

Research methodology and the management disciplines: The need for heterogeneity

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ABSTRACT

Too often, graduates leave higher education aware of only one research method, namely the survey, and even at that, their experience of this method is all too often confined to the descriptive postal survey. An example of this is presented for students and researchers working in the disciplines of accounting, business administration, and economics in Northern Ireland. A research method essentially is a way of collecting and analyzing empirical evidence, and such methods have traditionally been classified as being either experimental or non-experimental. In more recent times, however, a third category of research design, quasi-experimental, has been developed. There are a large number of experimental errors that might undermine the internal validity of experimental research. Difficulties such as these can make the use of experimental designs in field setting unfeasible. Quasi-experimental research designs, claims Lawler (1977), recognize the realities of the field situation yet also incorporate some of the essential attributes of traditional experimental designs. Non-experimental research methods include the survey, the case study, and participant observation.

FULL TEXT

As those of us involved in the relevant disciplines are all too aware, doing social science research of any description is not at all easy. The enormity of the problems facing researchers is made frighteningly clear by Seelye (1963), cited in Easthope (1984), who postulated the following:

- * social science is action: whatever a social scientist does s/he intervenes in the processes of the social world
- * inexhaustibility: one can never exhaust the social world because in describing it one adds to it
- * freedom: every theory enters into social behaviour and in a way that people are free to change their behaviour and negate it.

Thus human beings, unlike physical objects, can become aware of the predictions made about their behaviour and so can alter that behaviour, thereby nullifying or moderating any prediction. It therefore concerns this writer that very little attention seems to be paid to research methodology in many areas of management teaching, especially at undergraduate level. Too often graduates leave higher education aware of only one research method, namely the survey, and even at that, their experience of this method is all too often confined to the descriptive postal survey. If the writer's impression is accurate, this represents a regrettable state of affairs on a number of counts. First of all, the survey, as is the case with other research methods, has advantages and disadvantages, and is more appropriate for use in some circumstances than in others. Secondly, meaningful research projects, as will become apparent in due course, very often require the investigator to employ more than one method. Thirdly, overuse of postal surveys can limit the amount of research which may be undertaken and the quality of research which is actually carried out.

Take, for example, students and researchers working in the disciplines of say accounting, business administration and economics in a small geographical area such as Northern Ireland. In the Province the total population of industrial and commercial organisations is relatively small (and, of course, the number of organisations in the medium and large categories is much smaller still). Little wonder then, that some colleagues having tried to conduct postal surveys of such organisations in recent times, have found it increasingly difficult to attain adequate response rates. When one considers that Government departments, academics, students, commercial organisations, schoolchildren, Uncle Tom Copley and all are sending questionnaires to the same small pool of organisations, it should come as no surprise that response rates are

dropping off. Thus it seems timely to remind those involved in management and related research (especially novice researchers) that there are a number of research methods available to them; to identify a selection of these and briefly explore what each entails; and to weigh up their advantages and disadvantages.

DIFFERENCES BETWEEN EXPERIMENTAL AND NON-EXPERIMENTAL METHODS

A research method essentially is a way of collecting and analysing empirical evidence, and traditionally such methods have been classified as being either experimental or non-experimental. However, as will be discussed further below, in more recent times a third category of research design has been developed. This category is referred to variously as "quasi-experimental" research designs--Cook and Campbell (1983); "adaptive experiments"--Lawler (1977); "patch-up designs"--Evans (1975) and so on. Spector (1981) states that the key difference between experimental and non-experimental designs concerns the degree to which the researcher controls whatever he or she is studying. In other words, non-experimental studies differ from experimental ones with respect to the amount of manipulation of research subjects and conditions undertaken by the researcher and not necessarily with respect to the research question asked or the conditions or characteristics studied.

