

A FEW HINTS TOWARDS UNDERSTANDING THE DYNAMMICS OF SOCIAL SCIENCE RESEARCH: SEARCH FOR TRUTH IN HUMAN AFFAI

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Social Sciences Research in Search of Truth

Abstract

Human knowledge is constantly being explored and expanded by researchers in the field of science, with the help of their thinking skills. A thing or an event is noticed and the awareness level begins by asking questions like what it is and what it is not; why it is, how it is, how long and how much, for whom it is, when it is and where it is. The limits of time and space provide immense scope for intensive scrutiny to obtain a fuller picture of the focused thing or event. Human affairs studied in this fashion provide an approximate knowledge in human affairs. Here-in are presented a few hints towards understanding the dynamics of social science research in its journey towards search for truth in human affairs.

Keywords

Social sciences, subjectivity, inter-subjectivity, objectivity, authenticity, reliability, validity.

Basic Awareness Need.

Human beings are knowledge seeking and are gifted with the inquisitive nature. They wish to know about their environments in which they live. The environments consist of objects of nature and the humans. The natural environment is studied by scientists and natural sciences take birth. The humans themselves live in groups and societies and their interactions constitute human environment. The knowledge thus produced is termed as human, sciences or social sciences. Thus the knowledge which they gather about their environments is divided into two parts the natural sciences and human sciences.

With the passage of time humans have devised techniques to study Nature in its all its forms. The objects of nature, like light, sound, heat, magnesium are quantifiable, solid, liquid and gas are the forms of matter which have their own measures and are thus quantifiable and provide almost true knowledge about things. The conditions of light, heat and sound are also quantifiable. Hence all knowledge produced through the experiments is called scientific knowledge of natural sciences. Natural sciences possess a very high degree of certainty" sureness and "Objectivity" so human curiosity has brought about "Certain" or "true" knowledge about objects of the world.

When it comes to the study of human environment, the degree of certainty about the study of individuals and the group becomes difficult. Natural sciences produce objective knowledge but human beings possess characteristics that cannot be studied like objects of nature. Hence knowledge about humans in the shape of psychology, sociology, economics, political science, anthropology and other areas of social existence do not ensure the same degree of certainty largely because this kind of their knowledge originates from the selves of the individual human beings and is not amenable to similar treatment. One of the characteristics of human nature is to reach the truth about things and about himself and his curiosity keeps him on the job for search for truth in both the areas. The truth about thing is of the nature of objectivity while the truth about human is of subjective nature.

One is likely to ask oneself why to replicate or duplicate studies already made by other researchers in the field. This idea leads one to the concept of certification of knowledge process where the existing foundation of knowledge takes the researcher to its extension in other situations to enhance its generalizability. The degree of generalizability ultimately paves the way for formulation of rules principles, theories and laws a stage of the highest limits of truth full knowledge.

In the earlier stage of inquiry into the puzzling and difficult to understand situation, the existing knowledge is explored to find anchorage and evidence for the truthful path taken by other researchers. A very handy way is to relate one's research question with any construct, concept or theory to provide research with a framework. Hence the researcher finds himself on a well - trodden path and seeks satisfaction about the nature of his own work i.e. whether or not it is on its authentic and truthful track. One can gain assurance also by the fact that according to the idealistic tests of the truthfulness of new knowledge the principle of coherence of the new with the old knowledge, results into the veracity of the new knowledge. This however, does not preclude one to open up new paths new enterprises where solo flight pays much more than the flight in the protection of one's peers. But this new path can be profitably taken by those who have already learnt much in the field. Research in social sciences is in effect journey towards reaching truth in human studies.

Search for Truth begins

The function of this curious nature of man is to keep track of truth about human existence at individual as well as collective level. The Function of research in social sciences is to start a search for truth in human affairs.

Why we do research and for what purpose involves activities like the following.

- a. Duplicate results of other researchers
- b. Replicate result of previous studies
- c. Produce new knowledge in the field
- d. Assess workability of existing theory
- e. Obtain a total picture and fill gaps in knowledge
- f. Apply existing knowledge on life situations
- g. Reach a degree of certainty as far as possible.

The Task for social sciences research is therefore diverse and is very challenging. It is to reach a high level of certainty about what we know about ourselves.

