

Defining a Research Study

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Abstract

Definition of a research study provides better clarity, focus, deeper understanding of the concepts. Definition of the terms should be based on factors such as context, history, relevance, frame of reference, and the culture of the people for whom investigation is done. Too broad or too narrow definitions are to be avoided which will hinder the designing of the study. Conceptualisation presupposes definition of terms operationally; that is, how the terms are used and interpreted in the study. This will promote replicability, generalisability and dissemination of findings. A term may be defined normatively and descriptively. The search for meanings of the terms will have to be done both empirically and through a thorough review of related literature. This provides a comprehensive idea or cognitive map of the work to the researcher. The definitions gathered are to be validated by experts to promote objectivity of the study.

Keywords: Conceptualisation; Operational Definition; Conceptual Framework; Empirical Definition.

INTRODUCTION

Once a research problem is selected based on need, priorities and demands, definition of the terms in the title will have to be done. To understand the meaning in broad, generally accepted terms is necessary, which is the starting point of research. The key words in the title are the variables under investigation. It is necessary for the researcher to define the terms first in order to

understand their full meaning. Definition of terms should be based on the context, history, relevance, frame of reference, person and culture because a simple definition to a term which describes complex human experience is difficult. For example in a study titled Child care Facilities available in Sivagangai District, while defining the term 'child care' one should remember how the concept has evolved, how different people (parents, child care personnel, researcher) use the term in different contexts, how the term is interpreted and how it is difficult to specifically explain and how it differs from culture to culture. Care of the children may be done by the mother, father, grandparents, full time or part-time caregivers, or day care centers. Hence it is necessary to give a broad, general, accepted definition of the term used in investigation.

Definition of variables in a research study gives better clarity, focus, deeper understanding of the concepts, grasping the meaning of the terms from

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several angles and helps to be specific in approach. A generally accepted definition of the terms used in the study is needed to facilitate replicability, generalisability and dissemination of the findings.

To arrive at a definition the variables or terms or key concepts in the title are to be analysed thoroughly.

CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

Conceptualization is a process of giving meaning, not just defining; it is an orientation or perspective of the terms used in the title. Concepts, variables in the research area need to be clearly understood. Concept itself is a classification or generalisation based on observation of similarities. Concepts are built by including the essentials and excluding the non essentials of the observed similarities. Concepts are global ideas about objects, people and events. This is how knowledge is built.

Concepts may be concrete-like flowers, trees, dogs, chairs, house, hands, elephants. They may be abstract and are not perceptible; but one can understand the meaning of words like stress, fluency, success, ethics, friendship, patriotism, honesty, wisdom, duty, justice, liberty, equality etc. On account of ambiguities there are difficulties while defining the terms.

For example the same term may be defined both normatively and descriptively. The term 'abnormal behaviour' may be pathological or merely deviant. Functional ambiguity is also widespread, the same term having both a descriptive and an explanatory sense. In this context one must remember that interpretation is intrinsic to perception and not just an afterthought.

Conceptual framework enables the researcher to make a starting point in systematising thinking however much tentative. It is better to remember that in social sciences all terms have some degree of vagueness.

Conceptualisation and Operational Definition of Terms in the Research Topic

Conceptualisation is the first step in providing operational definition of the terms researched. Giving operational definition is necessary for meaningful communication to fellow researchers who want to verify the earlier research findings. The researcher has to show how the term has been used in his or her investigation.

While defining a variable the investigator has to be very cautious because if it is too broad, then the variable means many things accommodating

several implications; if the definition is too narrow the investigator may exclude some essential dimensions of the concept.

Research involves systematisation, generalisation and evolving theories and principles which can be helpful in predicting and controlling events and people. Giving operational definition means conceptualisation which is essential for any research for clarity and understanding. While defining it is necessary to take care of the linguistic aspect also. There may be two or more words referring to the same concept; in the meantime a single concept may have several meanings according to the context. The search for meaning of the variables will have to be done both empirically and through the review of related literature. Giving operational definition means conceptualisation which is essential for any research for clarity and understanding. There may be two or more words referring to the same concept; in the mean time a single concept may have several meanings according to the context. The search for meaning of the variables will have to be done both empirically and through the review of related literature.

Review of related literature in the form of books, encyclopaedias, journals, lectures, conference proceedings, monographs, literature matrix, e-resources, Google Scholar is necessary to understand the meaning of the variable under investigation throwing light on various shades of meaning of the variable in different contexts. This will provide the cognitive map for the researcher. This will help in getting a meaningful picture of the variable by 'seeing through' various definitions. A comprehensive idea of the concept helps the researcher to be definite and specific in his or / her enquiry. This enables the researcher from merely exploring the variables to selective observation of the variables.

