Theoretical and Technical Comparison of Two Distinguished Methodologies: Survey Research and Focus Group Interview

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ABSTRACT

The principle assumptions of distinguishing between quantitative and qualitative methodology have been debated, emphasizing the philosophical issues which underpin much of the discussion. A distinction also is drawn between epistemological and technical issues in relation to the controversy. The assumption is raised as to whether it is possible to establish a connection between epistemological positions and associated techniques of those scientific methodologies. Two different types of research paradigms, the survey research and focus group interview are then selected in which such methods present a character for the collaboration.

The Implementation of Two Methods

The survey and focus group interview methods are equivalent in being collective methodological techniques, yet they have distinctly different methods of implementation.

The interpretation of survey research has been defined in a variety of different ways, and is articulated by a number of theorists. When one reads the early surveys and statistical investigations of the pioneers, it seems to be common to point to the word ‘survey’ as a collective method. For example, Denzin (1978) defines the survey approach as a methodological technique that requires systematic collection of data from populations or samples through the use of a self-administered questionnaire. The focus group is also a research method devoted to data collection, but are restricted to a particular tightly defined topic; and the accent is upon group interaction to produce data and insights by using an interview guide (Blumer 1969; Bryman 2004; Morgan 1996; 1997; Robson 1993).

Despite this, the notion of the survey research has been developed from solely observing something in detail to the operation of doing so rigorously and comprehensively, eventually resulting in written data (Marsh 1982). At present, a great number of scholars include the process of organising and analysing data in the method of survey research (see De Vaus 2002; Marsh 1982). This might bring its difference to the focus group interview in terms of implementation.

Epistemological, Ontological and Methodological Assumptions

While there is no doubt that epistemological, ontological and methodological underpinnings of the survey are entirely opposite from the focus group interview, some theorists proposed the alternative perspective which needs to be given more consideration.
The survey research method is frequently viewed as a principle model of quantitative research as it emphasizes quantification in the collection and analysis of data. By contrast, most focus group researchers undertake their work within the traditions of qualitative research, as the viewpoints of the people being studied are a qualitative form. These can be associated with the common perspective of their epistemological assumptions, which are widely regarded as being inherently positivistic or interpretivist (and/or symbolic interactionist, see Bryman 2004). Bryman stated:

“In some cases writers have chosen not to use the quantitative/qualitative distinction and have instead used terms which have been used as synonyms. The terms 'positivist' and 'empiricist' often denote the same fundamental approach as 'quantitative', while 'naturalistic' field research, 'ethnographic', 'interpretivist', and 'constructivist' are sometimes used instead of 'qualitative’” (1984:77)

The Parisian Auguste Comte (1798 – 1857) originally coined the term ‘positivist philosophy’. His Positivist knowledge appears to be accepted by a number of survey researchers in which it underpins the method of quantitative paradigm, the survey research in particular. Halfpenny (1982), for example, emphasised that positivism remained the description of a set of practical techniques for the collection and manipulation of social data, particularly in applying sample surveys to generate descriptive social statistics, which are then analysed by using multivariate and inductive statistics to induce generalisations or test hypotheses.

Corresponding to Bryman, he proposed that “the paraphernalia of positivism are characterized typically in the methodological literature as exhibiting a pre-occupation with operational definitions, objectivity, replicability, causality, and the like” (1984:77). The survey is typically seen as the preferred instrument of the research within this tradition because it can apparently be readily adapted to such concerns. The research of this notion is thus frequently depicted as being positivist or empiricist.

The focus group interview, on the contrary, is a central tenet of theoretical positions of ‘symbolic interactionism’ by George Herbert Mead (1863 – 1931). It is a type of social theory that has distinctive epistemological implications for the study of human group life and social phenomena (Blumer 1969; Bryman 1984; 2004; Charon 1998). The significant methodological implications of the symbolic interactionist’s view of human group life and social action consists of, and exists in, the fitting of lines of action to each other by the member of group.

According to Blumer, symbolic interactionists traditionally have rejected the notion that inherent meanings or intrinsic stimuli control human behaviour. He argued, "The position of symbolic interactionism is that the social action of the actor is constructed by him” (1969:23). In addition, he called such articulation of lines of human active actions that give rise to and constitute among those participants as ‘joint action’ [16] and named the dynamic actions in diverse and varying forms as a principle of the ‘game theory’ [54]. These concepts are what the focus group method does when speaking of such things as discussion. The meaning of the world or objects for a person is fundamentally derived from, or arises out of, and is modified through an interpretative process of social interaction. This nature of the focus group interview, therefore, differs strikingly from the survey research, as it is not undertaken by passive individuals in isolation from each other.

