MINISTERY OF EDUCATION OF THE REPUBLIC OF BELARUS

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REFERAT

“Stages and types of an applied sociological research.

Sociological research process”

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What is an applied sociological research?

Sociology can’t exist without various kinds of empiric information about social processes and events that take place in the society. Such information can be found in the data of formal statistics published in magazines, bulletins etc. It can also be obtained as a result of an applied sociological research (ASR) which differs from a fundamental research by its final result. A fundament research is aimed at getting new knowledge while an applied sociological research is to be carried out to solve a particular social problem. This feature constitutes the ASR specificity.

The ASR specificity is made up of other features, too. There are two types of applied sociological researches. The first one is to investigate problems which demand consequent and long-term managerial activities; the second one is carried out on request of customers on one occasion. Success of such a research depends on mutual understanding between a researcher and a customer as far as its aims, objectives and expected results are concerned. Time factor is also very important as results should be gained in terms agreed upon by both sides.

Any ARS requires a solid theoretical basis. To work it out, a researcher should have a good command of a sociological conceptual apparatus. It is of great significance because different social sciences and even different scientific schools within one science make use of different concepts to explain one and the same phenomenon. If it is a pure theoretical analysis, choosing notions and concepts makes no difficulty, as a rule. If it is empiric learning of a social problem, a sociologist should be able to make a correlation of theoretic models with their analogues in real life and correspondingly make use of notions and categories relevant for the given scientific perspective.

There are still debates in sociology whether it should have its own conceptual apparatus. The arguments are of rather a principal character because there is a close tie between people’s everyday consciousness and social sciences that has already resulted in borrowing many concepts from everyday consciousness to the conceptual apparatus of science. For instance, fundamental concepts “interest”, “motive”, “need”, “role” etc. are but a few examples of this kind, and they differ from other sociological categories such as “system”, “semiotics”, “functionalism”, “structure”, “stereotype” etc. In contrast to sociology, in natural sciences the number of borrowed everyday concepts is very small because there are fewer dilettantes among chemists or physicists than among sociologists, whose role any person without professional training is ready to perform.

Traditionally there are three types of concepts in sociology: those of general philosophic, those of grand sociological and operational ones. The first type of concepts exists in sociology because sociology emerged within social philosophy and preserved many of its concepts such as “society”, “social norms”, “culture”, “values” etc. When became separated, sociology began working out its own apparatus related to the areas of social life considered its object of research, for instance, “social action”, “social institution”, “social process”, “social control” etc. At the operational level (that of collecting empiric data), sociologists make use of concepts called variables which define people’s opinion of somebody or something, income level of a separate social group etc.

Anyway, the number of concepts and terms is constantly increasing due to the latest discoveries which are made in modern science changing the picture of social world and due to the processes taking place in modern society.

Diversity of the conceptual apparatus shows that having one and the same object of analysis, each scientific perspective in sociology singles out different subject areas in it. It means that the contents of a given concept may be brought about in a different way so as to what scientific school or paradigm it is studied by. For instance, philosophy accounts for 60 definitions of personality and 400 definitions of culture. Similar differences can be seen in sociology as well. So each concept and term reflects definite approaches and conceptions, and within them – qualities, characteristics of objects, phenomena, processes etc. being under study by researchers of those conceptions and perspectives.

The role of the conceptual apparatus is seen as double: first, it reflects the state of scientific conception of the analyzed object; second, it serves as the basis for working out a system of variables used in sociological surveys, observations, experiments etc.

Stages and types of an applied sociological research

The aim of an applied sociological research is to get facts to meet the customers’ practical needs, and it is carried out to confirm or reject a hypothesis. There are four stages in it: 1) a preparatory stage, 2) a field stage, 3) preparation for processing and processing the data, 4) analyzing the data and reporting the findings.

At the ASR preparatory stage the topic is made specified, a theoretic conception and research design are developed, a sample is made, tools of research are determined, research groups are formed, schedules are made, material and technical supply is discussed.

The aim of the ASR field stage is to collect primary sociological information in natural setting, or “in field”. The data can be obtained from people in class, at work, in and outdoors, on the exit etc. with different means and tools fixed by a research design.

Preparation for processing and processing of data. The obtained information needs checking up and regulating. The whole amount of data is studied from the viewpoint of the extract’s deviation from calculated parameters. The procedure includes looking through methodic documents to see if they are filled in an exact and complete way, with high quality, then reject as defective those papers which don’t satisfy the necessary requirements. Open questions are decoded, and the data can be processed with the computer. If the amount is little, it may be given a manual analysis.

Analyzing the data and reporting the findings. At this stage, conclusions are made if the hypotheses have been confirmed or rejected, social relationships, tendencies, contradictions, paradoxes, new social problems are revealed, results of the research are given shape of a document. Such documents are 1) information notes; 2) information report; 3) analytical report; 4) report on research. The last two documents should contain conclusions and recommendations on how to solve the learnt problem.

