Glossing inadequacies: a problem with some methodology texts

There is now a huge number of introductions to social research methods, both in general and focusing on specific approaches or methods, with many new ones being published each year. Not surprisingly, these are of variable quality: some are sound, others have serious weaknesses. One important function that they should serve is to provide readers with a clear understanding of key concepts and the meaning of commonly used terms. This may be done through in-text definitions or via the provision of glossaries. In this brief paper I want to indicate why some of what is provided along these lines is seriously inadequate and misleading. I will quote actual examples, but without providing specific citations since the point is not to pillory particular authors but to identify common failings and (more importantly) the requirements that need to be met.

One problem with some definitions is that they focus on only one meaning of the term concerned, often a minor or deviant one, without alerting the reader to the fact that there are others that could be equally or more relevant. For example, one methods text tells us that ‘reification’ refers to ‘the distortion inherent in according greater emphasis and less questioning to a concept or set of assumptions than would be called for in a more critical examination’. This may capture one way in which this term is sometimes used, but the entry does not even acknowledge the more usual philosophical meanings that readers are likely to come across, such as: ‘the treatment of human phenomena as if they were things’ (see, for example, Berger and Luckmann 1966:106), or the treatment of a situation as an instance of a general category thereby losing many of its relevant features (Holmwood 2014:22).

There are other examples of this failure to provide a reasonably comprehensive account of relevant meanings of a term. Here are two:

‘Belief is a conviction of the truth of something which is based on faith rather than evidence’

‘Functionalist refers to designing research to be “fit for purpose” with a particular emphasis on outcomes which can be easily applied to policy and practice’.

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1 Written 16.8.14
Use of the term ‘belief’ does sometimes indicate reliance on faith rather than evidence, but very often it does not. In most contexts it would not be contradictory to refer to evidence-based beliefs, as well as those based on faith, hope, prejudice, etc. Similarly, while the meaning given for ‘functionalist’ in the definition cited may sometimes occur, the term has more frequently been used to refer to specific sets of theoretical ideas in both sociology and psychology. In the case of sociology this is sometimes seen as involving a distinctive form of explanation (see Isajiw 1968; Martin and McIntyre 1994). The reader could be seriously misled by not being made aware of this.

A first requirement in the provision of definitions, then, is that they cover the main senses of the term that the reader is likely to encounter, and where necessary clarify the relationships amongst these. And, as I have illustrated, this requirement is by no means always satisfied. A second problem is the provision of definitions that are insufficiently specific – in the sense that they do not pick out key distinguishing features of what they are identifying. Take, for example, this definition of ‘symbolic interactionism’:

‘The approach purports that individuals’ actions and meanings are conferred and enacted through the process of interacting with each other.’

Aside from the non-standard usage of ‘purports’, and the problem that actions are described as being conferred, whereas presumably this can only be true of meanings, this definition gives readers very little sense of how symbolic interactionism differs from other sociological and social psychological approaches. Indeed, it is hard to imagine any sociologist disagreeing with symbolic interactionism if this were all it involved, even though there may be differences in interpretation of the key terms making up the definition. Part of the problem with that definition is a failure to indicate what the adjective ‘symbolic’ in ‘symbolic interactionism’ implies: the role that symbols, especially linguistic ones, play in mediating the attribution of meaning and structuring the process of social interaction. More broadly, though, it is necessary to indicate that the core of symbolic interactionism is the idea that people continually interpret their changing environments, both alone and in concert with others, and act on the basis of this ongoing process of interpretation. In particular, interactionists emphasise that social interaction is a highly contingent process, and must be studied in its unfolding, rather than being reduced to the operation of static variables, whether psychological or sociological.
This problem of highlighting the distinctive features of theoretical and other approaches can be further illustrated by looking at the same text’s definition of ‘social constructionism’. This is said to be:

‘based on the idea that people construct reality and their understandings through the process of interaction, but unlike phenomenology, it is possible for such an approach to take account also of structural factors that influence this process.’

It is difficult to see how readers could distinguish between symbolic interactionism and social constructionism when consulting these two definitions. We are not told whether or not interactionism can take account of structural factors (a matter of contention amongst advocates of this approach), and therefore whether it is more similar to constructionism or to phenomenology in this respect – accepting for the purposes of argument that there is such a difference between these two in the first place. Moreover, determining whether or not social constructionism can take account of such factors would depend on a more precisely specified conception of what it involves, and would require distinguishing between more and less radical versions of it. The definition offered does not begin to do this.

A related, but slightly different, problem concerns a failure to deal with terms that are similar and/or overlap substantially in meaning. For example, another glossary includes an entry on ‘constructivism’, defining it as follows:

‘the term used to describe a theory of knowledge which stresses the active process involved in building knowledge rather than assuming that knowledge is a set of unchanging propositions which merely need to be understood and memorised.’