In spite of this epistemological dissimilarity of survey and focus group methods, both ontological and methodological assumptions are clearly recognised. The survey is seen as involving a principle of deductivism and objectivism, whereas the focus group can be constructed as inductivism and constructionism. For methodological supposition, the emphasis of deductivism is placed on the testing of theories and is typically associated with a positivist position (Bryman 2004; Groat and Wang 2002). In other words, the results of a survey do provide a test of a theoretical hypothesis if the theory is made explicit (Marsh 1979). The focus group, in contrast, necessitates an inductive process of inquiry that seeks clarification of multiple critical factors affecting the phenomenon for generating theories (Groat and Wang 2002). Besides, the survey results can be conducted in a way that is value free. It has been involved to objectivism, which is an ontological position that asserts that social phenomena and their meanings have an existence that is independent of or separate from social actors (Bryman 2004). As opposite to constructionism of the focus group, it has been assumed as a subjective reality and a view of the researcher as interactive with the subject of inquiry (Groat and Wang 2002). Furthermore, the human investigators impose or reveal the meaning and order upon their own and the actions of others (Blumer 1969).

It can, however, be considered that the assumption for the epistemology of survey methods being inherently inevitable positivism has been challenged. According to Marsh (1982), the most influential of the critics have argued that the mistake constructed by survey researchers is in their very attempt to be scientific. While others have argued that they are insufficiently scientific, and at the heart of this dispute, there is a disagreement about what any science should be. This could be the case that Denzin proposed his idea; ‘the survey research can contribute to symbolic interactionism’:

“Despite the fact that survey designs necessarily involve commitment to a form of variable analysis just criticised, the survey can be employed as a method of determining the stable and routinised
patterns of interaction that exist in social groups. Such patterns are often easily elicited, and there is reason to believe that they will be accurately reflected via the survey method (1978: 183).”

In his assumption, he raised the case of anthropologists, who have successfully employed a variant of the survey method in their kinship studies and have found, given agreement on the categories of analysis, that such structures can be reliably and relatively easily elicited.

Denzin’s alternative perspective to the survey research, nevertheless, has been subject to occasional attacks by exponents of orthodox sociology. Rock (1979), for instance, argued that “symbolic interactionism in the main those attacks have taken an ‘ad hominem’ guise, representing the alleged weakness of the sociology as the consequence of intellectual infirmity or bias (217).” Such criticism influences the position of survey researchers in which they embed in the assumption of the positivism.

**Strengths and Weaknesses compared to each other and to other methods**

The survey and focus group interview methods are gaining in popularity at present. While both of these procedures have advantages, both have limitations that bring into question their ultimate usefulness as research techniques.

The survey method is a quantitative approach that is often used since it offers flexibility, versatility and specialisation. It can be designed to measure things as simple as respondents’ physical or demographic characteristics, or as complex as their attitudes, preferences, or life-style patterns. Its data can be collected in person, by telephone, direct mail, or via the Internet, matching both the needs and the budget of those seeking information. In addition, the use of well-designed and organised instrumentation can contribute to the efficiency of survey research, which can generalise its result to other circumstances (see Alreck and Settle 1995; Groat and Wang 2002). However, these great advantages of survey research are overstated and deficiencies and flaws of the survey research method have been extensively discussed. The first limitation of the survey, of course, is that it is traditionally used to measure the attitudes and circumstances of passive or lay respondents. It is not employed to help communication between active participants (Carr-Hill 1984).

Further significant argument of survey method is a criticism of its techniques of investigation. The survey ignores completely the fact that it has been linked with the use of a fixed format or structured questionnaire (Denzin 1978; Marsh 1979; 1982). This is ‘ill-equipped’ to capture the analysis of complex aspects of human interactions, Denzin argued:

“In situations where symbolic meanings are in flux and where interactional forms are continually being redefined, the survey method will be found lacking because of its structured and relatively inflexible nature (1978:175)”.

However, for the focus group interview, the quality of information obtained by social interaction enables far superior depth than that obtained by the survey method. Also, the potential for studying a wide range of topics on the focus group become tenable. Morgan (1996) showed the case of systematic comparison between the survey and focus group results from a variety of studies. The results confirm the biggest difference between these two methods; the focus group interview went beyond the information obtained in the survey at hand such as giving more complex behaviours and motivations. The original weakness of the survey is the impact of the group on sensitive topics and cultural minority groups. However, it has been approved by the study of several researchers (e.g. Frith 2000; Grace 1995; Jarrett 1993; Joseph, et al. 1984; Lengua, et al. 1992; Overlien, et al. 2005; Seals, et al. 1995; Smith 1995; Wilkinson 1998). They demonstrated their use of focus groups in these settings how this research of inquiry can widely apply to other topics and populations.

Comparing the strengths of the focus group is notably different from the strength of other methods, either a participant observation or an individual interview. Morgan (1996; 1997) proposed that the focus group offers something of a compromise between the strengths and weaknesses of participant observation and individual interviewing. It is thus not as strong as either of them within their specialized realms. The respective weaknesses of participant observation and individual interviewing, however, enables focus group to operate across conventional boundaries. This flexibility may be the greatest strength of the focus group. Yet, none of this is intended to overstate the strengths of focus group interviews. Given its potential weaknesses there are many cases in which focus groups would not be the preferred method due to its limitations, as has been mentioned by a number of scholars. Morgan (1996), for example, argued that the problematic condition of focus groups is linked to the process of producing focused interactions, raising issues about both the role of the moderator in generating the data and the impact of the group itself on the data. Robson (1993) mentioned the difficulty of following up the views of individuals and the effect of group dynamics on the results. In addition, Bryman (2004) supplemented the issues about the difficulty of analysing, organising, and transcribing the data.

