

Assessing Historical Method of Qualitative Research in Social Sciences

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Abstract

The historical research method aims to improve understanding of the most appropriate techniques to confront data and test theories in international research. This paper seeks to see historical research methods as not simply the collection of dates and facts or an account of past happenings but an explanation of past events, including an exposition of these events. The paper argues that social sciences are inherently and irreducibly historical disciplines. From the position of social realities and historical processes, a request for the standard and integrative deployment of historical and sociological reason is thus a surpassing one. Marxism, Annales and Post-Structuralism are the main theoretical approaches for this study. Using extant literature, the historical research method could provide a hypothesis for solving current problems and gain a clearer perspective of the present. The paper highlighted the challenges and strengths of historical research methods. It concluded that they apply to all fields of study, encompassing their origins, growth, theories, personalities, and crises.

Keywords: *research techniques, historical research, qualitative, research, post-structuralism*

Introduction

Gaining knowledge about the origins and development of a subject of study can help one gain insight into current trends, organisational culture, and future opportunities. The historical research approach covers all subjects of study, including their inception, development, theories, characters, and crises. Historical data can be gathered using both quantitative and qualitative characteristics. Once the choice is made to use a recorded research method, procedures must be followed to obtain a trustworthy outcome. The history report is concerned mainly with those persons – inside and outside. These professional historians are engaged in the historical work of a social science character and with that part of historical study and training that falls within the scope of social science. On the contrary, the diversity of historical work reflects the diversity of the historian's interest and the evidence available to him, and this diversity is a valuable, even indispensable, feature of the discipline. We are in an era when economists, sociologists, political scientists, and others attempt to work with historical evidence (Landes & Tilly, 1971). To concentrate on history as a social science, we need some sense of what sets history apart from other social sciences.

Research is a painstaking process involving resources to investigate and discover what is hidden in the limelight. For Kothari and Garg (2014), research in common parlance refers to a search for knowledge. One can also define research as a scientific and systematic search for pertinent information on a specific topic. Research is the art of scientific investigation. Some people consider research as a movement from the known to the unknown. It is a voyage of discovery. We all possess the vital instinct of curiosity. When the unknown confronts us, our inquisitiveness makes us probe and attain an understanding of the novel more and more. This curiosity is the mother of all knowledge, and the method one employs to understand whatever the unknown can be termed research. According to Tan (2015), historical research is not simply the accumulation of dates and facts or a description of past happenings. Still, it is a flowing and dynamic explanation or description of past events, including an interpretation of these events to recapture implications, personalities and ideas that have influenced them. Berg (2000) stressed that it is crucial to distinguish nostalgia from historical research since the former is the retelling of comfortable past pleasantries, events, or situations that lack research vigour while the latter attempts to methodically recapture the complex nuances, people, meanings, events and even ideas of the past that have impacted and shaped the present.

For Osuala (2005), research is arriving at dependable solutions to problems through planned and systematic data collection, analysis and interpretation. Research is essential for advancing knowledge, promoting progress, and enabling man to relate more effectively to his environment, accomplish his purposes, and resolve conflicts. Research is oriented toward discovering the relationships among the phenomena of the world in which we live. Research is devoted to finding conditions under which a specific phenomenon occurs and the conditions under which it does not happen in similar circumstances. This paper aims to assess the historical qualitative research method in social sciences critically. To achieve this, the paper is divided into five subsections, including this introduction. The second section is on literature review and theoretical background, while an overview of the historical research method forms the third section of this paper. The fourth section addresses the challenges and strengths of the qualitative research method and is followed by the conclusion.

Literature Review

To some extent, history has always been a core feature of the international imagination and the entire social sciences. Leading figures in the discipline of International Relations, such as E.H. Carr, Hans Morgenthau, Martin Wight, Hedley Bull and Stanley Hoffman, have all employed history to illuminate their research. Wight (1966) made searching the *desiderata* of international history an indispensable element of international theory, the best that could be hoped for in a discipline without a core *problem*. According to Lawson and Hobson (2008), although often considered to have been banished by the scientific turn in International Relations (IR) during the Cold War, at least in the United States, history never really went away as a tool of International Relations theory. In recent years, the return of history has been one of the most striking features of the various openings in international relations theory.

