Introduction to social science research methods

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Before you start, think about:
Methodology – Method – Research design – Analysis

• **Methodology** -> the way the researcher has approached the task of researching a certain research question/problem
  • Which data are collected, how and why?
  • Looking at the role of the researcher with regard to the research participants

• **Method** -> “tools” used to carry out a research

• **Research design** -> “assembling” the tools

• **Research Analysis** ->
  • Plan the analysis from the start: What data will you get from your collection and what will you do with it?
  How much data do you need? What statistical tests/analytical approaches? E.g. positivist/quantitative, content analysis, thematic analysis, Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA), discourse
Methodological approaches

**Positivists**
- Commonly use of hypothesis, deductively derived from theory and previous knowledge
- Empirical testing, understanding causality
- Large case numbers or rigorously selected small case numbers to maximize generalizability
- Separation between researcher/observer and what is observed
- Aiming at knowing the reality

Approaches such as ontology, epistemology, axiology

**Interpretivists**
- Holistic focus, emphasizing cases as complex entities
- Context important, understanding specific situations
- Data are presented in narratives, including excerpts from texts
- Cases are selected on the basis of inherent interest
- Researcher may immerse him/herself in the situation to be studied
- Relative focus on meanings, context

-> The choice of methodology refers to the way in which methods are used.

Methods ("tools") - Observation

- Allows researcher direct access to people’s behaviours *in situ*
- Adaptable to a number of different research designs e.g.:
  - Ethnographic research
  - Case studies
  - Action research
- For exploratory phase: ‘find out what is going on’
- As supportive/supplementary method: corroborate or validate main data
- As primary method: supported by/validated with e.g. interviews
- Or as one method in a multi-method design
Methods ("tools") – Observation types (Robson, 2011)

- Participant observation
  - Essentially qualitative, rooted in anthropology, sociology
- Structured observation
  - Quantitative style, e.g. social psychology
- Unobtrusive observation
  - Usually unstructured and informal
Methods (“tools”) - Observation: Advantages

- Directness – no need to ask people about their views, feelings, ...
- Complements and contrasts with data obtained by other means: what people do often contrasts with what they say they do
- Self-report data subject to distortions of memory, or self-presentation (social desirability response bias), or gap between ideal and reality, or lack of awareness (e.g. of automatic or habitual behavior)
- Lack of artificiality; situated in “real world”
Methods ("tools") – Observation: Disadvantages

• Complex and time consuming
  • E.g. classic participant observation requires several years immersion in ‘the field’
  • All forms of observation require extensive preparation and decisions about what to record and how
  • Structured observation schedules are hard to develop from scratch and require practice to use well and reliably

• Reactivity – extent to which observer influences events being observed
Methods ("tools") – Observation: Researcher roles

• On two continua:
  - extent to which researcher participates in the environment/activities being observed
  - Extent to which participants know of researcher’s presence and purpose

• Methodological and ethical implications with respect to each of these
Researcher roles in participant observation

• **Complete participant**: Researcher seeks to become a full member of group, conceals researcher role

• **Participant-as-observer**: Researcher participates in activities of group; researcher role known from the start

• **Marginal participant**: Researcher participates to a lesser degree and is largely passive; researcher role known

• **Observer-as-participant**: Researcher aspires to take no part in activities; researcher role known
Discussion: What issues might you have to think about?

• What are the ethical and methodological concerns for each of the researcher roles described on the previous slide?

• Most of the textbook advice assumes you are going into a new situation as a participant observer: What if you are already part of the group you wish to observe?
Methods ("tools") – Interviews/Focus groups

• First-hand accounts
• Most common method in qualitative research: demand for rich, idiographic, participant-centred data
• Can be used with a variety of research approaches/methodologies (less suited to positivist/quantitative approaches)
• Group interviews are called “focus groups” (useful when the interaction between people is of interest)
Methods ("tools") – Interviews: Types of research questions

- Questions concerned with people’s lived experiences and perspectives
- Understanding social processes in their settings
- Understanding change
- Understanding identities and self-concepts
- Exploring previously unresearched areas
  -> As study method in its own right
  -> To build theories that may be used for hypothesis testing/fixed designs
Methods ("tools") – Interviews: Approaches

• Different types of structure/format: structured, semi-structured (most common), unstructured, informal, narrative

• Different types of analysis: content, thematic, discourse, IPA

-> For a great explanation of qualitative approaches to research and interviewing within those, see Tracy, 2013
Methods ("tools") – Interviews: Advantages

• Good for in-depth understanding of individuals
• Mutual discoveries, understanding, reflections; conversations are created between interviewer and interviewee
• Can be flexible and adaptive
• E.g. allow researcher to come across previously hidden, complex phenomena
• Useful for exploring issues that cannot be easily observed
• Useful for strengthening and complementing other data
Methods (“tools”) – Interviews: Disadvantages

• Time consuming (preparation/developing interview schedule, conducting interviews, transcribing and analyzing)
• Lack of standardization raises concerns about reliability
• Hard to rule out biases
Exercise

• Your research project looks audiences of operas.
• You want to interview participants who love operas as well as those who don’t

-> Come up with three interview questions that would work for both groups
Methods ("tools") – Diaries: Useful for (aka advantages)

- Longitudinal studies, especially tracking processes/experiences/change/events over time
- As an alternative to observation
- As a supplement to observation
- Bringing aspects of behavior to participants’ conscious awareness to enable deeper reflection
- As a basis for in-depth interviews (Mitigates against disadvantages of retrospective interviewing such as biases, reframing of experiences in retrospect, losses of memory)
Methods ("tools") – Diaries: Issues to consider (aka disadvantages)

• Attrition: Dropout, losing touch, losing motivation
• Materials and presentation need careful design and piloting
• Avoiding data overload and overburdening participants
• Extent to which completing the diary changes the experiences recorded
Exercise

• Think of one example of a research area that would be ideal for the use of diaries
Methods ("tools") – Questionnaires

• For large amounts of data collection
• Can yield quantitative or qualitative data depending on items
• Useful for measuring psychological constructs such as
  • attitudes and opinions
  • Self-esteem, self-efficacy, happiness, depression, anxiety etc...
  • Personality traits (Extraversion, neuroticism, openness to experience)
  • Some forms of aptitude or ability
• Useful for collection data on behavior or opinion when more direct investigation would be impractical (e.g. frequency of attending concerts)
  -> aka survey
• For retrospective data
• For investigating the structure of concepts (e.g. “creativity”)
Methods ("tools") – Questionnaires: advantages

• Collection of large amounts of data relatively quickly and cheaply
• Useful to investigate relations
• Useful to investigate relationships among a number of variables (experiments usually have to be limited to 2 or 3): e.g. factors involved in whether a student continues learning an instrument
• Can be used to collect quantitative and qualitative data
Methods ("tools") – Questionnaires: disadvantages

- You have to rely on what participants tell you
- Your participants have to rely on what they read
- Your questionnaire items are only an indirect measure
- So the questions you ask, the way you ask them and the precise wording are crucial
- Constructing a questionnaire well is not a simple task
References and further reading

- Ericsson, K.A. (1996). The road to excellence: The acquisition of expert performance in the arts and sciences, 