, subjective, and less replicable than quantitative technique. It refracts the reality and presents one version of it.

Silverman states that the qualitative researcher works at greater depth with a relatively small number of participants to enhance the quality of the responses and mostly prefers interpretative methods including focus group discussion, observation, and, unstructured and semi-structured interviews. Qualitative research stands on interpretivism, constructivism and critical theory. The qualitative approaches explore the subjective meanings through which people interpret the world, the different ways in which reality is constructed through language, images and cultural artifacts in specific contexts. Social events and phenomena are understood from the perspective of the actors avoiding the imposition of the researcher's preconceptions and definitions. It is often concerned with

the exploration of change and flux in social relationships temporally and spatially. The methods used in qualitative research, often in combination, are those which are open-ended to explore participants' interpretations and which allow the collection of detailed information in a relatively close setting. These methods include depth interviewing, ethnography and participant observation, case studies, life histories, discourse analysis and conversational analysis. It is in the nature of qualitative research, with its emphasis on depth and detail of understanding and interpretation, that it is often small-scale or micro-level. Qualitative research is not a single set of theoretical principles, a single research strategy or a single method (qtd. in Sumner, 2006, p. 248). It developed in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries across a range of disciplines, on varied and sometimes conflicting philosophical and theoretical bases, including cultural anthropology, interpretive sociologies (such as symbolic interactionism), phenomenology and, more recently, hermeneutics, critical theory, feminism, post-colonial theory, cultural studies, post-structuralism and postmodernism (Sumner, 2006, p. 249). These diverse approaches inevitably give rise to substantial differences and disagreements about the nature of qualitative research, the role of the researcher, the use of various methods and the analysis of data.

Basic approaches in qualitative approach to research are phenomenology, ethnography, inductive thematic analysis, grounded theory, case study, discourse/conversation analysis, narrative analysis, and mixed methods. This approach attempts to examine /research human behavior, attitude, opinions, perceptions, values, emotions, knowledge, cultural meanings, social structure, and relationships, etc. Its data collection methods include participant observation, in-depth analysis, focus group, and document analysis.

For Snape and Spencer (2003), qualitative methods can be applied to a range of research approaches that have their theoretical origins in a range of disciplines including anthropology, sociology, philosophy, social psychology and linguistics. Although considerable diversity exists in the type of studies that can be described as 'qualitative', it is possible to define a set of core characteristics. These include: (a) aims that are directed at providing an in-depth and interpreted understanding of the social world of research participants by learning about their social and material circumstances, their experiences, perspectives, and histories, (b) samples that are small in scale and purposively selected on the basis of salient criteria, (c) data collection methods that usually incorporate close contact between the researcher and the research participants that are interactive and developmental and allow for emergent issues to be explored, (d) data that are detailed, information rich and extensive, (e) analysis that is open to emergent concepts and ideas and which may produce detailed description and classification, identify patterns of association or develop typologies and explanations, (f) outputs that tend to focus on the interpretations of social meaning through mapping and 're-presenting' the social world of participants.

Doctor of Philosophy is not just a degree but a dynamic process consisting of a range of activities and skills. It is an independent academic work resulting in original contribution to knowledge producing a publishable work (Lovitts, 2007, pp. 4-5). She adds that a PhD project identifies a new way of thinking, identifies a niche in the existing literature, synthesizes different perspectives, analyzes the single entity, identifies new sources and contexts, applies new approaches to old ideas and new ideas to old approaches, changes the way people think, and finally opens up new fields (Lovitts, 2007, pp. 222, 274). Many things depend on the kind of university and level of study, the kind of degree, hard or soft science, core or applied science, quantitative, or qualitative, factual or speculative, descriptive or critical, eclectic or interdisciplinary, advocacy, or problem solving, and so on.

