

WWJMRD 2017; 3(5): 32-35
www.wwjmr.com
Impact Factor MJIF: 4.25
e-ISSN: 2454-6615

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Major research methods in social policy study and public administration

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Abstract

This paper presents an overview of research methods, tools, techniques and designs available research in the twin fields of social policy study and public administration. Social policy is seen in the paper as a sub-discipline of public administration, which grows out of political science to apply management principles in administering state apparatus. The paper presented case study, experimental with reference to quasi-experiment, historical etc as the most useful research methods among others. It is an explorative review. It concluded that reliance on research method will increase the body of knowledge of policy administration and recommended acquaintance with modern research tools, software and numeric skill to practitioners, scholars and students in the area.

Keywords: Public Administration, Social Policy, Research Methods, Scientific Methods

Introduction

Administration according to Adamolekun (1986: 2) is defined as “the principles, practices and rationalized techniques employed in achieving the objectives or aims of an organisation. This explains the general concept of administration, but this paper concerns itself with public administration which specifically focuses on administration of governmental organisation. The main aim of the study is to look at public administration as a field of study, its subfield and to examine the scientific context of public administration research with particular reference to the research methods applicable in public administration and social policy study investigation. The paper reveals that research methods applicable in the sciences are applied in the fields in study to support scientific claims of scholars in these fields, in view of their application of contemporary scientific research method. A research method is an overall strategy that is chosen to integrate the different components of a study in a coherent and logical way so as to ensure that a research problem is effectively addressed. It is an important blueprint in any discipline employing scientific investigation.

Public Administration as a Social Science Discipline

Public administration is a sub-field of political science, the latter being one of the major fields of study in social sciences. Social sciences according to Anikpo (1986: 15) consists of disciplines that focus on the realities associated with the behaviour of man not just as a biological organism, but as a rational creature living in organized groups called “society” and acting towards one another on basis of individual or shared beliefs, motivations, expectations and goals.

The groups of disciplines that fall within this category include: Anthropology, Sociology, Geography, Economics, Political Science, Policy Study, Psychology and Management. The social science disciplines are called science because they employ scientific methods and techniques as applicable in the physical and natural sciences in their investigation. These scientific techniques include application of scientific research methods.

Public administration study human behaviour in governmental organisation setting, what motivates public policy and activities of bureaucrats in work relations. It applies research methods in its mode of investigation, which will be examined after explaining the concept of research method. Social policy study as a subfield of public administration examines causes of social problems in the society and efforts of government and other stakeholders in providing solutions to such problems in order to ensure and enhance acceptable standards of living and quality of life.

The Concept of Research Method

According to Cohen and Manion (1980: 26) research, methods refer to the range of approaches used in research to gather data which are to be used as a basis for inference and interpretation for explanation and prediction. Traditionally, the word refers to those techniques associated with positivistic (scientific) model such as eliciting responses to predetermined questions, recording measurements, describing phenomena and performing experiments. Methods may also be taken to include the more specific features of the scientific enterprise such as forming concepts and hypotheses, building models and theories, and sampling procedures.

On the other hand, the aim of methodology in the words of Kaplan in Cohen and Manion (1980), is to describe and analyse these methods, throwing more light on their limitations and resources, clarifying their presuppositions and consequences, relating their potentialities to the twilight zone at the frontiers of knowledge. It is to venture generalizations from the success of particular techniques, suggesting new applications, and to unfold the specific bearings of logical and metaphysical principles on concrete problems, suggesting new formulations. In brief, Kaplan posited that the aim of methodology is to help us to understand, in the broadest possible terms, not the products of scientific enquiry but the process itself. This is explained to show that methods and methodology as used in this work are not synonymous. Finally, Cornwall's (1994: 98) observation that methods are the nuts and bolts or the mechanics of data collection and information exchange in scientific research is the centre point of this paper. This conceptualization is the operational guide in discussing research methods in Public Administration and Social Policy Study.