Despite the use of well-established survey methods and focus groups are growing in the scientific study, researchers are today dealing with an
increase in problems and criticism from without and within the professional community. These researches of inquiries have come under fire from different angles. Some of their criticism is legitimate and some is not. However, in any case there is a growing necessity that scientific researchers should address these points of inquires: be it to correct unjustified claims; be it to tackle existing problems and do away with shortcomings.

Research Design Issues

Given the wideness of possible applications of the survey and focus group interview, it is uncertain to assert what specific research project of each method is most suited since they have been found uses in many of specialty areas. The implementation of both methods, however, are still limited; it is unable to be employed across another boundary.

The ordinarily distinctive competence of survey methods is its strategy associated with a broad situation or circumstance and can be used to examine specific issues. That is in contrast with the focus group interview, which is designed to explore a set of specific issues in depth on concrete situations. Most recently, nevertheless, both methods can be found in a similar research domain, particularly in the professional practices. Nevertheless, their connection is scarcely found in the literature of research theorists. In the professional actions, the growth using of the survey and focus group could be discerned in the domain of welfare capitalism. This is not only its goods and services, through market research of various kinds, but also of its social products, through cultural and media studies, and of its political products, through both public and private political opinion polls (see Alreck and Settle 1995; Bryman 2004; Chiu 2003; Donsbach 1997; Marsh 1982; Morgan 1992; 1996; 1997; Robson 1993). The results of such domain are directed toward the decision-making and executive action projects.

The survey and focus group are well equally suited for inquiring in the professional practices. However, for many academic and professional disciplines, the use of the focus group interview has to be done carefully. The reason for this proposition arises from Alreck and Settle’s supposition (1995), they connoted that the survey research in academia is to enhance the body of theoretical and conceptual knowledge of the discipline. It used to provide not so much to assist in the decision making purpose.

“Rather than information to be applied to practical problems and actions, theoretical research seeks information to answer research questions and to test hypotheses about the propensities and predispositions of people this type of survey information may apply directly to existing conditions or potential actions at the moment. Instead, it is sued to enhance the literature and the state of current thought within the discipline or area of the sponsor (1995:5)”.

Given the proposal of this application, the survey appears to be used in academic research projects more than focus group. Even so, a number of researchers have deliberately attempted a broader approach to the uses of the focus group. As well as, the theorists’ options have currently developed the possible uses of it, there are, of course, undoubtedly many other creative uses. This article will pay attention to the most popular procedure “mixed methods”, which are discussed in the next section.

The collaboration of two methods

There is no single method ever adequately solves the problem of its own deficiencies. For example, while the survey method has its potential for studying a wide range of variables, the issues of causality and invalidity have been debated. Proposing the principle of multiple methods, therefore, could be useful in every investigation as Webb et al proposed:

“... if no single measurement class is perfect, neither is any scientifically useless… for the most fertile search for validity comes from a combined series of different measures, each with its idiosyncratic weaknesses, each pointed to a single hypothesis. When a hypothesis can survive the confrontation of a series of complementary methods of testing, it contains a degree of validity unattainable by one tested within the more constricted framework of a single method … There must be multiple operationalism.” (1966, pp.173-74 qtd. in Denzin 1978)

Methodological triangulation can operate in many forms, but its basic feature will be the combination of two or more different research strategies in the study of the same empirical units. The use of multiple methods or triangulation can decrease the personalistic or inherent prejudices of scientific researchers, which originate from single methodologies. In other words, the researchers can partially overcome the deficiencies that flow from one investigator and/or one method by comparing methods and investigators in the single research project (Bryman 1984; Denzin 1978). The assertion of the conceptual framework to clarify the complementary methodologies has been presented. For instance, Morgan and Krueger (1993) mentioned the ways of combining quantitative and qualitative methods in general and the survey and focus group in particular. The collaboration contains the studies in which the surveys are the primary method, whereas the focus groups serve in a preliminary capacity or act as a source of follow-up data and vice versa. These procedures enhance the opportunity of such methods to complement each other in the ways of trustworthiness of acquired data. For instance, group participants interpret the notion of truth, arises through the administration of a post-interview questionnaire that presents a realist version.
of validity (Hyde, et al. 2005). Likewise, using the focus group contributes to the creation of survey question items corresponding to a potential for diminishing specification errors, invalidity and unreliability (Alreck and Settle 1995; Morgan 1997).

This can be emphasised that the arguments for triangulated or multi strategies are not overestimated. As there are a number of scientific researches report how it is possible to affirm on empirical bases. Cataldi (2005), for example, asserted that the focus group is a technique that well supports the survey, especially in the case of indefinite triangulation. His work showed that the group discussion offers various opportunities for supporting the interpretation of the wider knowledge that has been already acquired in the survey inquiry. The combination of the survey research and focus group interview methods into a single project, therefore, will better enable the researcher to strengthen valid propositions, as well as give a better comprehensive view of the reality achieved.

REFERENCES
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