Despite having differences in subject matters, dissertations have the following elements in common as universities typically apply the same criteria: (a) an understanding of relevant existing literature, (b) a critical analysis of the previous research, (c) a clearly defined topic, (d) the appropriate application of research methods and tools and techniques, (e) presentation and interpretation of results, (f) clearly developed conclusions and implications and recommendations and, (g) contribution to knowledge on the particular domain. A PhD dissertation demonstrates: (a) an original testing of ideas, (b) an independent experimentation, (c) an understanding of appropriate techniques and their limitations, (c) working knowledge of the published literature on the topic under investigation, (d) an ability to present the work at an appropriate level of literary quality, and (e) discovery of new facts and interpretations of the findings. Lovitts has suggested that there are normally six components in a PhD dissertation such as Introduction, Literature Review, Theory, Methodology, Analysis and Conclusion. In this way, Paltridge and Starfield (2007) have suggested that a typical PhD dissertation can be devised as: Chapter 1: Introduction comprises of background information, the research problem/research questions, purpose of the study, hypotheses, scope of the study, significance of the study, definitions of key terms, organization of the study.

Chapter 2: Literature Review embodies review of relevant literature, specific topics related to the issue under investigation, how previous research suggests the study is important to do, and the gap in the research that the study will fill.

Chapter 3: Conceptual Framework and/or Methodology incorporates research design, methods used to collect data, research instruments, methods used to analyses the data, details about who, how, when and why, description of the setting and participants, and issues of ethics and consent.

Chapter 4: Results includes the findings of the study, described under themes that emerged from the data, under the research questions or under the data collection techniques that were used.

Chapter 5: Discussion and Conclusions combines of a re-statement of the research problem, a re-statement of results, discussion of what was found in relation to previous

research on the topic, limitations of the study, implications for future research, and consent.

The Introduction Chapter establishes the research territory. In this section, the researcher demonstrates the general research field, background information, reviews the previous research in this area, offers the operational /working definitions of the key terms, establishes a niche in the existing research, extends the existing knowledge, identifies the problem, presents research questions, and hypothesis, states the significance of the study, describes the methods employed so far, presents the overall blueprint /road map of the study and finally offers the chapter organization. Lovitts (2007) argues that in all disciplines, the introduction states the problem. It provides context for the work in a motivational manner. It should lay out the research question(s) and the general strategy. As a distinct chapter, the introduction often incorporates the literature review and theory, and provides an overview of the entire dissertation. The introduction is often written after the conclusion. In some disciplines, natural sciences in particular, the introduction functions as an executive summary. The faculties have had mixed feelings about the importance of the introduction, and have noted that the quality of the introduction has not been critical to their assessment of the dissertation. Outstanding introductions have a hook that draws the attention of readers to read the dissertation. They provide a clear statement of the problem, identify the contribution up front, and address its importance and significance. They are written with authority, and show insight into and command over the argument. They also provide a chapter-by-chapter blueprint of the dissertation. They present clear research questions. However, they are less interesting and less well motivated than outstanding ones. Acceptable introductions do the things that an introduction needs to do. Unacceptable introductions are poorly written. The problem is not well stated. They often contain unnecessary details. After reading the unacceptable introduction, readers do not know what the dissertation is about and in which direction it goes.

The Review of Literature is a journey that embarks from known territory to unknown one. Hence, researchers first contextualize their research by setting the stage. It should describe and synthesize the major studies related to the area under investigation. It should also sketch the development of the state-of-art of that field of study such as current developments, controversies, and breakthroughs. Paltridge (2007) has suggested that the literature review should focus on: the key issues that underlie the research project, the major findings on the research topic, by whom and when, the main points of views and controversies on the issue being investigated, a critical evaluation of these views, indicating strengths and weaknesses of previous studies, conclusions about the state of the art at the time of writing, including what research still needs to be done, that is, the gap that remains in the research that the study will fill. The literature review may be arranged: (a) according to the various questions to be asked, (b) according to the various topics and sub-topics that are central to the study, (c) according to the specific variables in the study, (d)chronologically from oldest to more recent research, (e) according to different points of view, (f) or a combination of these. There is no single right way in which to organize the

review of the literature. Often the nature of the research problem determines the organization. It is significant in a literature review to provide enough background information to previous studies so that the context of the ongoing study can be clear. Overall, the literature review should describe previous pertinent studies, and the results of that research.

