Mindful Inquiry in Social Research

Fundamentals of Mindful Inquiry

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Chapter Four: Fundamentals of Mindful Inquiry

There are some fundamental characteristics of mindful inquiry, regardless of which method, technique, or culture of inquiry you use. Mindful inquiry

Different cultures of inquiry and research methods emphasize certain of these elements. Some research practices attempt to rule out one or more of these elements. However, we have found that, in the context of the lifeworld in which the research and the researcher exist, the missing element will still come into play. For example, a strict behaviorist denies the ontological reality of meaning. He focuses solely on observations of behaviors in sequential action. However, when speaking of the results of his research, the behaviorist is explaining to those in his lifeworld what the observations mean.

[p. 59 ↓] In a similar way, a historian who believes she is writing pure description of events without relationship to theory will still be asked why she wrote about a particular aspect of or period in history, why she used certain sources and not others, and so on. The explanation will undoubtedly reveal an underlying or implicit theory.

A phenomenologist or ethnographer may say she is not interested in prediction but only description. However, the reader of the description of a phenomenon of culture will tend to assume that, in similar circumstances, other human beings from other cultures may act as was forecast by implication in the description. For example, if one reads James Heap's (1982) phenomenological descriptions of getting into a depression, one expects that if one followed a thought pattern as described by Heap, one would likely also get into a state of depression.

Experiment and Typification in Everyday Life and in Social Inquiry

Everyday Experiments

Everyday we conduct inquiries as we accomplish necessary tasks and attempt to fulfill our goals. We may not be conscious of all the goal-seeking aspects of our behavior. Our behavior may be aimed at a purpose we are not aware of at the time.

Trial and error and imitation are primary ways in which we make inquiries in everyday life. By imitating others, we may quickly learn how desirable results may be obtained. Trial and error is a form of experimentation. Usually, we will already have accomplished something one way in the past. Then we add a new component and then observe that things go better or worse. It is like an experiment divided up into two or more points in time.

Learning in everyday life is also a process of observing typifications or patterns of objects and events. Birds learn to fly in certain ways, depending on and according to the way the sky typically looks in certain directions. Following these clues may sometimes be wrong, however.

Social scientists are in the business of categorizing the typifications made by persons in their lifeworlds and then making typifications of these typifications. For example, in this book, we typify certain kinds of research strategies under the rubric of cultures of inquiry.

Cooking Pasta

If our previous efforts at cooking pasta in a white enamel pan for 10 minutes resulted in a soggy consistency, we may decide to experiment next time and cook the pasta for 8 minutes. Then, if it is still too soft, we may try a different pan, an **[p. 60 ↓]** even shorter

cooking time, or some other variation. After several more trials, we may have found our preferred way of preparing pasta. If we want faster results, we may want to do a classic experiment by matching groups. We may ask a number of friends to each cook the same pasta in different kinds of pots for different lengths of time. We will, if the payoff is big enough, get two matched groups and expose only one to the treatment. We will observe how the results differ and then be able to typify the cooking of pasta based on these experiments.

Even when findings are produced in the purest, double-blind experiments, we cannot always be sure that the findings, when applied, will work out the same way because they will always be used in a unique lifeworld setting. Even the most desirable results cannot escape the edict of Heraclitus: "One cannot step twice into the same river, for the water into which you stepped has flowed on" (Heraclitus, 1979, p. 14)

The Classic Experiment and its Derivatives

The classic experiment comes from chemistry. A substance is isolated in a test tube. It is submitted to a controlled process in a laboratory. It may be mixed with something else or have a catalyst added to it that is designed to produce change. The resulting substance is measured and compared with the substance before the experiment. The whole process is guided by theories of the properties of matter that allow descriptions of the process to be put into equations that must balance as matter and energy before and after the intervention.

Social Psychological Experiments

Social psychological experiments involve putting persons in controlled situations, manipulating variables, and observing and reporting on changes in behavior. In a now famous study, Stanley Milgram (1974) employed volunteers as assistants in a research project. The volunteers were ordered by "scientists" to increase the voltage of electric current to persons strapped to seats behind glass walls. Milgram found that most of the research participants were willing to obey the "scientists'" orders to increase voltage, even when the persons behind the glass were showing signs of agonizing pain and the

voltage was strong enough to endanger their lives. Those behind the glass were in truth paid actors, a fact that was not known to the participants of the experiment.

