

ETHICS AND VALUES IN SOCIAL SCIENCE RESEARCH: A CASE FOR QUALITATIVE APPROACH

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Abstract

Ethics and values are major determinants of human behaviour whether as an investigator or the subject of investigation. Hence they form the major areas for study by social scientists. This work intends to discuss the code of professional ethics in social science research. It also attempts to examine the role of value, value judgments and objectivity in social science research. The paper thus concludes that there is a remarkable difference between research in the natural science and the social science. It thus argued that it is not possible or even desirable to separate values from either in the selection of the research problem or in the application of findings. However, there is a need to minimize the influence of personal values in research. Hence the need for a qualitative approach.

Introduction

Broadly defined, research is the process of identifying a problem and finding solutions to the problem. Research process is a complex one which involves many things such as, problem identification, theory/concept application, literature review, interpersonal communications, data analysis and so forth (Oyibo, 1992:19). Research therefore is a reflective seeking or intensive search with a view to becoming certain. In this regard certain research methods or methodologies are followed in carrying out research. Ofo (1994:1) explained that the choice of which research method to be used in any investigation depends on the purpose of the study and the type or nature of the problem to be investigated. It has thus been argued that the methods of science are not necessarily applicable in the social sciences (Ayoade, 1991:29).

Bailey (1982:29) however opined that the controversy over the difference between the physical sciences and the social sciences centres around methodology rather than around methods. He defined method as the research technique or tool used to gather data, while methodology is the philosophy of the research process, which includes the assumptions and values that serve as a rationale for research and the standards or criteria, the researcher uses for investigating data and reaching conclusions. The methodology of the physical scientist, he noted, is more quantitative and precise. As a result of its precise nature and objectivity, it is generally recommended for use to the social scientist. Ake (1991:24) rightly observe that sometimes methodologies hamper research understanding instead of promoting it.

This work intends to make a case for qualitative approach for the social sciences. The reason is based On the fact that there are basic and fundamental differences between research in the physical sciences and the social sciences. It could be said that there is a wide range of alternative methodologies or approaches and criteria for understanding social phenomena ranging from qualitative to quantitative. Again the radical sociologist tends to see apolitical research as an impossibility. It is their view that any researcher has values both conscious and unconscious, that will color his or her perception and affect his or her analysis of the data. This, notwithstanding, ethical and value issues do not in any way devalue inquiry in the social science. It is rather an acknowledgement of its existence by the social socialist.

Ethics in Social Science Research Ethics (Definition/Conceptualization)

Ethics has no single or universal definition. None-the-less ethics could be explained as the fundamental principles of the moral laws. As a branch of philosophy it deals with the morality of human action or behaviour. Hence ethics is regarded as the normative science of human conduct. In research, ethics is seen as conforming to accepted professional practices. This has given rise to a general agreement about ethical principles, in research. For instance the American Sociological Association and the American Association of Public Opinion drafted codes of ethics

Bailey (1982:442) gave two reasons why codes of ethics suddenly became important:

First that many more persons are being used as subjects in social research. Further is the subsequent development in the use of computers for storing large banks of data thus raising new questions about the researcher's ability to ensure confidentiality and anonymity for his or her subjects.

The rejection by the radical social scientist of the "scientific rule: that social researchers must, when doing research,, be apolitical, value-free, and objective and refrain from making policy statements about the way things should be.

In spite of the general agreement about ethical principles and the subsequent drafting of ethical codes, there was disagreement about the way to word codes of ethics and what to do in a situation in which there is a conflict of interest such as the right of the majority to know and the right to privacy of the minority. Hence there was concern with certain types of ethical issues. Some of the ethical concern are:

- (i) That, it is unethical for researchers to harm anyone in the course of research, especially if it is without the person's knowledge and permission. This according to Bailey (1982:428) includes:
 - (a) Asking a respondent questions that cause him or her extreme embarrassment.
 - (b) Deceiving a respondent about the true purpose of the study.
 - (c) Causing emotional turmoil by reminding him or her of an unpleasant experience.
 - (d) Causing guilt, or invading his or her privacy.
 - (e) Being studied without one's knowledge.
 - (f) Violation of a promise of confidentiality.
 - (g) Presenting facts out of context.
 - (h) Falsifying findings or offering misleading presentation such as lying without statistics.