The main virtues of non-experimental methods are that they examine the interrelationships between naturally occurring events or phenomena. As Krausz and Miller (1974) point out, much can be learned from the analysis of covariation in such events or phenomena; furthermore, this is frequently the only feasible method of studying social situations in field settings. In addition, non-experimental studies may achieve high external validity, that is, the findings of such studies may be readily generalisable to other subjects and circumstances. On the other hand, it is generally accepted that non-experimental designs have one major drawback--no matter how sophisticated a non-experimental research design may be, it will be extremely difficult to establish causal relationships between the variables of interest with any degree of confidence. To quote Krausz and Miller(1974: 64): "We can never exclude the possibility that an unmeasured variable is mediating the relationship between the two variables we observe". Thus it has been said that the experimental method is the only method of collecting data which has the power to establish causal relationships between variables unequivocally. However, Spector (1981) feels that this popularly-held maxim concerning the strengths of experimental research designs and the weaknesses of non-experimental designs with regard to the drawing of causal relationships between variables, may be over-simplistic: Many experimental designs are so fraught with confounding variables that causal inferences cannot be made with reasonable confidence, and there are non-experimental, observational designs that can establish causal chains of events. (1981: 23-24)

THE EXPERIMENTAL METHOD

Essentially an experiment is a means of collecting evidence in an attempt to show the effect of one variable upon another. Normally the experimenter will actively manipulate one variable (the independent), attempt to hold all other variables constant and observe changes in the other (the dependent variable). Thus an experiment must be designed in such a way that its results will logically confirm or refute the predicted effects of the independent variable. Duncan (1981) considers that the ultimate test of any experimental design has to do with its internal and external validity. A design may be described as internally valid if it permits the researcher to discard alternative explanations concerning predictions regarding the experimental treatment and its outcome. On the other hand, if the results of a research project may be accurately generalised to other subjects, situations and settings, the design may be considered externally valid.

However, as Cook and Campbell (1983) caution, the researcher may find themselves in a trade-off situation concerning internal and external validity. To illustrate, a high degree of experimental control is usually necessary to achieve internal validity, but the greater the degree of control to which the research conditions and subjects are exposed, the less naturalistic the conditions of the experiment and the less possible it is to generalise the findings. Cook and Campbell provide the following guidance concerning the primacy of internal validity:

Since experiments are conducted to make causal statements, internal validity assumes a particular importance because it relates to whether a relationship--of whatever strength--is unambiguously causal or not. (1983: 245)

Unfortunately, there are a large number of experimental errors which may undermine the internal validity of experimental research. These include history errors, testing errors, maturation errors, instrument decay errors, selection errors, mortality errors, regression errors and interaction effects, Campbell and Stanley (1966), Duncan (1981). While it may be possible to

control for all or most of these potential errors in a laboratory setting, control becomes much more difficult in natural or field settings.

For example, a study of a real organisation rarely enjoys the luxury of randomly selecting employees and placing them in experimental and control groups. Moreover, the passage of time, dynamics of work group turnover, and so on, make the control of maturation, mortality, testing and history errors unlikely. (Duncan 1981: 991-992)

Difficulties such as those outlined above can make the use of experimental designs in field settings unfeasible. Thus recent times have seen the emergence of what are commonly known as 'quasi-experimental' designs.

QUASI-EXPERIMENTAL RESEARCH DESIGNS

Lawler (1977) refers to such designs as "adaptive experiments". These, he claims, recognise the realities of the field situation yet also incorporate some of the essential attributes of traditional experimental designs--for example, the identification of a control group before the treatment or change is introduced, and pre-and post-measures. What they lack is the random assignment of subjects to the various conditions of the experiment (usually the most practical means of controlling for the effect of subject variables). However, while they cannot achieve everything which true experiments can, they are better at assessing causality than static one-time correlational studies.

Evans (1975) argues that such designs are most powerful when used in combination. For example, he asserts that a combination of what Campbell and Stanley (1966) refer to as the "time series design" and the "non-equivalent control group design" can serve to eliminate most possible alternative explanations if properly applied. While accepting this fact, it seems to this writer that the superficial sophistication and style of some quasi-experimental research (particularly much of that emanating from the USA), coupled with the use of an impressive battery of statistical techniques of sometimes questionable appropriateness, can serve to draw the unwary reader's attention away from the inherent short-comings of this method, particularly regarding the establishment of causal relationships, and to confer upon the findings of such work an impression of certainty about such relationships which may well be unmerited. The quasi-experimental method needs to be handled with caution and its limitations fully acknowledged when results are being reported and conclusions drawn.