From the point of view of Adeoti and Adeyeri (2012), the age-old intellectual and 'pedestrian' controversy over the meaning and societal significance of history is bound to persist for a long time. However, the firm reliance on historical information, particularly in third-world countries in recent times, underscores history's acceptance as reality and outcome of objective research. According to Buckley (2016), historical research methods and approaches can improve understanding of the most advantageous proficiency to face data and test theories in internationalisation research. Internationalisation process research can benefit from using qualitative research in social sciences to analyse sources, use comparative evidence across time and space, and examine verifiable choices.

Whitney (1948) posits that historical research interprets past trends of attitude, event, and fact. The Greek word "*historia*" means a search to find out. History is any description of past events or facts written in a spirit of critical inquiry for the whole truth. More certainly, historical research may be considered as embracing the entire field of the human past as broad as life itself. However, the data must be viewed from a historical perspective as part of the process of social development rather than as isolated attitudes, events, or facts.

Social sciences are inherently and irreducibly historical disciplines. Moreover, fundamentally, the transformative movement of history – a relentlessly creative and destructive social dynamic that is ever-fashioning the new and the contemporary out of the old and the established – constitutes their shared subject matter. Therefore, a thorough engagement with historical analysis techniques is necessary to fully understand the myriad realities examined by anthropologists, economists, psychologists, sociologists, and other scholars studying the human social state (Mills, 1959). Evidence is the pillar of historical interpretation. This is because, without evidence, there will be no historical interpretation. Evidence is the rubric upon which history stands. History is an outcome of

diligent research. History is critical in the selection, interpretation and analysis of available data. These historical features have made it look scientific (Ajetunmobi, 2005).

Bryant and Hall (1959) posit that a call for the mutual and integrative deployment of historical and sociological reason from the view of social realities and historical processes is surmounting. As such, it must take us beyond the old border bartering and that imaginary division of intellectual labour, wherein archive-mining historians were tasked with extracting and yielding the evidentiary ore that social scientists would purport to refine into theories grand and deductive. With the cultivation of shared interpretative competencies and a sustained analytical coupling of the historical and the sociological in one theory and method, it stands to reason that we will significantly reduce many of the alarming inconsistencies that continue to range across the still 'anarchic' human sciences. Each discipline pursues preconceptions of what is real and salient and how such things are best apprehended. The existing cacophony of general discordance subjects the claims and procedures of each specialism to doubt and scepticism and testifies to disarray and incoherence that is entrenched in existing research practices (Bryant & Hall, 1959).

Historical research first took on some forms of analytic detachment with the Jews of Ancient Israel, whose accounts in the books of the Old Testament exhibit a capability for bringing together information from vast sources and making accurate appraisals even though they were more shaped by religious experience as compared to other types of analytic inquiry (Monaghan & Hartman, 2000). From the 14th to the 19th century, historical research methods transformed from supernatural explanations to more secular approaches (Breisach, 1994). By the early 20th century, historical methods had become secularised, and from this time onwards, historical knowledge came under public attack.

History is a socially structured process; social interaction is historically transacted. From this ontological datum, it stands to reason that these interconnected aspects cannot be sundered into isolable 'static' and 'dynamic' properties to be studied separately by independent, autonomous disciplines, one keen on pursuing the 'general', the other fixated on revivifying the 'particular'. Historical and social science transcends and coherently integrates these polarities through a grounded recognition that only a synthesising application of historical and sociological modes of analysis can comprehend that singular concurrence. A confederated venture grounded in an inclusive attentiveness to the social-historical will bring dual analytical enhancements in the form of sociologically coherent histories and historically rigorous sociologies. Historiographical inquiry and social science inquiry are enlarged and fortified through a combined deployment of the respective strengths of the other in an ongoing reciprocal movement between the empirical and the theoretical (McDonald & Arbor, 1996).

The difference in underlying philosophy between history and social science presents the keenest challenge in integrating the temporal dimension with international business research. The contrast between the philosophy underlying history and that of social science, an issue for over a century (Simiand, 1903), is put by Berlin (1960) that history details the differences among events, whereas the sciences focus on similarities. History lacks the sciences' ideal models, whose usefulness varies inversely with the number of characteristics they apply. As an external observer, the scientist willingly distorts the individual to make it an instance of the general. Still, the historian, himself an actor, renounces interest in the general to understand the past by projecting his own experience upon it. It is the scientist's business to fit the facts into the theory and the historian's responsibility to place his confidence in facts over theories.