Part of the Code of Professional Ethics and Practices of the American Association for Public Opinion Research The Code

Principles of professional practice in the conduct of our work.

- (a) We shall exercise due care in gathering and processing data, taking all reasonable steps to assure the accuracy of result.
- (b) We shall exercise due care in the development of research designs and in the analysis of data.
 - 1. We shall employ only research tools and methods of analysis which in our professional judgment, are well suited to the research problem at hand.
 - 2. We shall not select research tools and methods of analysis because of their special capacity to yield a desired conclusion.
 - 3. We shall not knowingly make interpretations of research results, nor shall we tacitly permit interpretations, which are inconsistent with the data available.
 - 4. We shall not knowingly imply that interpretations shall be accorded greater confidence than the data actually warrant.

How to Remain Ethical

Bailey (1982:429-430) listed the following as to how to remain ethical.

- 1. Computer Simulation by gaining response from the computer instead of the individual, it may be possible to reduce greatly, the number of subjects required in the experiment, and thus the number that can be harmed by the research.
- 2. Finding a condition in which the negative effects already exist so that the researcher is not responsible for producing them,
- 3. Informed consent: Informing respondents of the possible negative effects and securing their

- permission.
4. Harm of subject is justified: Rationalization on the part of the researcher that the study is not unethical because the harm inflicted on the subject is justified either because it is a lesser evil than the harm the investigator is attempting to cure or because the researcher considers the subject evil and feels justified in harming him.
 5. Sampling: Use of samples rather than complete populations so that fewer person are harmed.
 6. Publishing aggregate data: Maintenance of privacy through publication of aggregate data only.

Value in Social Science Research

Value

Definition/Conceptualization

Value as a concept may be seen as beliefs, standards, ideals about what is desirable or a good and what is an undesirable and a bad behaviour. Values are the most general components of social action (see Tghovojoh & Okumagba, 1997:41). Bailey (1982:25) quoting, Wilson (1971:672) explained values as simply the conceptions of the desirable and undesirable. Values are major determinants of human behaviour. They are socially defined and are meaningful to group existence.

Values in research touch on different areas. But basically the issues raised are to convince that something is right, good, proper or desirable, and the moral involvement of the researcher and his subject in the subject matter of research. The social scientist for instance who studies the value of his own culture is also involved in those values. Consequently it is assumed that it would be difficult for him to keep those values from interfering with his research work. The researcher's bias could lead to value judgment.

Value judgments are merely the formalized expressions of sentiments and emotions derived from the culture. It has been argued that strongly held values are not only untestable but may so prejudice a researcher to lose all semblance of objectivity (Bailey, 1982,26). Ayoade (1991:30) explains objectivity as the dissociation of the investigator from the subject of investigation so that the same conclusion can be reached by independent investigators. This position is considered desirable in order to divest judgment of self-interest, class interest or culture.

Bailey (1982:29) listed the following as the effects of values in social research: (a) That different paradigms representing different sets of values and beliefs (whether overt or covert) exist in social science, (fa) Two or more different paradigms will have compatible beliefs and values with regard to certain research topics but incompatible beliefs and values for other potential research areas.

- (c) in those areas in which beliefs are incompatible, there may be violent disagreement between paradigms concerning suitability of the topic for study appropriate hypothesis and integration of findings.

Values and Social Science Research

Some researchers feel that an investigator's value should be held in abeyance so that the research will not be biased. Some others argue that it is not only unnecessary but also in fact impossible to keep one's value out of one's research. Goode and Hart (1952:2) summarized the points of this later position (argument) in four dogmatic propositions i.e. between science and the social sciences:

- (i) Human behaviour changes too much from one period to the next to permit scientific exact predictions.
- (ii) Human behaviour is too elusive, subtle and complex to yield to the categorization and artificial instrument of science.