Readers are not being prepared here for the fact that ‘constructionism’ and ‘constructivism’ are sometimes treated as synonymous, at other times as having significantly different meanings. Furthermore, if as seems likely the focus in this entry is on psychologists’ use of ‘constructivism’, this needs to be highlighted. It should also be remarked that, even in these terms, the contrast drawn in the definition is an odd one. By no means all those who deny that ‘knowledge is a set of unchanging propositions which merely need to be understood and memorised’ would be classified as constructivists on most usage of that term.

In another text, ‘social constructivism’ is defined as referring:
to the process by which phenomena in the social world are formed and sustained by social structures and interactions rather than being constants that conform to natural laws. Researchers who adopt this approach are likely to use mainly qualitative rather than quantitative methods.’

This treats the meaning of the term ‘constructivism’ as virtually synonymous with that of ‘constructionism’, but again without warning readers about the usage of these different terms. It also suffers from the weakness I identified earlier: a lack of specificity in formulating the distinctive features of the position. On this definition virtually all social scientists today would be social constructivists, whether or not they use qualitative methods. I suggest that any reader who looked up these various definitions of constructionism/constructivism is likely to be left confused. They certainly ought to be.

A similar inadequacy of specification can be found in definitions of other methodological terms. Here, for example, is a glossary entry for ‘grounded theory’:

This is an approach to analyzing qualitative data that argues that it is possible, through interrogating, comparing and contrasting pieces of data, to build up theoretical accounts.

There may, perhaps, be some approaches to qualitative research that would not fit this description, but most would do so, including many that could make little genuine claim to being examples of grounded theorising. Another problem with this definition is that grounded theorising is an approach to the design of whole investigations not just to the analysis of data.

This leads me on to my next topic: the problem of inaccuracy. Errors, minor and more serious, are not uncommon in the definitions provided in methodology texts. Here is an example of a relatively minor, though common, error:

Triangulation is a method whereby data from at least three different perspectives (for example, teacher, students and observer) are collected on the same issue/event so that they can be cross-validated. Alternatively, three or more different kinds of data (for example video, interview and questionnaire) are collected on the same issue/event and used to shed light on each other.
In fact, triangulation involves the comparison of two or more types or sources of data, or theoretical perspectives. The term comes from navigation (or surveying), where two lines of observation on the same fixed object carried out from different vantage points can be used to pinpoint one’s position relative to this landmark. The two vantage points and the landmark constitute three corners of a triangle, and it is through employing the known geometrical properties of triangles that estimates of location can be calculated. So, the error involved in this definition of ‘triangulation’ obscures the basis of the metaphor being used. Furthermore, one might also reasonably expect an account of triangulation to indicate that there are conflicting views about its purpose: ‘cross-validation’ was certainly what it was originally intended to achieve, but this has increasingly been challenged and alternative conceptions of what it can provide have been developed, particularly by qualitative researchers (see Hammersley 2008).

It is not, however, only those terms that are generally associated with qualitative research that are defined in ways that are seriously defective. For example, one glossary tells us that:

Randomized controlled trials are used in experimental research and comprise: selecting a random sample representative of the total population being studied; dividing this into two component parts (treatment group and control group); administering a pre-test to the whole cohort and subsequently a ‘treatment’ (some kind of change) to the treatment group only; and following up with a post-test to establish the differences in the changes that have taken place over time between the two groups in order to identify those changes which have resulted from the treatment.

While a few parts of this definition are correct (many trials do use treatment and control groups, and pre-testing, and all use post-testing), there are important errors. The main one is that the term ‘randomised’ in ‘randomised controlled trial’ (RCT) does not refer to random sampling, but rather to the random allocation of subjects to treatment and control groups, or to groups receiving different treatments. Many experimental researchers argue that this is essential if reasonably confident conclusions are to be drawn about whether any difference discovered between the groups was a product of the treatment(s) being tested. RCTs rarely involve random sampling from the relevant population; this, indeed, is one of their weaknesses, or so it has been argued.
Entries on philosophical terms seem especially likely to involve inaccuracy. Here is one example:

Logical positivism was the original form of positivism which established logic and the principle of verification as essential elements in the search for knowledge and truth.

One error here is that the term ‘positivism’ was invented in the early nineteenth century by Comte, and his work spawned an influential philosophical and religious movement in France and beyond. So, twentieth-century logical positivism was not the ‘original form’. There seems to be a kind of historical myopia here. The rest of the definition is also misleading, partly because it is insufficiently specific. The logical positivists did not ‘establish logic’, Aristotle would have a better claim to this, and he also certainly saw it as an essential element in the search for knowledge. The logical positivists were not even responsible for the development of the new type of logic on which they relied, this was developed by others in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

What is true in this definition is that the logical positivists are the most famous exponents of verificationism, and that they saw verification as a central scientific principle. However, should a reader pick up this point and then go on to look up ‘verification’ in the same source, he or she would probably be led into further misunderstandings:

Verification (verificationist) refers to the process of collecting evidence to prove the truth of a proposition. It is the opposite approach to falsification (see falsifiability).