Gaddis (2002) suggests that a particular contrast between history and social science is that history insists on the interdependence of variables. Meanwhile, mainstream social science methods rely on identifying the 'independent variable' that affects (causes) changes in dependent variables. He suggests that this parallels the distinction between a reductionist view and an ecological approach and arises from the social scientists' desire to forecast the future. That also implies continuity over time, and the independent variable persists in its causative effect(s). It is also connected with assumptions of rationality, which are also assumed to be time-invariant. Social scientists counter that historians are theory resistant, at least to the kind of independent variable/rationalist/context-invariant reductionist theory that (perhaps stereotypically) characterises economicistic approaches.

Again, this forum is highly timely, posing a series of essential questions about the relationship between history and international relations and questioning the status of international relations' recent historical return. According to Gilpin (2001), while most scholars have tended to treat neorealism and neoliberal institutionalism as the representatives of mainstream US International Relations, it is essential to include constructivism as the third prong in what can now be considered a triumvirate. This immediately blurs the claim that mainstream US International Relations is ahistorical. As such, constructivism is propelled towards accounts of time and place specificity, context and change, rendering it necessarily historical and sociological in orientation (Lebow, 2004).

It fits unproblematically into the mode of historicist historical sociology in International Relations. However, although constructivists occupy an essential place in the history of the international relations spectrum, it is not the case that new approaches lie outside of it (Roberts, 2006). Even the archetypal version of a historicist International Relation – Waltzian neorealism, Robert Keohane and others have applied historical analysis to a rational choice neo-liberal institutionalist research agenda. Moreover, historical research is germane to the work of neo-classical realists such as E. H. Carr (Schweller, 1998).

Reflecting on the purpose of his methods, Snyder (2010) states that history matters and its three fundamental methods are simple: the insistence that no past event is beyond the historical understanding of the reach of historical inquiry, reflection upon the possibility of choices and acceptance of the fundamental reality of choice in human affairs.

The question of how firm internationalisation evolves is best answered by carefully using historical research methods only adapted for the context of economic and international business research (Jones & Zeitlin, 2007). It is equally important to know that global business theory and methods can enrich historical research (Kobrak & Schneider, 2011). In addition to the Chitu et al. (2013) examination of the 'history effect' in international finance and trade, international business can be focused on global history in the way that Bell and Dale (2011) analysed the economic and financial dimensions of the medieval pilgrimage business.

The new concept of internationalisation in social science discipline that emerges from a consideration of the light shed by historical research on managerial processes is that internationalisation is the outcome of a set of decisions, dependent on context and previous decisions, considering alternative locations, entry and development methods in a choice set of time and space. In these sequential decisions, knowledge of past decisions and their outcomes plays a part in the next round of decisions. Hence, companies can create 'vicious or virtuous circles' in internationalisation. Historical research matters to decision-makers as well as analysts. However, knowing when to consider history, ignore it, and 'take a chance' is the essence of managerial judgment (Kogut & Kulatilaka, 2001).

We cannot ignore the past experiences for the present and future development. Historical research is founded on the identification, analysis and interpretation of old texts, which are functions of hermeneutics. It is a scientific method that seeks to understand a text and to interpret it to other people. The folk wisdom expresses, "the nation which forgets its history is forced to repeat the same mistakes" (Spilackova, 2012). To understand qualitative research, it is pertinent to know the brief history of research, its traditions, and its philosophical foundation. History writing in qualitative research discusses the past and prospects for the future (Brinkmann et al., 2014). Historical research is one of the methods to describe how and where the study started, how it developed over time, and where it stands at present (Mohajan, 2018). It is referred to as historiography, that is, the investigation of elements from history (Berg, 2012). According to Leininger (1985), "Without a past, there is no meaning to the present, nor can we develop a sense of ourselves as individuals and as members of groups", which the social science discipline promotes.

Theoretical Background and Proponents

The central theoretical approaches in historical research, according to Tan (2015), are Marxism, Annales, and Post-structuralism. According to Breisach (1994), Hegel's philosophy of history existed before the Marxist interpretation of history came into focus. Hegel's ideological views on complete unity of the whole course of the world became a precursor for Marxism when the currents of intellectual development shifted in the nineteenth century. The Marxist interpretation of history rises from the ruins of Hegel's philosophy of history. Cassell (2014) posits that based on Marxist theory, history is the story of struggles between social classes where those in power control wealth and resources while the powerless battle to survive. However, for Tan (2015), this economic deterministic historical theory became increasingly out of tune with Western thought, such that after 1988, the Eastern European countries and the Soviet Union rejected their Marxist regimes. Hence, they doubted the viability of Marxism as an encompassing historical theory.

