

The academic research in the field of Humanities – practical observations

Abstract. The academic research is intertwined with the research methods it employs. There are various academic disciplines and there are also various research methods. Some of these are perceived as incompatible with one another, particularly because they are employed in the area of sciences as opposed to that of Humanities. However, more and more studies and authors have started to indicate that the threshold between the different fields of academic research is rather permeable. This article aims at discussing some of these studies and authors, with a focus on the research in the field of Humanities. Its purpose is to indicate the blurred line between different methods of research and the need to approach them with flexibility and an open mind.

Keywords: academic research, research methods, Humanities

In the academic research, the first step towards a good quality research endeavour begins with some preliminary considerations that are required before designing a proposal or a plan for study. These considerations relate to selecting an appropriate research approach, reviewing the literature to position the proposed study within the existing literature, deciding on whether to use a certain theory in the study, and employing good writing and ethical practices. The first step should be to select a suitable research approach: the hypothesis of the study, the procedures of inquiry and the specific research methods of data collection, analysis, and interpretation. The selection of a research approach is also based on the nature of the selected research hypothesis (Creswell 2009).

When one discusses the academic disciplines, one may refer to social sciences, physical science, or the Humanities. The latter, meaning those academic disciplines that study human culture, may be further

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divided into the fields of art, religion, philosophy, arts, linguistics, languages and literatures. If the social sciences and the physical sciences employ empirical methods and also direct and indirect observation or experience, the humanities use totally different methods of research, methods that are mainly critical or speculative, and have a substantial historical perspective. Social sciences and physical sciences make use of direct observations or experiences that can be analysed quantitatively, whereas social sciences make mostly use of qualitative analysis. Humanities, in general, may employ various methodologies. Basically, each subject area had its own contribution towards a certain methodology, for example historical methods, phenomenology or textual criticism.

Researchers like Ross Scimeca and Robert Labaree from the University of Southern California, attempting to delineate a unified methodology for the humanities and social sciences, namely the synoptic method, discuss the three methodologies mentioned above. Thus, the historical method is considered as one of the oldest methodologies used in the Humanities. According to Denzin, Norman and Lincoln, the historical method refers to the use of primary historical data in dealing with a research question. Such data may include demographic records, press articles, official records, correspondence; the main purpose would be to investigate a clearly defined historic period via the texts and recorded events from that era (Denzin, Norman and Lincoln 2005). Textual criticism, on the other hand, attempts to analyse a given text regardless of discipline. It is used primarily in literary criticism, and in the nineteenth century, the “higher criticism” in Biblical studies yield hermeneutics (Scimeca and Labaree 2008).

The Stanford Encyclopaedia of Philosophy defines phenomenology, the third type of research methodology underlined above, as representing the study of structures of consciousness as experienced from the first-person point of view. The central structure of an experience is its intentionality, its being directed toward something - as it is an experience of or about some object. Phenomenology is concerned with the study of experience from the perspective of the individual. In the human sphere this normally translates into gathering ‘deep’ information and perceptions through inductive, qualitative methods such as interviews, discussions and participant observation, and representing it from the perspective of the research participants (Lester 1999).

The synoptic method as originally devised by the librarians and researchers Scimeca and Labaree attempts to research the origin and development of an idea or concept from various disciplinary perspectives.

The synoptic method is not concerned with the truth or falsehood of an idea or concept, but strictly how a given idea or concept emerged and evolved within various disciplines to increase human knowledge (Scimeca and Labaree 2008).

Apart from the well-known dichotomy qualitative-quantitative in the field of the research methods, there are further distributions, too. For instance, a popular approach used in qualitative research regarding education and learning is called grounded theory, meaning a systematic inductive methodology in the social sciences, which implies constructing a theory through the analysis of data. It differs consistently from the traditional models of research: instead of choosing an existing theoretical framework and collecting data to confirm or infirm the theory in the researched case, it begins with a question or a collection of qualitative data as such. The data begins to be collected and then a pattern becomes apparent. The specific tag name of these reoccurring ideas and elements is *codes*. Such codes once collected and reviewed more than once, along with the data gathered, may be grouped into concepts. These concepts may then be grouped into categories which, in turn, give rise to new theories. The founder of this theory, Dr. Jochen Glaser, states that it is a general methodology and it can be used on qualitative as well as quantitative data. The method is mostly used with qualitative data due to its richness and its ease in being collected and analyzed. Basically, it is cheaper and quicker to collect data and it avoids the rigours of statistical analysis. On the other hand, in Glaser's own words, the grounded theory came out of quantitative work, and the whole notion of when variables vary independently as opposed to dependently relates to whether one forces relevance on the subject or one discovers what is relevant to the subject and then one gets variables that relate (Bogner, Littig and Menz 2009).

One of the most commonly employed scientific research method is the hypothetic-deductive method. It implies a scientific inquiry, the formulating of a hypothesis that would be confirmed or rejected by the consequent research. When the hypothesis is infirmed, the process is called falsification, whereas its confirmation corroborates to the initial theory. Dagfinn Follesdal, in his study on hermeneutics, states that the so-called hermeneutic method is actually the same as the hypothetico-deductive method applied to materials that are 'meaningful' (for example the systems of beliefs and values of human beings in action). Follesdal offers in this respect five different interpretations of the role of the stranger in Ibsen's 'Peer Gynt', shown to be examples of how interpretation-hypotheses can be judged by confronting them with the

data (for example the text, the biography of the author etc.). Follesdal draws the same conclusion from his analysis - there is no fundamental methodological difference between natural sciences and humanities (Follesdal 1979).