Historical Ex Post Facto Experiments

Max Weber, a great, turn-of-the-century (nineteenth to twentieth centuries) sociologist, devised a way to address causal questions at the level of social organization. Weber developed a method called the *ideal type* to get a handle on **[p. 61 ↓]** complex historical phenomena so that comparisons and contrasts could be made. An ideal type is a selection of elements of a pattern of social organization that allows the inquirer to distinguish it from others. For example, Weber was able to discuss the emergence of bureaucratic organization by making a list of characteristic components common to all bureaucratic organizations and distinct from other forms of social organization. Bureaucracies are hierarchical, with each office above being responsible for those below. Records or files are central to bureaucracy. Bureaucratic officers act according to specified rules and only within their designated area of responsibility. They act without favoritism, they make a lifelong, full-time career of their roles. Bureaucratic organizations, based on these findings, may be contrasted with patrimony, in which decisions are made by the patriarch or his designee based on favoritism (Weber, 1968a).

Weber had doubts about Marx's monocausal economic interpretation of history. He developed ideal types of the nature of Protestantism and capitalism gleaned from the writings of Protestant leaders and exponents of capitalism. Weber looked at societies in history that were at the forefront in the development of capitalism and found them to be Protestant countries. He was able to show, therefore, that cultural developments influenced economic ones (Weber, 1967a, 1967b, 1968b, 1992). Weber's work is so groundbreaking and important for all of the social and human sciences that it is imperative that everyone in these disciplines, regardless of how remote her or his primary interests are from Weber's, be familiar with his theories. For a clear and comprehensive discussion of Weber's thought, see Bendix's *Max Weber: An Intellectual Portrait* (1962); for a short one, see Collins's *Max Weber: A Skeleton Key* (1986).

Simmel: Formal Sociology

Simmel developed descriptive models of typical forms of interaction and typical kinds of individuals (1950). His way of analyzing social relationships was like a social geometry that also carried an element of experimental design. In his formal sociology, he described how numbers affect social life. Relations between two people, for example, change dramatically when a third party is brought into the picture. Simmel catalogued the effects of bringing a third party into a dyad much as a chemist describes the introduction of a catalyst to a compound. Simmel also developed several typical models of individuals in social situations, such as the *stranger.* Such types are not psychological types but types that exist because of certain social structural situations. The stranger is both confided in more intimately (because his opinions have little effect on the social order) and more distrusted. He is located in more than one psychological geography at a time. When the stranger becomes a fully accepted member of the community, Simmel argues, his personality also changes.

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Survey Research and Experimental Logic

Survey research is used when information is needed to answer questions about a population. It dates back to the Roman Empire, when Caesar wanted information about the population in the empire in order to impose taxes. It has been institutionalized in opinion polls. The survey is not designed to expand or change the consciousness of the researcher, but only to give him information so that he may in some way control, explore, or "help" the population. Political and governmental bureaus and advertising and marketing agencies are primary users of survey research. The production and distribution of such research is, in itself, a mammoth operation. To save money and time, the technique of random sampling was devised in order to be able to generalize from a select group to an entire population. Questions of cause and predictability may be addressed by survey research with the use of sophisticated analysis techniques, such as path analysis (Blalock, 1964).

Tests and Measurements: Developing Types

Measurements have been devised to categorize persons according to attributes deemed important by the inquirers or those who pay them. These attributes include intelligence, learning style, and personality type. Such measures organize responses in such a way that the respondents come to be better understood and their behavior can be predicted. Such tests may be used to predict and control outcomes. Once so categorized, persons may be deemed qualified or disqualified, fit or unfit, for certain kinds of jobs.

Experts in measurement psychology may be able to explain and predict anyone's behavior based on knowledge of their type. For example, the Myers-Briggs Type Indicator, following Carl Jung's observations about introversion and extroversion tendencies, has developed four personality factors yielding 16 possible combinations in any individual (Myers, McCaulley, & Most, 1985). If one is an INFJ, for example, one is seen as someone who is introverted (I), bases actions on intuition (N) and feeling (F), and seeks closure on situations (J—judgment). Once so categorized, anything a person does or says may be said to be "according to type." For example, after sitting at a faculty meeting for 8 hours, 2 days in a row, a member of the faculty left, saying he felt exhausted and needed time to think and recuperate. An advocate of the Myers-Briggs said, "Oh, he is an INTP, that explains why he can't deal with this so well!" Such an explanation detracted from the fact that all of the attendants felt exhausted, but most were too polite or too frightened of losing face with the dean or their colleagues to say so. In such a way, political situations may be psychologized. This psychologization is a built-in hermeneutic stance in the use of such tests and measurements. In addition, the fact that human beings' attitudes and feelings are in flux are not taken into account by the tests. This is not to belie the possible usefulness of **[p. 63 ↓]** some tests. Reflection on what is known about behavior patterns and characteristics of others who took the tests could be helpful. However, a test score may be used as an excuse for not developing one's self in new and challenging directions.