NON-EXPERIMENTAL METHODS

THE SURVEY

A survey has been described as 'a form of planned collection of data for the purpose of description or prediction as a guide to action or for the purpose of analysing relationships between certain variables' (Oppenheim 1966: 1). One problem with surveys is that, as a research method, they appear beguilingly simple to design and administer. A consequence of this is the common tendency amongst novice researchers to launch headlong into some 'fact-finding' exercise having done little or no planning, and having given no thought to the survey's design (nor indeed to the possibility that an alternative research method might be more appropriate). Experience soon shows that the planning and design of surveys can be an arduous and complex business. Moreover, there can be no short-cuts, as a poorly designed survey will almost certainly fail to provide accurate answers to the questions of interest--and it may produce a considerable amount of irrelevant information thereby wasting valuable resources. Thus the purpose of careful planning and design is to achieve precision, effectiveness and efficiency. More specifically, as Oppenheim (1966) explains, survey design should be aimed at answering questions such as:

- * Which variables should be measured?
- * What kind of sample will be drawn?
- * Are control groups required?
- * What type of person will be involved?
- * What scales may be employed, or will specially designed scales be needed?

Another factor which must be considered during the design process is the type of survey which is to be undertaken.

Generally speaking surveys may be divided into two broad classifications, namely:

- (i) Analytical surveys aimed at exploring relationships between variables, and which are often undertaken to test specific hypotheses.
- (ii) Descriptive surveys, the purposes of which are largely fact-finding in nature. In addition, descriptive surveys may be used to make predictions, for example, by comparing the results produced by a number of descriptive surveys over a period of

time which may identify certain trends.

Within these two general classifications of survey are a number of sub-species. For example, there are one-shot designs, whereby all the information required is collected by means of one approach to a single sample of the research population. One-shot designs may be further sub-divided into cross-sectional and factorial designs. The former characteristically sample a cross-section of the population, and as Swift (1979) explains, they rely primarily on statistical control of variables, that is, statistical adjustments and between-group comparisons that are carried out during the data analysis phase of the research. Factorial designs could be said to be modelled on experimental research designs. In this case the researcher, rather than relying on the natural occurrence of sub-groups in a sample as would be the situation with a cross-sectional design, selects research subjects who have experienced particular combinations of the treatment or change, the effects of which he or she wishes to investigate or control.

Then there are repeated contact designs, which include before-and-after studies, panel surveys and longitudinal surveys. Longitudinal surveys typically are concerned with development and change over time, and are potentially most powerful with regard to establishing causal relationships between variables when an experimental group and a matched control group are incorporated into the design. Unfortunately such an arrangement is very often impossible, in which case a series of descriptive surveys may have to be used in an attempt to identify trends over time.

A further design consideration concerns the choice of data collection method. The most commonly used data collection methods involve either an interview schedule (face-to-face interview, telephone survey) or a questionnaire (self-completed in researcher's presence, postal survey etc.). The aim in both cases is to present respondents with a uniform stimulus. However, this is much easier said than done. To illustrate, with face-to-face interviews unconscious behavioural cues from the interviewer--a smile, a nod, a frown--may influence the nature of the responses given. Similarly, responses may be interpreted differently by the various interviewers. With regard to questionnaires, these may also be open to interpretation, they may be culturally biased, class-ridden and so on. However, careful design can help eliminate or minimise many of these problems.

A questionnaire may be defined as 'a device for obtaining answers to questions using a form which the respondent completes himself/herself', and clearly any survey using this data collection method will stand or fall on the effectiveness of the questionnaire. Thus questionnaire design is a matter of prime importance. Swift (1979) suggests that the following criteria should be considered when formulating questions: relevance of questions to research problem under investigation; comprehensiveness in relation to the various aspects of the research problem; comprehensibility to respondents; appropriateness of form in terms of planned method of data analysis; feasibility regarding respondents' ability to answer the questions. The sequencing of questions can also be important, while the skilful use of open and closed questions can increase a questionnaire's effectiveness.

Finally piloting is another extremely important part of survey organisation, as a pilot is essentially a trial run for the main study. At this stage, ideally, the questionnaire or interview schedule should be administered to a number of respondents representative of the research population and under conditions similar to those that will exist for the main study. The aims of the pilot are to identify any problems with the questionnaire or interview schedule, and to test the survey design itself, including the means of data collection and related procedures.