A study on research conduct undergone by the University of Stanford indicates that a hallmark of humanistic study is that research is approached differently than in the natural and social sciences, where data and hard evidence are required to draw conclusions. This is obviously due to the fact that human experience does not reflected in facts and figures. Humanities research employs methods that are historical, interpretive and analytical in nature. Those who conduct Humanities research are habitually asking questions about common assumptions, uncovering new meanings in artistic works, or finding new ways to understand cultural interactions (Zur 1993).

Conversely, in his lecture on the new methods for Humanities research, John Unsworth, professor at the National Humanities Center, observed:

If we consider humanities research in terms of the basic and the applied, some would say that all humanities research is basic research, because it never aims at having a practical application [...]. On the other hand, if understanding is a practical outcome, then you might just as easily argue that all humanities research is applied, in that it aims directly at producing a practical outcome, namely changing the way we understand that part of the human record it has in view. Probably the truth is that in the humanities, as in science, both are done: Frye's work on literary archetypes, or Freud's work on the human psyche, or Saussure's work on language, might best be considered basic research: this research is aimed at developing theoretical frameworks, rather than at applying those frameworks to particular objects of attention--even though particular objects are always in view as the theories are developed. In that sense, when we apply those theoretical frameworks to the understanding of particular texts, to illuminate the text rather than to alter or extend the theory, we're doing applied research. (Unsworth 2005)

Scientific research can be generally and broadly divided, particularly regarding sciences, in basic research or applied research. The first type is less goal-oriented and it mostly results in theory whereas its conclusions tend to be theoretical rather than practical. The second type of research, the applied one, is related and at the same time intertwined with basic research. It differs because it is goal-oriented from the beginning.

Referring to the quantitative and qualitative methods of research, Taylor et al. offer a good definition of the terms per se. Thus, according to Taylor, quantitative data is numerical in form – in the form of numbers. Questionnaires and structured interviews are the usual research methods. Some researchers claim that unless human behaviour can be expressed in numerical terms, it cannot be accurately measured, whereas qualitative data covers a range of material from the description of social life provided by participant observation and unstructured interviews to information from written sources, such as diaries, autobiographies and novels. Some researchers argue that qualitative data provides greater depth, a richer, more detailed picture (Taylor et al. 2015).

Befring, on the other hand, states that

the quantitative methods include formalized principles that form the basis for a stringent research process that proceeds from formulation of research questions, research design and the selection and analysis of data to interpretations and conclusions. The data is linked to specific variables, and standardized methods are applied for data collection (for example in expert assessments, observations, interviews or formal testing). The variables can thus be expressed in numerical form, and the data material can be described in the form of tables, graphs or statistical measurements such as averages, variances and correlations, and analyzed with the aid of e.g. analysis of variance, factor analysis or regression analysis. (Befring 2015)

Creswell observes that, following the development and perceived legitimacy of both qualitative and quantitative research in the social and human sciences, mixed methods research, employing the combination of quantitative and qualitative approaches, has gained popularity. This is only a step forward, utilizing the strengths of both qualitative and quantitative research (Creswell 2009).

Regardless of the research method chosen and employed, the quality of the research remains of utmost importance. In this respect, Uma Sekaran distinguishes eight benchmarks of scientific research: purposiveness, rigour, testability, replicability, precision and confidence, objectivity, generalizability and parsimony.

Detailing these, purposiveness means that scientific research needs a definite purpose – the purpose of any paper being to offer evidence of what it states to be true, providing valid examples. Rigour refers, according to Sekaran, to a good theoretical background and a sound methodological base – the authors should make use of the best known and well-regarded authors in their field of choice, drawing on the most

respected literature currently available. Testability means that the scientific research ought to have a logical hypothesis which should, in turn, be supported by data as accurate as possible, supporting the hypothesis (Sekaran 2003). However, as Professor John Unsworth remarks in his lectures on research methods, in Humanities' studies, the best a researcher can do is to offer a hypothesis that withstands being disproven for some period of time, until contradictory evidence or a better account of the evidence comes along (Unsworth 2005).

Replicability, the next benchmark of scientific research in Sekaran's perspective, means that the conclusion and results of the research could and should be replicated if the same type of research is to be conducted again. Precision and confidence, as described by Sekaran, refer to the closeness of the findings to reality based on a sample, when estimations are correct, so that we can confidently claim that 95% of the time our results will be true and there is only 5% chance of our results being false (Sekaran 2003). As Lehrer also points out, the test of replicability is the foundation of modern research, as replicability is how the community of research enforces itself (Lehrer 2010).

The fifth benchmark of a good quality scientific research in Sekaran's view refers to objectivity and in order to meet this criterion, the author ought to make sure to collect valid data from viable sources. Generalizability means that the more the possibility to apply the results of the research in a different setting, the more useful the research becomes for other future users.

Another important aspect that needs to be underlined is that the academic value of any research concerns reliability and credibility; it also concerns the quality of the research methods applied and last but not least the researchers' ethical standards.

A more recent added value under scrutiny in this respect is that all serious research should be made available for general peer review, thus excluding any potential inadvertent concerns. Blind peer review or multiple reviewers are other viable options, perhaps the most commonly employed today before publication, whereas open-source journals are starting to become the norm worldwide. All these add to a transparency and wider availability of research in the globalized research world of today.

To conclude, the research methods employed for science and humanities cannot in fact be divided into clearly-cut categories because there is much overlapping between these classifications. In fact, such a separation may lead to confusion as the methods could be implemented together into researching basically any set of data or observations, adding

to a fuller comprehension of a research topic. As a conclusion, the differences between the scientific research and humanities research and their respective methods are not that significant. In fact, they are rather similar, with the single main difference that the scientific research can offer accurate, clear and quantifiable results, whereas humanistic methods bring about discussion and raise questions rather than proving facts. In Unsworth's words, there is more a difference of degree rather than of kind (Unsworth 2005).

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