

Workshop paper – 2. workshop

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Research methods in sociology

27.2.2005

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Introduction

For the second workshop I read chapter "Human Inquiry and Science" from the book "The Practice of Social Research" (Babbie, Earl. 2001). This chapter introduces the basics of practising social science.

Chapter is divided into four smaller chapters, which I will present each shortly in this paper. First small chapter is basically about knowledge, and how scientific knowledge differs from every day human inquiry. Second chapter introduces three major aspects of making social science: theory, data collection and data analysis, and how they are used in social research.

Third chapter is about three different orientations in making social science. These are distinctions between idiographic and nomothetic explanation, deductive and inductive theory, and also between qualitative and quantitative data. According to Babbie (ibid., 33) good social researcher learns all these three orientations, and sees them equally important ways of making scientific research.

Last chapter is about ethics in social research. Firstly, participation to research projects should always be voluntary. Secondly, it should never cause any harm to subjects of the research. These two points seem obvious, but are sometimes hard to carry out in reality.

In next chapters of this paper I will write more specifically about all the main topics of the chapter I read.

From ordinary human inquiry to social science

People observe the world around them, and make conclusions based on what they observe. Still most of the knowledge people have is not based on their own empiric observation; they rather get it from the others. This kind of knowledge is usually based on agreement, that something is the way it is. It concerns something everyone knows, even though most of the people never experienced it themselves. (Babbie, 2001, 17-20)

This so-called second hand knowledge is based on two sources, tradition, the things and information we inherit from former generations, and authority, which means the information we get from experts. Both of them have their good and bad sides. Firstly, it is of course crucial to have a basis for all new things we get to know. On the other hand, we take some things for granted, and never question is something really like we know it, or could it be also totally different, if we started to think it over. (ibid., 17-20)

Social scientists use the same knowledge that we observe and learn in our daily life. Still scientific inquiry varies from normal human inquiry, because it attempts to make laws of cause and effect more explicit. Scientific knowledge has to be logical, it has to make sense, and also support empirical observations. On the other words, in science it is important to observe and understand what kind of things are so repeatedly connected to each other that they make a pattern. Social researchers focus on how things are, and try to explain why they are the way they are. (ibid. 18-19).

Babbie (2001, 20-21) writes about some errors people make in normal daily observation. These errors scientists are of course trying to avoid. Firstly people tend to do inaccurate observations. For example different people can have very different memories from a situation they all were present. According to author this is because our daily observations are usually casual and semiconscious. In science, observation is a conscious activity, and it is made deliberately to reduce this kind of errors.

Other error in daily observation is overgeneralization. This means finding evidence of a pattern based on limited observation, only few similar events. Researchers try to avoid overgeneralization by having a representative and large sample of observations. Another way to avoid it is to repeat the study many times, and see if it gives similar results every time. Overgeneralization can lead to selective observation, which means that when we expect that certain pattern exist, we start to ignore things that might show that the pattern doesn't exist in reality, that our generalization is wrong. (ibid., 20)

Last error Babbie (ibid., 21) mentions is illogical reasoning. This means almost superstitious beliefs, which some people have. For example when the weather has been good for a long time, people start to worry that rain is just around the corner. Also when a gambler has had a bad luck, he might think that good luck has to follow his failure. This kind of reasoning has no logic, because no one can prove that there really exists a pattern behind it. Scientists use system of logic explicitly and consciously to avoid this kind of reasoning.

In the end of this chapter author (ibid., 21-24) introduces three different philosophic views about reality: premodern, modern and post-modern views. In premodern view there only exists one opinion, truth about the reality, and all the other views are wrong. A bit later in history people started to see reality through modern view, which means that there exist only one objective reality, but people have their own different subjective views about it. Still according to this view, only objective reality is really real.

According to Babbie (ibid., 22) nowadays philosophers speak increasingly about postmodern reality, which suggests that objective reality does not exist, there is only several subjective views which are all equally real. This causes a dilemma to scientists: they are trying to describe what is "really" happening, but at the same time they are humans themselves, and bring their own values and beliefs to the research. This means that through postmodern view results of researches are also one point of view among the others.