As can be seen, the design of surveys is fraught with pitfalls for the unwary, and contrary to what it appears many novice researchers sometimes think, the descriptive postal survey is not the only survey method available to researchers. It should also be noted that as with other research methods, the survey has advantages and disadvantages. As Bernstein et al (1988) point out, surveys can prove a very effective means of collecting a considerable volume of data from large numbers of subjects at relatively low cost, and can be valuable in identifying basic patterns and changes in human behaviour. On the other hand, use of the survey method usually permits the researcher very little control over the variables of interest and the research conditions. Furthermore, as already indicated, it is difficult to establish causal relationships between variables with any degree of certainty using this method.

THE CASE STUDY

While much has been written about the case study as a teaching method, less attention has been paid to its use in the context of research. Yin (1989) offers the following definition of a case study which suggests that case studies can represent

an effective and multi-faceted research strategy in certain circumstances:

A case study is an empirical inquiry that:

- * investigates a contemporary phenomenon within its real-life context; when
- * the boundaries between phenomenon and context are not clearly evident; and in which
- * multiple sources of evidence are used. (1989: 23).

The issue of definition is important, since the case study, as a research method, tends to lack credibility. For example, much concern has been expressed on occasions about lack of rigour in such research. However, it could be argued that this problem has arisen very often because case study research can be extremely difficult to do well, and that any lack of rigour derives from incompetence of use rather than inherent weaknesses in the method itself. Another criticism centres on external validity, the problem of generalising the findings of a single case to a wider set of circumstances. While this is a real problem, it is not unique to the case study, since, as has been shown, it can be equally difficult to generalise the findings of a single experiment. One way of overcoming the difficulty in the latter case is to conduct a set of multiple experiments in an attempt to replicate the same phenomenon under a variety of experimental conditions. Similarly, it is possible to undertake multiple case studies, with a view to examining a situation from a number of perspectives and to determine whether a particular theory is sustained across a range of circumstances.

Since much of what has been written in the literature has focussed on the weaknesses of the case study method of research it is the intention here to highlight some of its strengths. Essentially this method represents an holistic investigation of contemporary events in the real world, and is particularly appropriate when the variables of interest cannot be manipulated by the researcher. Arguably the most important feature of the case study is its ability to generate both qualitative and quantitative evidence from a wide and varied range of sources, including archival material, artifacts, survey data, interviews and observations. It should also be added that in the course of a case study investigation various research methods may be employed, for example, within a case study there could be a survey and/or an experiment or quasi-experiment. The case study can also be used to good effect to test or examine in greater depth, information generated by another method, for instance, an exploratory or descriptive survey. Moreover, contrary to what is popularly thought, case studies can make a number of valuable contributions with regard to evaluative research. As various writers have pointed out, case studies can investigate causal relationships in real-life settings which would be too complex for either the survey or experimental methods to address.

It has already been intimated that attempting to employ the case study method skilfully and to good effect is by no means a soft research option. One particularly difficult aspect of this type of research is that of theory building from case studies, as there is a danger that such theory may merely describe highly idiosyncratic phenomena and/or prove difficult to generalise, Eisenhardt (1989). Nevertheless 'grand' theory may still prove possible if multiple studies are conducted, producing an accumulation of theory-building and theory-testing studies. However, this method is probably most appropriate in the early stages of research on a particular topic, or for providing a fresh perspective on a topic that has received prior research attention.

Designing case study research is also a more complex matter than most novice researchers suspect. Essentially, case study research falls into two broad categories, namely, single case designs, and multiple case designs. However, both categories may be divided into two further subcategories, viz. holistic designs, and embedded designs. Although at first sight it may seem difficult to justify single case designs, there are circumstances in which their use is perfectly defensible--for example, when the case in question is extreme or unique, or where the case presents the researcher with an opportunity to observe and analyse a relatively inaccessible phenomenon. Moreover, while the evidence produced by multiple cases may be considered more convincing and thereby increase the credibility accorded to an overall project, the conduct of this type of study may require amounts of time and resources that put it beyond the scope of the single student or researcher. It might prove possible to resolve this problem if a team of students or researchers were to pool their resources, but ultimately it might be necessary to limit the study to one case and acknowledge the need for replication (which, of course, is not unusual where the experimental method is used).