In all disciplines of Humanities and Social Sciences, review of the literature is mandatory. The review contributes to framing the context and connecting the problem to past and contemporary thought. Boote and Beile argue that a commendable literature review is “a precondition to doing substantive, thorough, sophisticated research” (2005, p. 3). They assert that researchers ‘cannot perform significant research without first understanding the literature in the field’ (p. 3). In history, the literature review is commonly called a historiographic review and is a review of other interpretations of history. Faculties in natural sciences have opined that the literature review as a teaching document for the next scholars in their laboratory. Overall, an outstanding literature review is imperative, relevant, analytical, and insightful. Researchers who write outstanding literature reviews demonstrate a deep and sweeping grasp of the literature, often drawing on literatures from other fields. Meanwhile, they are selective, including only the most relevant and crucial works. They use the literature to show what is missing, why their research needs to be accomplished, and how their research is likely to advance the field. Faculties in Humanities and Social Sciences have stated that scholars who write outstanding literature reviews are generous to their sources as they are empathic with the previous researchers.

Methodology/Methods Chapter discusses the process of undertaking the research. Methodology refers to the theoretical paradigm or framework in which the researcher is working. The paradigm can be quantitative or qualitative. The methodology helps to justify the argument. It develops an explanation as to why the research method(s) under discussion have been chosen. The section requires a restatement of research questions and explains how the chosen researches method(s) help answer the research questions. Similarly, method refers to the actual research instruments and materials used. The methodology informs the choice of methods and what counts as data. For instance, interviews, participant observation and discourse analysis are methods generally employed in qualitative research, whereas in quantitative research the methods and materials employed in a laboratory or other experimental settings require detailed descriptions. The researcher discusses why a particular method has been selected. S/he should refer to the literature on the method(s) under review and justify her or his choice using the literature. The justification should revolve around the intrinsic value of the research method in terms of yielding the data that enable the researcher to answer the research questions.

The Analysis/Discussion Chapter is the core segment of the dissertation because all other parts are conditioned by the analysis and its results. It has a direct connection with the preceding and succeeding chapters. The following are the features and moves of a typical analysis chapter of a dissertation. This chapter incorporates textual evidence to justify the major argument and arguments. In order to support or contradict the claims, the

researcher can also bring about the critics' perspectives. Overall, there is a logical interaction between primary data, theorists' perspectives, critics' observations and the researcher's arguments.

The Conclusion Chapter from the perspective of Paltridge and Starfield (2007) generally incorporates, an overview of the significant findings in the light of existing research studies, implications for current theory, an examination of findings that fail to support or only partly support the hypotheses, limitations of the study that may affect the validity or the generalizability of the results, recommendations for further research, and future direction.

Conclusion

This paper has discussed the structure of the dissertation written for Doctor of Philosophy in almost all disciplines of Humanities and Social Sciences. Philosophical approaches including critical theory, positivism, postpositivism, interpretivism, and constructivism are generally employed for analyzing the primary data. The structure the dissertation embodies the introduction, literature review, methods and methodology, discussion or analysis and conclusion as well as references. Both quantitative and qualitative research methods are usually used for interpreting the data. However, the qualitative data are greatly preferred in the disciplines of Humanities and Social Sciences. Despite having numerous procedures, PhD dissertation can be well-written if the researcher is familiar with the techniques and tools needed in dealing with the data. Despite few differences in the roadmap of dissertations depending on the guidelines of specific disciplines, all disciplines of social sciences follow the same underlying structure for the PhD dissertations. This article can help the researchers to benefit from the outlines presented so far when drafting their dissertations at postgraduate and doctoral levels.

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