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Master One

Research Methodology

Syllabus

Section of English, Faculty of Letters and Foreign Languages

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I. Objectives

At the end of the theme, you should be able to:

- understand what a research strategy is;
- make a distinction between strategies and methods;
- explain how a researcher chooses a strategy;
- make a clear connection between research strategies and research purposes;
- identify the common research strategies used in the field of social sciences in general, and educational research in particular; and
- discuss the essence and tenets of each one of these research strategies.

II. Content

1. What are research strategies?
2. Which strategy to choose?
3. Case studies
4. Experiments
5. Ethnography

1. What are the strategies?

A strategy is a plan of action designed to achieve a specific goal. Historically, the concept has had military origins relating to the role of generals. It was about the way they had a broad overview of operations, the way they planned specific combat tactics as part of a bigger plan for overall victory, and the way they relied on careful planning to achieve their goals.

In social sciences, a research strategy retains the same essential components. It requires:

- An overview of the whole project that uses the ‘bigger picture’ as the basis for deciding how to approach a research paradigm;
- a carefully constructed plan of action that is rationally designed and likely to offer the best prospects of success (a research problem); and
- a specific goal that can be achieved and which is clearly identified (a research problem).

2. Which strategy to choose?

To decide which strategy is likely to work best, the researcher needs to consider three key questions:

Is it suitable?

Is it feasible?

Is it ethical?

The answers to these questions might point to a particular strategy as the favourite one, clearly standing out as the most suitable for the task at hand. It is crucial to answer these questions and make clear enough what strategy the researcher should opt for:

1. *Is it suitable?*

It is better to think of strategies in terms of how useful they are and also how appropriate they are. The justification for the choice of any specific strategy must depend on having a clear vision of the particular purpose for which it is being used.

2. *Is it feasible?*

The choice of strategy needs to take into account certain practical aspects of conducting research. The researcher must get access to the kind of data sources that the strategy requires. S/he also must be able to gain access to the kinds of people, and also be able to get access to the needed documents.

3. *Is it ethical?*

There are certain standard measures which researchers are expected to put in place to minimise the risk of harm. For social researchers, these involve guarantees that:

Participants will remain anonymous;

Data will be treated as confidential;

Participants understand the nature of the research and their involvement;
and Participants voluntarily consent to being involved.

3. Case Study

Some research methodologists define a case study as the following:

- ‘It is a specific instance that is frequently, designed to illustrate more general principle’ (Nisbet, Walt, 1984).

- ‘It is the study of an instance in action’ (Adelman et al., 1980).

- ‘It provides a unique example of actual people in actual situations, enabling readers to understand ideas more clearly than simply by presenting them with abstract

theories or principles’ (Cohen et al., 2005).

- ‘It is a strategy of inquiry of which the researcher explores in-depth one- or more individual programs, or processes, or event, or activity’ (Creswell, 2009).
- The main benefit of a case study then is that the form is one or few instances that usually allow the researcher to deal with the subtleties and intricacies of complex, social situations (Hoadjli, 2015).

4. Experiments

A set of research methodologists define an experiment as the following:

- ‘It is to isolate individual factors and observe their effects in detail. The purpose is to find out new relationships and properties associated with the subject being integrated, or to test the existing theories’ (Denscombe,2010).
- ‘The point of experiment is to see how far a person will proceed in a concrete and measurable situation in which he is in order to inflict increasing pain on a protesting victim. At what point the subject refuses to obey the experiment?’ (Milgram, 1994).

In social sciences, the use of an experiment would appear to be restricted to those situations where it is possible to manipulate situation and impose control on crucial variables. To overcome this deficiency, some social scientists have turned to what they call the ‘Quasi-experimental’ Method as a more appropriate research strategy.

For many methodologists, the quasi-experiment method relaxes the probabilistic and population distinction imposed by the other types of research methodologies, ‘true’ experimental design, by shifting emphasis from "cause-effect" in temporal priority to ‘association’ between variables.

The main benefit of a ‘quasi-experiment’ research strategy is that research design is able to employ something approaching true experimental design in which researchers have control over what Campbell and Stanley (1963) refer to as ‘the when and to whom of measurement’ but lack control over the ‘when and to whom of exposure’ or the randomization of exposures-essential if true experimentation is

to take place. Kerlinger (1970) refers to these situations as a ‘compromise design’ – an apt description when applied to much educational research where the random selection of schools and classrooms is impracticable (ibid).

5. Ethnography

The term ethnography literally means a description of peoples or cultures. It has its origin as a research strategy in the works of the early social anthropologists, whose aim was to provide a detailed and permanent account of the cultures and lives of small, isolated tribes.

Ethnography has the following characteristics:

It requires the researcher to spend considerable time in the field under study. It requires the researcher gives special attention to the way the people being studied see the world.

There is an acknowledgement that ethnographers’ final account of the group being studied is more than just description.

The main benefits of ethnography are as the following:

It is a research strategy based on direct observation. It provides rich and wealthy data.

It aspires holistic explanations which focus on process and relationships that lie behind the surface events.

It has an open and explicit awareness of the role of the researcher in the investigation (Denscombe, 2010).