Due to depth of analyzing the subject of research and level of complexity of objectives being solved, there are three basic types of an ASR: a pilot, descriptive and analytical ones.

A pilot ASR is aimed at checking up how a basic ASR is prepared. It covers small amounts of phenomena and is based on a simple research design, so elements of the basic ASR are to be checked up: its objectives, hypotheses, conceptions, tools etc are specified. Very often new hypotheses are formed as a result of the pilot ASR.

A descriptive ASR is to get empiric data enabling to make up an integral presentation of a learnt phenomenon and its structural elements. It is based on a research design worked out in detail, and an approved set of tools is used. A descriptive ASR is used when the object of analysis is a relatively big amount of elements with various characteristics. With a descriptive ASR, one can compare and confront the object’s features, find out if there are social relations between them etc.

An analytical ASR is the deepest type of sociological analysis with the aim of both describing structural elements of the study phenomenon and finding out causes affecting its character and specificity. It needs a lot of time, a detailed research design and approved tools. By its methods of collecting empirical data, an analytical ASR is of a complex character as the data can be obtained with various forms of survey, document analysis and observation.

Another typology of ASR is based on whether an object is studied in statics or dynamics.

An instant ASR provides information about the state of an object and its characteristics at the moment of its study, or in statics. The information gathered that way bears static character as it reflects the object at a single point of time and can’t show changes or tendencies of the object developing in due course.

A repeated ASR is a study of one and the same object or objects carried out over a period of time or at several different points in time under same or different conditions, or in dynamics. Being rather complex by character, it requires rich methodic and methodological experience that a sociologist must have.

Learning social phenomena means getting and analyzing lots of information that is often non-systematic, non-comparable, obtained from different sources with different levels of reliability etc. In order to get a reliable picture of social reality and dynamics of social processes, it’s necessary to collect the data that most totally reflect social change, can be easily classified, systematized and given a quantitative generalization. So, collecting information should be done on a special purpose.

The most effective way to do it is social monitoring as an integral system to get the data about the phenomena and processes taking place in the society. Social monitoring is designed to fix, keep and make primary analysis of the obtained information, that’s why it requires theoretic, methodological basis and technical means to analyze the data. Monitoring is carried out by a single centre which provides processing of the data and makes them available for every customer.

Social monitoring is traditionally viewed as including two subsystems: statistical monitoring and sociological monitoring. Statistical monitoring is a system of getting quantitative characteristics of different sides of the society. Its aim is to collect statistical indices, parameters, coefficients etc. so that researchers can make an efficient analysis of political, economic, social and other phenomena.

In turn, sociological monitoring is needed to monitor changes taking place in the society. Sociological monitoring is an integral system based on study and analysis of mass conceptions about the given changes. Its aim is to get new sociological information on a systemic way – every small period of time, say, month or quarter. That’s why it requires obligatory monthly and quarterly express-surveys on most actual social problems.

Each subsystem provides different kinds of information: sociological information reflects people’s subjective opinions on various issues while statistical – describes various phenomena with objective quantitative parameters. Differentiating by the character of data, the subsystems comply with the principles of their organizing. When united, they become parts of an integral system of social monitoring that provides a complex analysis of the obtained data. Its results serve as a reliable basis for drawing conclusions on humans’ behaviour under objective conditions of living, and how humans’ interests, values, motives and aims of their activities affect these conditions.

Sociological research process

An ASR has its own structure and methodology but methodology, no matter what type a research can be, assumes a common foundation. First, after specifying the topic and selecting the type of an ASR, at the preparatory stage sociologists should develop a research design. A research design is of great importance as it gives theoretic grounds for methodological approaches, methods and techniques of learning the object and subject of research. It consists of two parts – methodological and proceeding ones.

A methodological part is to show what is studied. Its function is to clearly define the study problem, formulate aims and objectives, make a primary analysis of the object and subject of research, put forward hypotheses, select basic conceptions and make their interpretation.

A proceeding part is to show how to study: what methods of research are applied, and what sample is selected. It also contains a research outline, schedule, participants’ duties, costs etc.

A methodological part is the first step which is to select the problem by determining what the researcher wants to know about the topic. He conducts a review of the literature (relevant books and scholarly articles) to help to refine the problem, determine where gaps exist, and note mistakes to avoid. Before beginning the research, it is important to analyze what others have written about the topic. Here a researcher deals with a problem situation – a contradiction between knowledge of people’s needs in some actions and lack of ways, methods and means of realizing such actions. A problem situation is not identical with a problem. It can be considered within the framework of a problem but it can be wider or narrower than the latter. Normally, analysis of the problem situation begins with defining the contradictions that specify a given situation. The example of a problem situation can be a contradiction between a person’s need in employment and possibilities of a modern labour market: more people seeking for a job and fewer vacancies in the labour market.