The twentieth century also saw the founders of the Annales School, Lucien Febvre and Marc Bloch, calling for a total history that stresses social and economic phenomena well suited to the quantitative approach (Breisach, 1994). The founders felt that human activities from different domains (economic, political, scientific, cultural, demographic, etc.) must be synthesised to understand history (Hall, 2007; Campbell, 1998). The school stresses social history, rejects Marxism, and deals with the pre-modern world before the French Revolution in 1789 (Padmanabhan & Gafoor, 2011). It was influenced by structuralism, a solid contemporary French philosophical and literary movement, as historical research of the Annales School could be seen as exploring several structural interpretations.

Overview of Historical Research Method

The purpose of the qualitative research method is to verify and explain the history of any area of human activities, subjects, or events through scientific processes (Spilackova, 2012). The essential aims of the historical method of research, according to Osuala (2005), are:

1. To gain a clearer perspective of the present. Present problems, such as the current problem of race relations in South Africa, are understandable only based on history. Historical research methods can provide us with hypotheses for solving everyday problems.
2. The simple scholarly desire of the scientist is to arrive at an accurate account of the past. This may involve nothing more than an academic interest in truth, that is, the desire to know what happened in the past and how and "why the men of the times allowed it to happen." There is also room for the scientist to be interested in giving an accurate account of the past without particular concern for its meaning for the present. However, historians generally believe that

their primary responsibility as scientists is to interpret the data to link the past to the present and the future.

3. To assist in the understanding of human culture (Berg, 2001). According to Moore et al. (1997), the most honoured justification for historical research is that people can learn from the past. Furthermore, historical research helps to identify individuals as a community since the construction of links between past and present allows people to be seen as part of a larger drama (Monaghan & Hartman, 2000). It also encourages interdisciplinary inquiry and understanding. In addition, it is intellectually enriching and challenging as historical research often asks the thought-provoking question of 'why.' Finally, historical research is fun because no other disciplines allow one to police their nose into the concerns of others and then label it as serious academic work.

Lundy (2008) posits five stages to undertake in historical research.

- i. Identifying a researchable phenomenon involves reading relevant literature, listening to current views about the phenomenon and reflecting on the researcher's interest before choosing a specific period, person, phenomenon, or era related to the focus of the study.
- ii. The development of hypotheses or research questions and the identification of a theoretical perspective that will guide the data collection and results interpretation, in addition to helping the researcher focus on and interpret historical occurrences as recorded.
- iii. The data exploration and collection stage can be the most time-consuming and labour-intensive part of the research process, as it depends on the subject of study and the accessibility of data sources.
- iv. The checking of facts, evaluation of the validity and reliability of data, and analysis of evidence gathered from each source, where the researcher evaluates the data and forms generalisations to accept or reject hypotheses or answer research questions and form conclusions.
- v. The report's writing describes findings and interpretations and provides detailed supportive evidence to defend the conclusions made.

Data sources for historical research can be primary or secondary (Berg, 2001; Lundy, 2008; Moore et al., 1997). Primary sources are data provided by actual witnesses to the incident in question. These may include official records, minutes of meetings, committee reports and legal documents, university bulletins, memoirs, biographies, diaries, personal letters, journals, and drawings. In general, primary sources are created at or near the time of the historical event being described. In contrast, secondary sources are account descriptions of persons who are not eyewitnesses of the event or did not personally know the person being studied. Secondary sources are subject to an inherent danger of inaccuracy. Any evidence transmitted from one individual to another tends to become distorted (Osuala, 2005). They are from those who are not immediately present at the time of the event, and these are referred to as second-hand or hearsay accounts of someone, some happenings, or some development (Berg, 2001). Secondary sources include biographies, scholarly articles, popular books, reference books, textbooks, court records, lab information, encyclopedias, newspaper articles and even obituary notices.

According to Monaghan and Hartman (2000), there are generally four approaches to the historical research method, and these all utilise primary sources as their chief database. However, they noted that these four approaches are not exclusive as researchers use as many approaches as their question, topic, and time would allow. This integration is made possible due to the nature of historical research that cuts across genres of approaches. The four approaches proposed by them are:

- i. Qualitative approach (also known as history by quotation) where the search for a story construed from a range of printed or written evidence and the resultant history is arranged

chronologically and presented as a factual tale, and the sources range from manuscripts (such as account books, school records, marginalia, letters, diaries and memoirs) to imprints (such as textbooks, journals, children's books and other books of the period under consideration).