The why of research is inter-twined with what of research, The knowledge which humans possess about themselves is based on the knowledge contained in the areas of social sciences in the form of certain observations, formulae, proposition and principles, rules, practices, theories even laws. A researcher has only to find out his own area of interest.

The starting point for individual researcher is therefore to try to decide about the area of interest. In this area the researcher should look for any gaps in the theoretical knowledge, its appreciation in certain areas of significance, its extension or elaboration. There may be need for replication to ensure application to new situations. An attempt may be made to study the theories in different contexts and conditions. The research question must have a cognitive anchorage in theoretical framework. The spirit of curiosity takes the shape of a research question to explain or extend the existing knowledge about human relations, human behaviour, human interaction, and human conditions. Human affairs are not identical and possess uniqueness and singularity. Human characteristics, properties, attitudes, prospects are all subjective in nature. Hence are sui generic and incapable of being weighted, measured or assessed according to the recognized standards of natural sciences. Human sciences are therefore essentially qualitative and interpretive. These interpretative researches do not easily lend themselves to the kind of measurement and evaluation done in the area of the natural sciences. Hence the research in social sciences has to obtain Knowledge about human events in a manner which leads to certainty, surety and truth. The truth which is subjective truth. There are two aspects of this subjective knowledge. One is the expression which is manifest or written. The other is the tacit, unexpressed and hidden in the minds of the humans. The research process must look for the techniques proper to each.

The question needs to be properly defined before further efforts are made to find its solution. The research question must have a cognitive anchorage in theoretical framework A statement of the problem Situation needs to be put in a form which is do-able or experiment able. The nature of the research queries must lead to exact nature of the type of research required. The variables involved should be clearly understood before the statement of the problem is written since social science research tries to imitate the rigour of research in natural sciences, it is therefore incumbent on the social science researcher to

observe the objective standards as are obtainable in natural sciences. The experimental method involves preparation of some objective for which investigation is being carried out. Only after ascertaining the significance of the problem for various stake holders the social research can be undertaken otherwise it will result in waste of time. There are types of variables which are in the categories of independent, dependent, intervening, moderating or confounding. This distinction must be kept so that the research does not lose its authenticity. These may be correlated, compared or contrasted with appropriate measuring instruments. These measuring instruments have the same importance as there is for measuring standards in the natural sciences, The only difference between the two types of instruments is that the former are imprecise and the latter more precise. This difference must be kept in mind while conducting social science research in point of their certainty or truth, however the social science research tries its best to emulate the research methodology adopted by natural sciences to look as a seeker of greater certainty of knowledge.

The "how" of research involves the methodology being used according to the nature of data to be gathered? Generally the data obtained is through liker scale or semantic differential scales and it is assumed that the weightages given by the human mind provide accurate assessment. All human minds may not give adequate responses as per weightages of 1,2,3,4,5 to the opinion for or against an issue indicating their strength. However, this is the only avenue which can reliably be taken to reach the subjective rating by human minds.

The difficulty in reaching the subjective truth is multiplied if the form of the concept and content are not comprehensively covered in the instrument chosen and it does not possess validity, reliability and objectivity. The nature of validity like content, construct, concurrent or, predictive need to be highlighted. The type of reliability like test-re-test, equivalent form, split-half, Regional equivalence, scorer- rates Need to be clearly stated. The truth of the research effort depends on the proper administration of the test. There are certain precautions which need to be taken so that the environment in which the instruments are administered is uniform for every respondent. As far as possible, the instrument may be administered to a group maintaining uniformity in "when" and "where". The respondents need to be assured of complete secrecy of their views, through courteous invitation to join the research venture as providers of necessary information. To keep their interest alive during the response session, they may be assured that the outcome of the research shall be communicated to them.

While it may be difficult to give credence to the possible unequal weightages amongst different People, it is not so in case of the same person when he takes up the extreme positions. There is a greater likelihood of finding the levels of truthfulness of the opinions. In effect one can reduce the Likert type measurement to a plain true and false statement concept which eliminates doubt. The whole purpose of such quantification is to reach a greater degree of objectivity in the social sciences research. There are variants of dichotomous scales which seem to place opinions of different people on a common platform of measurement. Semantic differential scale can be used by making it dichotomous. The check lists and observation sheet may serve the same purpose of reaching objectivity through qualification.