Then the object of research or unit of analysis (the term used by Western sociologists) is defined. It can vary from social artifacts, phenomena, processes or groups to a society on the whole. Very often the object of research is people grouped into various communities, organizations or involved in different social processes because people bear a definite social problem. For instance, at learning the problems of employment of youth in Belarus, everybody who symbolizes the contradiction in the given area should be regarded as the object of research. It can be both existing and potential employers of a certain age, employees, law-makers who make laws of labour, representatives of state bodies of power and governance engaged in solving employment issues.

The object of research should be characterized from the viewpoint of its area (a country, region, city, enterprise etc), time (a period and terms of carrying out a research) and branch (type of activities such as industry, culture, education etc). For instance, the object of research is student youth of Belarus in early XXI century.

Often a selected object is too big for quantitative analysis that’s why a researcher should define an approximate size of the general sample. A general sample is the number of units with a common feature attributing these units to the analyzed entity. For instance, when any social problem experienced by students of Minsk is studied, students of Minsk are the object of research. It embraces everybody who studies at state and private institutions in Minsk (universities, institutes, colleges and vocational schools), namely girls and boys of all years of study – from first to fifth. And the general sample here is the statistic number of all students who study in Minsk. It’s a great number, for instance, 27,000 daytime and part time students study only at the Belarus State Economic University, and it’s not expedient to put every of them under analysis. So sociologists use a random sample selecting a group of units (a sample) for study from a larger group. Each unit is chosen entirely by chance that is known, but possibly non-equal, to be included in the sample. There are a lot of methods to provide reliability of including units into a random sample so that sociologists can get reliable data. In our case, a random sample can be a number of students taken in proportion to the total number of students studying at every institution of learning located in Minsk.

Besides the object of research it’s necessary to define the subject of research that fixes the limits under which the object should be studied. It helps the researcher to consider the object’s definite feature, quality or distinction in a detailed way. Qualities, features, relationships and the like are selected so that they can be described, classified and measured. For instance, it’s impossible to investigate students’ all social problems in one research but their attitudes to studies, absenteeism, their satisfaction with methods of teaching etc. can be under study.

After that researchers should sound aims and objectives. Aim is the final result researchers want to get. The ASR is to obtain a practical aim, find ways to solve a social problem, work out recommendations that’s why a novelty element is less important in it. Objectives are a totality of definite purposeful orientations which provide additional requirements to analyzing and solving the problem.

Now researchers may formulate a hypothesis – a statement of the relationship between two or more concepts, the object’s structure, or possible ways to solve a problem. Hypotheses are called working if they contain preliminary explanation of the phenomenon or process which is good enough for the first stage of research. At analyzing the object, a general hypothesis is defined but it is often too theoretic for an ASR and requires transformation. According to the contents, hypotheses fall into describing, explanatory and forecasting, according to the level of development – into primary (if put forward before collecting the data) and secondary (if corrected and formulated while analyzing the data).

The last section of the methodological part is entitled “Basic concepts, their interpretation and operationalization”. Concepts are known to have an abstract character that’s why in formulating a hypothesis concepts are converted to variables – concepts with measurable traits or characteristics that can change or vary from one person (time, situation, or society) to another. For instance, at learning teenagers’ deviant behaviour, the subject is “teenagers’ deviant behaviour”. This abstract concept is used in the hypothesis that there is a direct relationship of parents’ deviant conduct and their children’s deviant behaviour. To check up this hypothesis the concept “deviant behaviour” should be converted to a variable that is done stage by stage. The first stage is the concept’s theoretic interpretation. It’s not easy because different scientific sources can have different interpretations of one and the same concept. A basic (abstract) concept often contains variables or particular concepts that are less abstract. The second stage is operationalization or converting concepts to mono-semantic terms, finding their analogues in real life or its empiric indicators. Operational variables constitute the instruments to collect empiric data.

The second part of a research design is the proceeding part which includes a set of methods and technique of research. It means the proceeding part describes ways of collecting, processing and analyzing the data. As a rule, an ASR is carried out on the basis of a random sample, and its main requirement is to be representative that’s why a random sample should represent basic characteristics of a general sample. If the country’s population or its part a researcher intends studying is a general sample, the number of interviewed individuals is a random one.

As a rule, the general sample is defined by the aim of research, and a random one – by mathematic methods. When a sociologist is going to study how Belarusian youth spends its spare time, he defines all young people living in Belarus as the general sample but he’ll have to question only a part of them as a random sample. The latter can exactly represent the general sample if a researcher follows the rule: each young person must have an equal chance to be included into the random sample, no matter where he lives, works or studies, what sex, age, state of health or the like he has. A researcher can’t question respondents if they are most available or selected on purpose. Selection of respondents is done with a mechanism of probabilistic choice and special mathematic procedures providing a higher level of objectivity and reliability. An accidental method is regarded as the best way to pick up typical representatives of the general sample.

Additional literature

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