- (iii) Human behaviour can be studied only by other human observers, and these always distort fundamentally the facts being observed, so that there can be no objective procedures for achieving the truth.
- (iv) Human beings are the subject of such predictions and have the ability deliberately to upset any predictions we make.

Increasingly a number of social scientists have continued to advocate for the emulation of the scientific method of research in search for objectivity, in order to achieve the inter-subjective validation of findings. It has however been argued that valuation in the social science differs from valuations in the non-human sciences. This is because whereas valuations are extrinsic to the subject matter of science they are intrinsic to the subject matter of social science (Ayoade, 1991:30). For instance by the method of observation the observer and his instruments easily become, part of the phenomenon under investigation. Consequently, every conclusion from the observation, say in political science bears some imprint of the personality of the observer.

Hence the conclusion by Ayoade (1991:31) that the imitation of the scientific method sometimes result in a methodological valuation whereby methods choose problems instead of problems choosing methods. In which case method would limit work to problems of little or no social relevance or to areas of political consensus. For this reason the view is held that values whether we like it or not do creep unconsciously or even desirable into the social sciences. For instance values do certainly exist in the Marxist paradigm although they may be hidden or latent. Bailey (1982:26) explained that Marxist paradigm embodies the feeling, that capitalism is evil, exploits the masses and harms the many to help the few. For this reason the Marxists advocate that capitalist countries should become socialist.

By this view the Marxist paradigm include not only assumptions about the way things are in the empirical world but also value judgments or statements about the way things should be. This situation made Bailey (1982:26) to opine that the chief thing to remember about values and value judgment is that all researchers have them and that they are different for different paradigms.

Nonetheless the negative effect of values and value judgments cannot be easily wished away. The question thus arise since values are possible sources of bias or at least of failure to communicate, what should be done about values in research? How can some level of objectivity or a value free social sciences be achieved?

Value-Free Social Science?

Proponents of a value free social research advocate for a suppression of value in order to conduct a value-free research. They accept the fact that a researcher is perfectly free to express his or her political and moral values "at home with his or her family, but when at work he or she should leave these values behind. For a value-free research therefore a researcher should display ethical neutrality. The doctrine of ethical neutrality is seen as a more useful guide in the social sciences. It makes the researcher to attempt to be purely objective in his or her research regardless of personal feelings (see Bailey 1982 & Ayoade, 1991).

Bailey (1982: 27) quoting Weber (1949) suggested that ethical neutrality could be accomplished if a researcher took care to separate his or her everyday life, with the particular set of values he or she displays everyday, from his or her professional role as social scientist in which he or she tries to refrain from making value judgments. The social scientist should dispense with his ethical, religious, political, philosophical, moral or marital preferences. He should be interested not in what is right or wrong, good or evil, but only in what is true or false (Bailey, 1982:26), quoting Biertedt, (1957:10).

Goulder (1962) (quoted in Bailey, 1982:25) also suggested that a teacher or researcher should state his or her personal values as honestly as he or she can lest these values be introduced in a covert or disguised fashion. In a sense one should make one's own values explicit and use them in research in that the researcher may not be able to recognize or control all of his or her own values.

Bailey (1982:28) explained that an increasing number of social scientists, including adherents from several methodological paradigms, reject the notion that it is possible or even desirable to separate values from either the selection of research problem or the application of

findings. These person according to him tend to advocate use of qualitative rather than quantitative methods and to reject the physical-science model of research.

A Qualitative Approach

Qualitative research offers richly descriptive report of individual's perception, attitudes, beliefs, view and feelings, the meanings and interpretations given to events and things, as well as their behaviour. It displays how these are put together coherently and consciously into frameworks which make sense of their experiences, and illuminate the motivations which connect attitudes and behaviour, the discontinuities, or even the contradictions between attitudes and behaviour, or how conflicting attitudes and motivations are resolved in particular choices made. Qualitative research reports can simply be said to focus on the various patterns, or clusters of attitude and related behaviour that emerge from the interviews.