Three basic factors in social science

Like I mentioned before, three major factors of social science are theory, data collection and data analysis. Babbie (2001, 25) writes that scientific theory is not trying to tell how things should be; it only describes how they are, and why they are like they are. Theory is the basis of the research, and data analysis searches for patterns in observations. Data analysis also compares observations with what was expected to logically find out from it, and did observations really show what the theory expected them to show. (ibid., 24-25)

Social regularities differ from regularities in the nature, because people have their own free will unlike objects in the nature. Anyhow also social world has a high degree of regularity, because for example social world is full of formal norms, like laws, and also social norms, that people obey. (ibid., 25-26)

Babbie (2001, 26) mentions three things that are important to remember while observing social regularities. Firstly sometimes social regularities seem trivial, when in the end they are not. This means that sometimes in reality things do not go like researches would predict them to go, observations can show that the theory is wrong, and then theory has to be updated as well. Secondly many patterns have exceptions, but if there are only few of them, it doesn't mean that the pattern would not exist. Thirdly, people are living subjects and could interfere with the research by acting in an opposite way they are expected to. But in reality this is not a serious threat to social research, because like said before, many patterns have exceptions.

Because social scientists try to look for regularities in social life, they are more interested in aggregates than individuals; they are trying to understand the systems people operate in. According to Babbie (2001, s. 28) one of social scientists' aim is to explain why social patterns stay similar even though people participating them change over time.

Social researchers speak about variables and their attributes when they study and collect data about social life. Variable could be a concept, like for example "education" or "gender",

and corresponding attribute “school teacher” or “female”. Social study is interested how variables are related to each other, and attributes are qualities or characteristics that describe these variables. Variables are regarded as dependent or independent. Babbie (2001, 32) gives an example: when researcher is trying to find out how education affects peoples’ prejudices, assumable prejudice is dependent on education. So prejudice is dependent variable, and education is independent variable in this case.

Three different research approaches

Third main chapter introduces three different distinctions of making social science. First one of these is idiographic and nomothetic explanation. Idiographic explanation concerns only one unique situation, and with it people can explain one situation and its causes exhaustively. Nomothetic explanation searches reasons to a bigger group of situations, a class of situations. According to Babbie (2001, 33) it settles for a partial explanation instead of explaining the case fully. Nomothetic explanation could be for example that every time a person studies with his friend, he gets a better grade than when he studies alone.

Second distinction is inductive and deductive theory. Inductive theory aims find a pattern from a specific observation, and comparably deductive theory moves from general to specific. For example, when a person compares the grades she got last semester, she will try to find out reasons why some of them went better and some of them worse. Finally she realizes again, that every time she studied in a group, she did better than when she studied alone. >From specific situations she can find a pattern, that studying with her friends helps her get a good grade. (ibid., 34)

In deductive way of explaining things a person would reason in a different way. When planning the studies he would start to think what would be the best way to get a good grade, to study alone or study with others. He would think about the negative and positive sides, and

finally use his ideas about studying in practise. This way he would see if he's deductive "theory", logical reasoning about studying would work in practice. (ibid., 35)

Last distinction is quantitative and qualitative data, which is basically distinction between numerical and non-numerical data. All the information is qualitative in the beginning, but quantification makes our observations more explicit. Quantitative data is important for comparing and summarising, but on the other hand in quantification data can lose some of its meanings, because numbers only tell about one measurable thing. For example age can be seen only as a number of years a person has been alive, but on the other hand it can also tell about person's maturity, or then about person's looks, how old or young a person looks like. (ibid., 36)

All of these explanations are useful in social science of course depending on the situation that is being studied. Babbie (2001, 37) writes that complete understanding of the topic that is been researched often requires more than one of these techniques.

Ethics in social science

Last main chapter concerns the ethics of social research. Main points are that participation to research has to always be voluntary, and that research should never cause any harm to subjects.

Babbie (2001, 38) writes that even though idealistic situation is that participation is voluntary, sometimes it is impossible to do in practice. For example when researcher is observing big area in a campus, he can not ask the permission from everyone. Sometimes it is also necessary in an observation situation that people being observed don't know that they are being observed. If they knew they might act in a different way. This kind of research ethics is something that researchers have constant debates about.

Also not causing harm to subject is not always an easy rule to obey absolutely. Harm is quite subjective concept, and it is hard to know if for example inquiry about person's religious views changes his ideas, and he starts to doubt about his belief. It is important for a researcher to think carefully about his research, and avoid potential harm it might cause to people. Babbie (2001, 38) writes, that because everything we do in life potentially harms someone, researcher has to weight the relative risk of harming someone against the importance and possible benefits of the research.

Conclusion

Articles main point is to lead the reader inside the world of social science. Author (Babbie, 2001, 38) also writes that one of the aims is to show that social science is not routine or boring. In my opinion he has succeed in that in this first chapter of the book. His examples are usually funny and simple but still illustrative. Hopefully I also managed to gather together most of the main points of what he wanted to tell in this chapter of the book.

Bibliography

Babbie, Earl. 2001. *The Practice of Social Research*. Belmont: Wadsworth Publishing Company; Chapter 1: "Human Inquiry and Science", 16-40.