Looking up ‘falsifiability’ we find:

Falsifiability is the term used in Popperian philosophy of science to replace verifiability. Popper argued that it would never be possible to prove the truth of any proposition because of the limitations of human experience. It was, therefore, preferable to seek to falsify a proposition, so that if this proved impossible the proposition could be said to have been established as true until such time as evidence was found to disprove it.

With the first of these definitions we are immediately faced with a problem because ‘verification’ and ‘verificationist’ cannot have exactly
the same meaning, since one is a noun and the other an adjective. But, even aside from this, the account of ‘verification’ here is wrong. It could be defined as ‘the process of testing the truth of a theory in the belief that there could be sufficient evidence to prove it’; but that is very different from collecting evidence to prove the truth of a proposition, which amounts to a form of bogus inquiry. Meanwhile, veriﬁcationism is the philosophical view that statements only have meaning if they can be subjected to logical or empirical test. Closely associated with this, though not logically implied, is the assumption that the truth of theories can be convincingly demonstrated beyond all possible doubt through such tests. Popper’s falsiﬁcationism challenged the second of these assumptions, as regards empirical propositions, though he regarded veriﬁcation as logically impossible rather than as deriving from the limits of human experience. What is true in the deﬁnition of ‘falsiﬁability’ is that he believed that the task of scientiﬁc research is to seek to disprove theories, and that they should be assumed to be true if they survive, until further notice.

Here is another example of an inadequate deﬁnition of a philosophical term:

Realism (real, realist, reality) is based on the epistemological assumption that truth can be determined as something distinct from the processes of mind (see Correspondence theory of truth, above). It assumes that there is a reality ‘out there’ which can be investigated and understood on the basis of collecting data and identifying supportive evidence.

Once again we have several words from different grammatical categories being deﬁned simultaneously. A more substantive problem is that there are many kinds of realism, and readers need to be warned of this. Furthermore, the formulation ‘determined as something distinct from’ is complex and obscure. Realists need not assume that truths can be discovered without reliance upon ‘processes of mind’, indeed it is hard to imagine who would believe this. The second part of the deﬁnition is likely to leave a reader uncertain about the meaning of ‘out there’: external to what? To an individual or to some collective human subject,

2 A similar problem arises with this deﬁnition: ‘Cause and effect (causal, causation) refers to the process of establishing a causal link between a “treatment” and a “research outcome”’. Moreover, these terms do not refer to a ‘process of establishing’ but to a process in the world. We should also note that this deﬁnition is circular: the term ‘causal’ is used to deﬁne ‘cause’. This is another occasional fault in deﬁnitions offered in methodology texts and glossaries.

3 It is also true that Popper rejected the idea that statements can only have meaning if they can be subjected to direct empirical or logical test.
for example? In fact, all that realists need to assume, on the basis of some definitions of their position, is that the existence and character of the phenomena studied are not entirely determined by the processes of perception, cognition, and linguistic formulation employed in understanding them.⁴

There are one or two terms that almost always seem to be poorly or inaccurately defined. One of these is ‘ethnomethodology’, which is defined in one glossary as:

a research approach which adopts the methods of ethnography but may not strictly be classifiable as ethnography. It tends to be used loosely to define research which gives priority to collecting data about people using methods such as interviewing and unstructured observation, and using description and narrative in reporting.

Almost nothing is correct about this definition: ethnomethodologists can employ ethnography, indeed some have done this, but they need not do so. Many, for example, have analysed transcripts of talk-in-interaction from settings in which they were not themselves present. Moreover, what is central to their work is a concern with revealing the mundane practices or methods involved in the constitution of the many objects that human beings experience as part of their world. This, and what it is taken to entail, is what is distinctive to ethnomethodology.

In summary, then, what is required of a definition is that it provides a reasonably comprehensive account of the relevant meanings of a term, that the account of each sense is specific enough to identify the distinctive features of what is being defined, and that it is clear and accurate in its formulation. Unfortunately, these are criteria that the definitions offered in methodological texts and glossaries by no means always meet. And the difficulties in doing this should not be underestimated. However, defective definitions are literally worse than useless: it would be better if they had not been provided, not least because they may be reproduced, and thereby sow further confusion and error. Unless we are able to work with theoretical and methodological

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⁴ The entry on the correspondence theory of truth referred to in the definition of ‘realism’ claims that this: ‘assumes that truth corresponds to a fact or facts, i.e. it is established in relation to an observable reality in the world’. There are difficulties, hard to avoid, concerning how ‘fact’ can be defined without employing the concept of truth, thereby rendering this definition circular. Furthermore, the term ‘corresponds’ appears in the definition, so that the definition is circular in this respect too. Equally problematic is the requirement that reality be observable. Commitment to the correspondence theory of truth does not entail this, as is made clear by the case of Aquinas and others, see Prior 1967.
terms that are relatively clearly and consensually defined, that capture key concepts, our efforts to deal with the challenging problems that social research faces will be doomed to failure.

References