- ii. The quantitative approach involves researchers intentionally looking for evidence that is quantifiable and thus presumed to have superior validity and generalisability, with the assumption that broader questions can then be addressed more authoritatively.
- iii. Content analysis, where the text itself is the object of scrutiny that uses published works as its data and subjects them to careful analyses that ordinarily include both the qualitative and quantitative aspects; and
- iv. Oral history focuses on living memory, where researchers gather personal recollections of events from living individuals via audio and video recording. This provides respondents with a natural and effective environment for a reciprocal interchange between them and the researchers.

The validity of historical research can be established through external criticism, while its reliability is determined via internal criticism. Berg (2001) is of the view that external and internal criticisms are essential to ascertain the quality of the data that will, in turn, affect the quality of the depth of interpretations and analysis since the rigorous examinations of the internal and external value of the data will ensure valid and reliable information as well as viable historical analysis. For Lundy (2008), the primary concern of external criticism is the genuineness of resource materials. Researchers must evaluate their sources with great care or even get verification from experts to ensure that sources are authentic to avoid frauds, hoaxes and forgeries, as these are not uncommon and can prove problematic. On the other hand, for researchers to determine the reliability of a source using internal criticism, the source's trustworthiness is questioned, such as the author's perceptions and biases of the phenomena and whether the author is reporting from intimate knowledge or others' description of the event. He cautioned researchers to be vigilant in including both positive and negative criticism of all data sources, which includes missing accounts and lack of relevant viewpoints and the persons involved in the event.

Challenges and Strength of Historical Research Method

The significant challenges to the historical qualitative research method revolve around the problems of sources, knowledge, explanation, objectivity, choice of subject, and the peculiar issues of contemporary history (Adeoti & Adeyeri, 2012). The issue of sources is a serious challenge to historians in reconstructing the past. The quality of a historical study is primarily determined by how sources are collected and used. Sources are essential in historical research, and they are varied and varied. Historical research is essential to how sources are recovered, examined, and preserved. The importance of recovery, examination and preservation lies in the fact that they provide a basis for assessing and interpreting sources to achieve the objective of historical research (Osarhieme, 1993). While sources must be reliable and valid, it is essential to strive to understand the origins of the sources because no matter how meticulous the process of recovery, interpretation and presentation might be, the reconstruction of the past goes beyond mere summing up of reliable information available in the sources (Adeoti & Adeyeri, 2012).

The main limitation of historical research is that the past can only be revealed in as much as how it is still present today, causing significant validity problems. Researchers' primary interests are in testing their theories rather than analysing crucial social events, leading them to favour other methods for generating data. Besides that, primary sources are more difficult to identify as the material title may

not correspond with its content and may be unavailable since it may be impossible to localise the sources, or they may not have been registered and stated in the inventory list yet (Spilackova, 2012). Often, it is also impossible to triangulate findings because the contemporary witnesses are no longer living, and there are no other sources of information on the given issue.

According to Monaghan and Hartman (2000), one of the strengths of historical research is that it provides people with possible instead of probable understandings and the ability to take precautions rather than control possible future because direct applications of the past to the present can distort events and lead to erroneous conclusions. For Deflem and Dove (2013), the hidden nature of historical research can also be viewed as an advantage since the research enterprise cannot affect its subject matter. Moreover, it permits the investigation of topics and questions that can be studied in no other fashion. It can use more categories of evidence than most other methods (except for case studies and ethnographic studies). Researchers can apply scientific objectivity to determine precisely what happened in the past. If well done, this research involves systematic, objective data collection and analysis.

Conclusion

The historical method of qualitative research applies to all fields of study because it covers a wide gamut of factors ranging from their origin, growth, theories, personalities, and crises. It will be a misplaced attempt to box qualitative historical research into a mere accumulation of data and facts without a dynamic explanation of past events, including their interpretation, in an endeavour to take up implications, personalities and ideas that have determined these events anew.

History has always been a core feature of the entire social sciences because, in recent times, the firm reliance on historical information underlines the acceptance of history as reality and the outcome of objective research despite some challenges.

Whereas qualitative historical research presents a fundamental context for understanding modern society, it informs global concepts, such as foreign policy development or international relations. Therefore, facts from historical events can help leaders make informed decisions that positively impact society, culture, and the economy.

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