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The Sage Dictionary of Social Research Methods

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The Sage Dictionary of Social Research Methods

Compiled and edited
by
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Editor's Introduction

Organizing themes

Although presented in alphabetical order, the concepts covered in this Dictionary were selected on the basis of several key themes which are embraced within the term 'social research'. These are:

(1) Philosophy of science, for example issues of *ontology* (what is the essential nature of reality?) and *epistemology* (whether or how we can gain knowledge of that reality).
(2) Research paradigms, for example *positivism* (which in general terms is taken to include the scientific study of some objective social reality) and *constructionism* (which is concerned with the study of ways in which the social world is constructed through social interactions).
(3) Research designs, for example the *experiment* (the attribution of outcomes to the controlled administration of a 'treatment' to one group and not another) and social survey (the systematic collection of data from or about units of analysis, usually individuals, often using sampling techniques).
(4) Specific aspects of data collection, for example *participant observation* (participating in a group in a covert manner in order to study that group) and specific aspects of data analysis, for example *multivariate analysis* (a set of statistical techniques to examine the relationships between several variables).
(5) Issues to be addressed when carrying out research, for example *ethics* (what standards should be adopted, say in relation to obtaining informed consent from subjects?) and *politics and research* (the extent to which research is contributing to the oppression of certain groups in society).
(6) The role of research in terms of function, for example *policy-related research* (research to evaluate the impact of social policies) and in terms of context, for example *marketing research* (the systematic collection of data about consumers of products and services in order to make informed decisions).

Structure of the contributions

The term 'Dictionary' is used to be consistent with the Sage Publications series of Dictionaries but, as with others such as *The Sage Dictionary of Criminology* it is more encyclopaedic in nature. Each of the contributions is structured

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according to a standardized format. First, there is a very brief *definition* of the concept. Second, this is followed by a longer elucidation of *distinctive features*, which could include historical background, disciplinary background (for example, sociology, psychology, economics), key writers, applications (where appropriate) as well as main features. Authors were encouraged to think in terms of writing a critical and reflective essay. Therefore, for each concept, there is an *evaluation* in which authors raise some of the key issues and problems relating to the concept under consideration. The issues and problems which are raised are those chosen by each author rather than as a result of prescriptions laid down by the editor. It is the sections on distinctive features and on evaluation which give the publication its encyclopaedic character. For each entry, cross-references are made to *associated concepts* within the Dictionary. Some of these are associated by 'similarity' and 'mutuality' and others because they represent 'challenges' and 'rivalry' to the concept under consideration. The cross references facilitate a mapping of concepts in terms of similarities and differences as described below. Finally, a brief list of *key readings* is provided.

How to use the Dictionary

The text can be used as a conventional dictionary or encyclopaedia to clarify the meaning of a term. However, more usefully it can be used in almost textbook fashion as a means of learning about the field of social research, and in the construction of an essay or dissertation, by making use of the cross-referencing provided by the *associated concepts*. The latter provide a mechanism for mapping connections between concepts in terms of similarities and differences. Associated concepts relating to any given definition have been chosen to direct the reader not solely to other concepts that share common features or underlying themes and principles but also to concepts that differ – often sharply – in terms of such features, themes and principles. The features of two of the definitions in this Dictionary can be adapted to assist in this endeavour. First, *network analysis* is a technique that examines the relationships between units of analysis. It was in part based on sociometry, a method founded upon asking children about their friendships. Network analysis is now more sophisticated and permits the examination of the strengths of relationships and the degree of density and interconnectedness of networks. By following cross-references it is possible to construct and examine networks of concepts: which concepts relate to one another, how they relate in terms of closeness, strength of relationship, similarities and differences. The second key concept is called the *constant comparative method*, which is a form of analysis in qualitative research and includes the process of minimal and maximal comparison of units of analysis in order to further understanding. Minimal comparison involves examination of cases which are as similar as possible and maximal comparison involves examination of cases which are as different as possible. This idea can be adapted to further the understanding of the territory of social research by listing the ways in which certain concepts in the network are similar and how other concepts differ. In this way the breadth and depth of social research can be uncovered.