If case study research is to be done well then design is not the only consideration--appropriate research procedures must also be employed. Among the most detailed accounts of what these procedures should cover and how they should be

implemented is that provided by Yin (1989), whose discussion includes case study design; the preparation required for data collection; where the research evidence is to be found and how it may be collected; the analysis of case study evidence; and the compilation of the case study report. Clearly, the quality of the research being undertaken will depend directly on how well each of these stages is executed. As Yin points out, case study research will not lose its reputation for being the 'weak sibling among social science methods' unless and until researchers take appropriate care over its design and execution. To conclude, as with the other research methods included in this discussion the case study has weaknesses but it also has strengths. Provided they are taught when and how to use it, students at both undergraduate and postgraduate levels and other novice researchers, should be able to employ this method to good effect, assuming access to target organisations is granted.

PARTICIPANT OBSERVATION

When the case study method is being used the researcher may adopt the role of objective observer of events. However, with participant observation the researcher becomes actively involved in the situation being studied. "Through participation, the researcher is able to observe and experience the meanings and interactions of people from the role of an insider". (Jorgensen 1989: 21)

Some of the essential features of this method are that it can aid the exploration of the perspective of insiders or members of particular situations in a real-life context; it requires the researcher to perform a participant role or set of roles which involves establishing and maintaining relationships with subjects in the field; it involves the use of an in-depth, qualitative case study approach and design; and it represents a method of enquiry that is open-ended, flexible and opportunistic, employing direct observation and other means of information gathering. The participative observation method is particularly powerful in relation to the study of, among other things, relationships between people and events, development, change and trends over time, as well as the contexts in which those being studied are operating. Thus, participant observation focuses on real life, not on artificial environments created and manipulated by researchers, the ultimate aim being to generate practical information and theories.

Contrary to what might be expected, participant observation can be quite a difficult method to employ effectively. For one thing, there is the question of the extent to which the researcher should participate in events. Clearly every effort must be made to minimise the degree to which he or she disrupts the situation being investigated, otherwise the so-called Hawthorne effect and/or various ethical problems may arise. The prevention of such difficulties may require the researcher to play a 'native' or full insider role as opposed to a marginal one. However, this could result in the researcher 'becoming the phenomenon', in other words, he or she might become so involved in the situation that they lose their objectivity. As Baron and Greenberg (1990) explain, there are also more insidious ways in which bias can creep into the research. To illustrate, since much of what goes on in everyday organisational life is rather humdrum, there is a natural tendency for researchers to focus on unusual and/or unexpected occurrences. Furthermore, it is not possible for even the most skilled researcher to notice, process and store all the information confronting them, thus they may miss much of what is important and reach conclusions based on only a selective sample of information.

It should also be noted that although observation is the main means by which information is gathered, the researcher will usually have to use other methods as well. These can include examination and analysis of archival material, artifacts, in-depth informal and unstructured interviews plus formally structured interviews and questionnaires. In addition, a diary or log of events in the field, including relevant casual conversations, must be kept, which in itself may create problems, especially if supplementary audio or visual records of activity are required. For example, the role being played may not permit the researcher sufficient time or opportunity to undertake essential record-keeping. Again, the question of theory-building from participative observation is a problematic one. It is generally considered that this method is particularly appropriate for exploratory and descriptive research, as well as for testing existing theories, although some would argue that participant observation can also lead to the formation of new theories.

To conclude, this is a method which may gain the researcher access to situations that are otherwise inaccessible to scientific investigation. In other words, in some circumstances participant observation may prove the only means of gathering information. However, because of the time and particular skills required to do this type of research, it may not always be appropriate for use by novice researchers.

CONCLUSIONS

Among other things the above discussion is intended to underline how important it is for students and other novice researchers working in the management and related disciplines, to realise the danger of becoming 'locked into' a particular research orientation, so graphically described by Eilon (1975). Furthermore, it is misguided to believe that research methods should be 'arrayed hierarchically'. For example, as Yin (1989) states, it used to be thought that case studies and surveys were appropriate for the exploratory stage of an investigation, but that experiments were the only means of conducting explanatory or causal enquiries. However, it is now accepted that all research methods, as has been explained above, have advantages and disadvantages, and while each may be more appropriate in some circumstances than others, there are areas of overlap. Bouchard (1983) puts the whole area of research design into perspective, stressing the need for methodological heterogeneity and multiple operationalism:

Methods are neither good nor bad, but rather more or less useful for answering particular questions at a particular time and place.....We urge all researchers to consider the advantages of methodological heterogeneity and to break the hold that a few favoured techniques have on them. (1983: 402)

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