The author's doctoral study was on " Personality Configurations and Teaching Effectiveness - A Correlational Study". While defining the expression teaching effectiveness, the related terms such as 'teacher effectiveness', 'instructional effectiveness', 'teaching competence', 'teaching efficiency', 'teacher competence', 'teacher performance' are to be considered. For example, 'teaching effectiveness' is a variable defined differently by different people. A headmaster prefers to define this as the 'ability of a teacher to produce cent per cent results'. A teacher educator may define the term as 'the ability of the teacher to apply different teaching methodologies with a sound knowledge of the subject'. An investigator has to specifically define the term. As

far as the particular investigation is concerned, 'teaching effectiveness' is the score obtained by the teachers in a research instrument designed by the investigator for the purpose of measuring the variable. This is similar to defining intelligence as what intelligence tests measure. Having examined all possible explanations, descriptions, definitions, meanings and implications of the variable under investigation, it is necessary to define clearly and operationally.

It took 2 years (from 1982 to 1984) to arrive at an operational definition of the variables in the study. Questionnaires were distributed to various stakeholders in Tamil Nadu asking the question "who do you consider as the most efficient teacher and why do you say so?" to 180 teacher educators, 67 inspecting officials, 100 teachers and Heads of Higher and Higher Secondary schools, 223 higher secondary pupils. In addition a case study of teachers adjudged to be the best in the five local schools was carried out, initially by observing their classes and then conducting interviews. Parents were also interviewed to find out their understanding of an effective teacher. In total 6400 statements were obtained, classified into those describing teaching (2400) and those describing the personality (4000) of the teacher as revealed in classroom teaching. These descriptions were then pooled and condensed, ranked and were finally chosen based on pre-pilot, pilot study experience. 35 statements indicating effective classroom teaching were finalised and classified into seven categories after condensing, recondensing all the descriptions. These 35 statements constituted the components of the observation schedule to assess teaching effectiveness. The 4000 statements describing teacher's personality as revealed in the classroom were condensed into 8 bi-polar dimensions like 'dull' vs 'intelligent', 'unimaginative' vs 'resourceful', 'unsympathetic' vs 'considerate', 'listless' vs 'enthusiastic', 'unattractive' vs 'magnetic'.

Specification for each dimension was given for confusion-free observation. An observation schedule to assess teacher's personality as revealed in classroom teaching performance of teachers was developed. High - inference behaviours were consciously avoided and more explicit, observable and hence measurable low-inference behaviour only were selected. The given account is an example of empirically developing the tools for research that requires a lot of time, patience and hardwork. Quality tools of data collection can be designed only after proper conceptualisation. Such attempts will reduce the subjectivity while defining the variables avoiding wastage of resources.

Proper conceptualisation raises the standards of research. The precision and usefulness of the concept will be more when its different usages are analysed. The search for meaning of the variables will have to be done both empirically and through the review of related literature. Pooling or condensing the statements or perceptions of different sections of the people educational administrators, teachers, students, inspectors parents will be helpful in empirically understanding the meaning of the concept.

Most scientific terms have a meaning specified by indicating a set of indices, concrete or abstract, often outcomes of specified tests and measures which constitute, not the meaning of the term, but some of the conditions which provide the ground for applying the term. As the context of application changes, indications also change. All empirical findings whether appearing as premises or as conclusions are provisional, subject to rejection in the light of later findings. This tentativeness is the heart of science which makes research a fascinating activity. In this context let us remember how Dalton's theory of atoms that they are the smallest units of an element was functional until Ray Rutherford discovered that atoms are divisible. Theories are developed based on repeated research and become facts. Still if later researches negate the earlier findings, new theories emerge which will be accepted after several confirmations.

Various Steps in Conceptualisation in Brief:

As mentioned earlier, a thorough review of related literature exhausting all possible sources and resources will throw light on various shades of meaning of the variable in different contexts.

- The meaning of the variables maybe arrived at empirically by getting definitions and descriptions from practitioners, subject experts and original thinkers.
- After getting a good number of definitions and descriptions for the variables under investigation in the form of statements it is necessary to condense them. Pooling of statements gathered from related literature and from the stakeholders is necessary to have a comprehensive idea of the variable and to reduce repetition.
- The definitions need to be validated by experts and through field testing once tools for research are designed based on variables

finalised. This will remove any possible ambiguities and help examine omissions and commissions.

In this fast moving world research scholars devote less time in conceptualising and giving a clear operational definition. They somehow complete the work without understanding the deeper meaning of the variables in their research work. During open defence, the candidates cut a sorry figure unable to provide proper meaning and convincing justification. The personal experience of conducting and witnessing viva voce examinations the author has confirmed this. Every research investigator has to remember that there is an inseparable public character to research, and if he/she is unwilling to face both the strengths and weaknesses of the work

he/she will soon have them pointed out by others. It is this which puts such demands upon the social scientist.

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