When all is said and done in case of the attempts of the social science researchers to reach objectivity, one other possibility haunts us in our face. How can we be sure that truth in its true spirit is reached through measuring common opinions amongst people? Are there not ideas and opinion lying hidden in the minds of people which defy standardization? It is an acknowledged fact that each individual is unique in nature also, in addition to his being a member of the categories of common denomination. This "sui genre" nature of man leads us to put subjective truth of the people to counter balance the one-sided view of objective reality as truth.

The study of subjectivity in human affair is duly recognized by experts under the heading of "Phenomenology" in psychology and "existentialism" in philosophy. The concept of inter- subjectivity is also brought in to make the subjective more like an objective. It may be not difficult to perceive the veracity of the subjective findings being as good as the objective finding Let us take the case of J. Piaget, A Swiss genetic epistemologist whose observations on single cases were so deep and correct that defying all the recognized concept of scientific objectivity, he reached truth with his "seeing eye" . Such observations are qualitative in nature and are as important to reach the level of authenticity as is possible in case of scientific methodology is social sciences. The point to note is that by coupling the quantity of opinion with the quality of opinions, there is a greater likelihood of reaching the level of veracity and authenticity in in all human sciences. Therefore most social scientists have a recourse to interviews personal participation observation, activities like inter-subjectivity, focal group discussions, buzz sessions and brain - storming sessions also in their studies.

After the veracity of opinions in the form of information is translated into data for analysis and

Interpretation more difficulties appear in the use of statistical techniques proper for each type of data so converted. Which type of data can best be analysed is a big question for the researcher to ponder over. A beginner researcher in social sciences has to mind his way safely and must develop a vision of the way which would lead him to his destination of confronting the truth in human affairs.

The instruments used in social sciences are termed as scales for measuring the data of different kinds. If discrete categories are involved the nominal scale is used, if ranking is involved ordinal scale is used if data involves equal interval then interval scale is used. If more precision is needed then ratio scales are used for data like height, weight, time, distance, speed. The Instruments used for research need to be tried out on small group to remove weaknesses and make these as "culture faire" How the data is measured and evaluated is a matter of choice with the researcher. Now we come to the "who" part of the research. Who are the people involved again depends on the nature of the research and its objectives. The group of people are called the target population whose characteristics are to be studied. As it is time consuming and cumbersome it is assumed that a representative sample of the population would represent the true picture of the population. The type of sampling needs to be truly representative, otherwise the truth shall escape the researcher and he would be engaged in a fruitless effort to reach truth which is his real Purpose.

One important consideration in choosing the kind of sampling technique is to decide about the parametric or non-parametric kind of sampling. The parametric leads towards a greater degree of generalizability whereas the non- parametric leads to approximation and not towards exactitude.

How long and how much the social science researchers need to keep one important proviso in mind while claiming the validity and authenticity of their findings as to generalizability and universality. Although the procedural similarity exists between the researchers of physical sciences and social sciences, the findings differ in their status of truth. The physical sciences study the inanimate matter and after continuous confirmation and reconfirmation increase the validity of findings through stages of generalization, rules, axioms, theories and laws but the findings of the social scientists always remain tentative and contextualized. Only in few cases one may hope to generalize the findings in similar conditions which at any rate do vary, if only slightly. In social sciences variety is the spice of life and it is of the nature of sui generis.

This seems reasonable because the social scientists do not deal with inert matter but with living beings which on group level are undergoing generative law, of birth, growth reproduction and decay. Hence the truth reached by the social scientists is of contingent upon conditions of time and space and are of a different variety than that of the physical scientists, who can claim level of warranted assertion for their findings and hence claims to certain knowledge.

One corollary of this premise is that the research in social sciences needs to keep open its doors for necessary assumptions and limitations of the findings. This would add to the limits of veracity of the research in social sciences.

In summary, it can be stated with confidence that social science research is a genuine attempt to reach the level of truth in social sciences as far as possible under the limiting conditions of flux of time and specificity of location of human affairs. It can be stated with full confidence that the researcher can reach the truth if he/she possesses two basic qualities of character namely truthfulness, in search approach and trust worthiness in reporting. He/she cannot act otherwise. Sadiq and Amin are the sterling qualities for the seeker of truth in research. It is miraculous that even today after 1500 years the entire world acknowledges the fact that you cannot reach the truth without adopting the same qualities which our Prophet Muhammad (SAW) preached and was acclaimed by the Al-mighty Allah as Rahmat-ul-Alameen (Blessing for the entire universe).