Mindful inquiry looks at typification as an inherent aspect of social science research. The typification process is one of the primary ways lifeworlds operate and consciousness is constituted. By making this central, those practicing mindful inquiry are constantly aware of the dangers of reifying typifications and creating self-fulfilling prophecies.

Journalism versus Social Science: Linking Theory and Research

How does human science research differ from journalism? Journalists (as well as police officers, insurance investigators, attorneys, etc.) investigate aspects of social and organizational life. Journalists interview witnesses or participants in events that are deemed newsworthy. Investigative reporters will, at times, become participants (overtly or covertly) in the activities they are inquiring about, as will police and governmental investigators.

Market research is opinion surveying that seeks to predict consumer behavior. In this sense, it borders both journalistic investigation and social science research because it tests hypotheses such as how age or socioeconomic status relates to buying patterns. Human sciences research does not just focus on the who, what, when, where, and how aspects of human behavior (even on the predictive hypotheses of market research), but it does focus on the why.

Theory guides all of our actions. Each of us carries an internal book of theoretical maxims that guide us in everyday life events. Phenomenologists call such theories typifications. For example, we may develop a theory of trash collection from observing what the garbage collectors leave behind. If the refuse they leave behind is troublesome to us, we may inquire about how to get them to pick it up. We may call the Department of Sanitation and discover that if we label the extra trash with a sticker sent for a fee, it will be picked up. We also learn from further investigation and hearsay from neighbors that the workers will pick up extra if you tip them.

Sociological, psychological, or economic theories are explanations about the causes of human events or the elucidation of their meanings. These investigations are based on known strategies and validated through the canons of acceptable evidence among scholars who share a discourse community. Theory is not static, but evolves and changes along with research as well as with the kinds of questions facing humans and organizations. Knowledge of the theoretical landscape gives one a road map that scholars have traveled as the social sciences developed. On these roads, there are well-known guides who have traveled them before, such as August Comte, the father of sociology (1974), and Emile Durkheim, **[p. 64 ↓]** author of *The Division of Labor in Society* (1947) and developer of a method of statistical correlation to investigate the causes of suicide. Such pathways also include highways built over battlegrounds on which armies of guides who disagreed about which way to go are still pulling out their swords.

There are many good books that describe the terrain of sociological theory. We recommend that you read one or two of them before engaging in social research, because they will help you navigate the frameworks of discovery and understanding in the social and human sciences. These texts will make you aware of the kinds of questions, concerns, and frameworks that have been developed for understanding human experience and in reference to which you will conduct your research. See Turner (1991), Ritzer (1992), Coser (1971), and Lemert (1993) for thorough treatments of sociological theory. Other social sciences also have reviews of theory that you should read if your research area is related to these social and behavioral science disciplines.

Prior to beginning your investigation you should, at the very least, know how your topic would be explained given several different theoretical perspectives. For example, say you are investigating a conflict between two inner-city youth gangs. A symbolic interactionist would view such conflict as a process of interaction between persons with different identifications using interpretations of meaning that frame each other as enemies. A structural functionalist would look at them as functioning to structure and solidify their groups in relation to the society as a whole, albeit in a socially unacceptable manner. A Marxist would look at them as victims of an oppressive system, the powers of which they do not ever address because they are too busy competing with each other. Researchers from each theoretical perspective would certainly

approach their work in totally different manners and would probably reach different results.

Conclusion

We have reviewed some general principles of mindful inquiry, regardless of the specific research cultures, traditions, methods, and techniques you may use. All inquiry occurs in a lifeworld that is structured by circumstances. The consciousness of the researcher also affects the entire research process, from conception to results.

Mindful inquiry is related to theory and is interested in both cause and meaning. A primary logical structure of all research is the logic of the experiment. It is concerned with sequences, predictions, and comparisons of typical components of social life. Mindful inquiry is governed by a mood of gentleness and care.