Furthermore it has been argued that the application of mathematics or statistics to social studies does not necessarily ensure vigor of proof, any more than the use of "insight" guarantees the significance of the research (Goode & Matt, 1952:3 13). What is therefore important about all research techniques is the issue of precision, reliability, and relevance of data and their analysis. For this reason the following questions are relevant:

- a) How precise are the observations/process?
- b) Can other researchers repeat the observation/process?
- c) Do the data actually satisfy the demands of the problem?

For instance, if the observations are crude other researchers may not be able to repeat them and casting them in statistical or mathematic form would not help the researcher.

All the same, most qualitative research attempts rough measurement; qualitative research also has its measurement technique that takes care of those data that could not be measured mathematically. Measurement is defined as the process of determining the value or level, either qualitative or quantitative of a particular attribute for a particular unit of analysis (Bailey, 1982:62). Thus measurement is not confined to numerical or quantitative specification but can be qualitative as well.

Qualitative measurement takes care of both structured and unstructured sources of data. For instance most daily observations and experiences, newspapers, magazines, radio, historical records, recorded protocols and indepth interviews are essentially unstructured. They are also important sources of data. If they are excluded or eliminated from consideration it would mean the narrowing of the range of available information. To bring order in their utilization the technique of qualitative coding is usually applied to them. When qualitative coding is applied to the above information sources, it is called content analysis.

Qualitative coding is given to all techniques for classifying reliably those social data on which very little order has been previously imposed by the researcher (Goode & Hatt, 1952:320). The use of the coding technique will forge a link between apparently unordered observation and adequately demonstrated generalizations. Coding is the technique by which data are organized into classes, and a number or symbol is assigned to each item according to the class in which it falls. Classification depends upon the question, asked and the concepts used in the particular research. Goode and Hatt (1952:32) listed the following as the main steps to follow in qualitative coding.

- (i) Clarify what it is that is desired from the material.
- (ii) Study the completed schedules carefully.
- (iii) Work out the classes and the indicators of the classes.
- (iv) Fit the classes to the data.

Qualitative attributes have labels or names rather than numbers assigned to their respective categories. There are certain variables that cannot be measured quantitatively such as an eye color or political, religious affiliation. For this reason all qualitative measurement is nominal, regardless of whether the categories are designated by names (quarterback, halfback). Nominally measured variables such as eye or skin colour, are put into at least two categories or else it is not a variable. The categories so created should be distinct, mutually exclusive, and exhaustive.

By exhaustive it implies that there must be an appropriate category for each case measuring case. By mutually exclusive each case should appropriately fit in only one category. Thus each case must have a category (exhaustiveness), but only one category (mutually exclusiveness), into which it clearly fits.

Conclusively, a researcher can arrange his data into qualitative categories and give each category a name to distinguish it from other categories. Qualitative variables can also be labeled with numbers rather than names but the numbers do not have the properties of the number system: that is they cannot be added, subtracted, divided or multiplied (see Bailey, 1982:62)

Conclusion

The business of understanding society brought about the need to give some thought to the ways in which social facts are gathered and data analyzed.' Social scientists have tended to emulate or imitate the method of the natural sciences. One very important reason for emulating the scientific method is the search for objectivity in order to achieve the inter-subjective validation of facts (Ayoade, 1991:28).

It has however been argued that assumption of similarity between science and the social sciences is fundamentally wrong. For instance, it has been pointed out that the objects of study in the social science, say political science are unique because they talk, intend, invent and introspect, it is on this basis that Ayoade (1991:29) opined that the assumption of identity between the natural and the social science can only result in naive operationalism and artificial taxonomic activities in imitation of biologists.

The desirability of a value-free social science is a myth because value is inherent in social facts. Thus it is difficult to separate values from social facts without distorting the facts. If therefore values and facts are inseparable so also can we not separate values and the investigator. Consequently a qualitative research approach is now gaining currency in the social science particularly when understood from the point of view that there are certain variables in the social sciences that cannot be measured quantitatively. That notwithstanding a quantitative approach can always come handy in analyzing quantitative coding and classification.

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