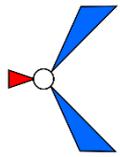


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bncdoc.id	HPU
bncdoc.author	Ackroyd, Stephen
bncdoc.title	Data collection in context.
bncdoc.info	Data collection in context. Sample containing about 40377 words from a book (domain: social science)
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<p><835/c></p>  <p>Key: Footprint ConEn1 Footprint ConEn2 Footprint ConEn3</p>	<p>thinking about social research, namely that it is about testing theoretical explanations of the facts. This emphasis is misleading in a number of ways. For one, much of scientific activity is not concerned with explanation as normally understood but with, “just finding out how things are”, “how things work”, “what things look like”. Much of biology and botany, for example, is concerned with taxonomy or classification rather than with explanation. Although to be effective taxonomy needs to be informed by theoretical and research requirements, it is not explanatory in the sense that theories are expected to be. Much of science is concerned with describing things rather than with explanation. Although there is perhaps a sense in which both taxonomy and description are related to explanatory purposes, this is not in any straightforward or enlightening fashion. Thus, in social science much research activity is directed at simply describing how things work, how conversations are organised, how slaughtermen do their work, how managers manage, what police-officers do on the beat, and so on; activities which are not especially motivated by explanation as the point of inquiry. This is not to say that at some point such studies may not eventually facilitate or enter into explanations of a traditional theoretical kind, but this is not their point. Further, and although this will not be our major preoccupation, “finding out” new theories, new perspectives and new approaches, looking to see how well they work and what problems they can deal with, is as much part of research as “finding out” new facts. A new theoretical formulation or a new analogy can be immensely important in furthering knowledge; certainly just as much as can finding out a new fact. Indeed, one could say that the latter without the former is more use to the game of Trivial Pursuit than it is to science. Darwin’s great innovation, for example, was not so much in finding out new flora and fauna during his voyage in the Beagle, but in thinking about them in a new and interesting fashion; one of major consequence for our understanding of the nature of life on this planet and driving much of biological research explicating and developing the programme that Darwin’s theory initiated. Similarly, a great many of the data Marx used in his theory of capitalist society were taken from “fact-finding” Royal Commissions established during the nineteenth century. There is one additional point we want to make about research which has to do with its collective and temporal character. By these we do not just mean that lots of people do research and take time over it. It is to stress than</p> <p>no piece of research</p> <p>, no matter how expensive or extensive, stands alone but becomes part of a corpus that is argued over, debated, used, criticised, ignored, reviewed, assessed, discarded, used as the basis for further research, and more. There is a strong sense in which the audience for research is other researchers. The significance of any research can never be merely an internal matter but is very much one determined by the response and judgements of fellow researchers and a fact of research life. THE ROLE OF PHILOSOPHY IN SOCIAL RESEARCH Perhaps one of the more puzzling contexts of social research is philosophy. Earlier we spoke of the selective interests that disciplines take in the world. For most this is a consequence of them being, or</p>
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	<p>aspiring to be, objective sciences incorporating, well or badly, the scientific method. Physics is interested only in those abstracted features of the world which its theories specify: one way of describing what physics does is “go beneath” how the world appears to us to uncover the “real” physical principles and processes which produce the ordered universe. In hindsight it is, in some respects, a pity that the social sciences, and sociology in particular, have taken physics as the exemplar of science; the science that it is the aspiration of all sciences, including the newer ones, to emulate. It is a pity not because sociology can not become like physics or, indeed, become a science - it is far too early for us to decide about either of these and related questions - but because sociology looked outside itself in order to discover the appropriate model of science to follow and, as it happened, it looked toward philosophical versions of science rather than to the practices of the sciences themselves. In one sense this was a reasonable step to take. If physics is to be taken as the acme of scientific knowledge, then it would make sense to try to emulate the methods that physics uses to gain its knowledge, and where else could one go for this by way of a shortcut but to philosophy, the discipline that has been endlessly preoccupied with the foundations of human knowledge. If there is a scientific method, then philosophy is likely to be the place to find it set out. Unfortunately, philosophy has proved to be a poor guide in this respect. Not because of any failure on its part, but because of its own nature as an argument subject. Philosophy’s business is with argument, and its theses, assuming that this is its endeavour (which is arguable), generate yet more argument, such that issues are never finally settled, and this is just</p>
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