Major Research methods in Public Administration and Social Policy Study

In examining the research methods used in public administration and social policy study, one is confronted with the problem of scientific study of social sciences and the methodological crisis of choice and direction in political science. This as noted by Obasi (1999: 12, 18) includes the problem of complexity of political phenomena; indeterminacy of human behaviour; human reaction problems; and, influence of value. On the issue of crisis of methodological choice, Obasi (1999) noted debate of various methodological schools including traditionalists, behaviouralists and the Marxists (e.g. radical political economists) schools. The traditionalists use historical, normative, descriptive as well as largely qualitative methods. The behaviouralists on the other hand apply the positivistic method to the study of political phenomena, with emphasis on scientific methods, including observation, verification and measurement. The Marxists adopt the method of historical materialism which recognizes the primacy of economic determinism of political action. This explained the general conflict of methodological choice which determined the specific research method to be used. Adedekun (2000), discussing methodological issues in public administration, noted that the most commonly used research methods in public administration are: case study, comparative, experimental and core experiment.

Case study method: According to Anikpo (1986: 38), the researcher in case study focuses on a particular social

institution or a community and attempts to relate any particular attribute of that unit to other variables. The aim is to find out as much detail as possible about a particular problem. It involves collecting information about the pressing problems, past experiences and any environmental factors that affect the behaviour or functioning of the social unit. In this way, it also connotes a survey. Case studies tend to maximize details about specific units. It is similar to what economists usually refer to as micro-analysis.

Comparative study: This deals with more than one social unit at a time. It finds out how and why a particular problem occurs. They compare and contrast a set of phenomena to determine the circumstances that lead to the occurrence of certain events or conditions.

In terms of general research approach, Perry and Kraemer (1992: 360) noted the existence in public administration researches of the following inquiry directions: recollected experience, historical, descriptive, deductive reasoning, logical argument, legal brief, empirical analysis, heuristic analogy such as simulation and literature review. In empirical method of analysis, Perry and Kraemer (1992: 361) noted the existence of case study, correlational analysis, structural equation (path analysis), longitudinal analysis, controlled field or laboratory analysis, and other non-empirical approaches. Accordingly, public administration research lacks cumulativeness, judging from the dominant methodology in used.

A critical look at this review shows that there is emphasis or common reliance on case study, experimental and comparative research methods in public administration and its sub-disciplines like policy study. It could also be noted that the research method in use in any discipline is a function of the subject matter in study of the discipline. Looking at research in public administration, the common subject of studies are usually administrative theory, public policy, policy management, planning, personnel, financing, accountability, citizen participation, intergovernmental relations, urban and regional government, federal and state government. The subjects of study simply connote that the most appropriate research methods to be employed are case study, comparative and experimental study.

But as the scope of the issue covered in public administration has varied over time (though without losing focus on its core or central questions), so have the methods varied among researchers. Commenting on the methods employed in the systematic study of politics, Varma (1975: 16-17) aptly wrote:

Political science, being a comprehensive discipline, may need not one but several methods. Unlike sociology or psychology where the study of the group or the individual is involved, a study which can be carried on through methods involving precision, accuracy, etc., political science deals with the territorial state, which is the largest organized form of society, which changes its character, form and goals from time to time, from country to country, and each change may involve a different approach, a method, or sometimes a combination of different approaches or methods. Emergence of a constitutional form of government and its justification may need one kind of method while the emergence of a totalitarian dictatorship quite another kind... it may sometimes require documentary methods of history, and on another occasion the analytical and case study method of legal studies, and

on still other occasions, the statistical and interview methods.

This difference in the method of conducting political science research as noted by Varma (1975) follows closely with the problem of methodological crisis as exemplified earlier from the stance of traditionalists, behaviouralists and Marxists.

Hence, the research method used by researchers in public administration and its sub-fields depends on the topic of research, target group, orientation and value of the researcher. Notable research designs useful in social sciences which encompasses public administration and policy study include: action research, cohort study, longitudinal study, meta-analysis, and sequential study (University of Southern California USC, 2016).

Conclusion and Recommendation

The scope of interest in public administration and social policy studies from the discussion above seem unlimited, the research method employed in its investigation are diverse and correspond with the topic of interest, orientation and value of investigator among others as earlier noted. But case study, comparative, experiment and historical are commonly feasible as alternative research methods in public administration. It is pertinent to note that research in policy study in particular and public administration in general are qualitative and quantitative and respond to the needs of empirical validity. It is strongly recommended that practitioners, students and scholars in these areas should be vested with modern social science research packages like SPSS, stata, etc. Numeric skills should be a fundamental requirement for entry to promote ability to utilize research methods and improve inquiry.

Like any other social science, public administration and social policy study employs scientific methods and it is qualified to be called a science on its own right as it studies human behaviour. Improvement in public administration and social policy research will help in improving the wellbeing and quality of life, which is the goal of social policy administration.

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