How We Know What We Know and How We Know We Know

1

CHAPTER OUTLINE

Have you ever had an argument with someone? She said one thing and you said another. She claimed she was right because she read it in a book. You defended your position by pointing out that a doctor told you and a doctor should know. So arguments go. But how do they stop? How can these points of view be tested to determine which is correct? How do we know when we are right or wrong? How do we know what we know?

We are confronted by questions all through life. What is the best diet for weight loss? What is the impact of job loss on the rate of marital breakdown? What is the solution to child poverty, or homelessness? Is tertiary education worthwhile? Is coeducation better for males than it is for females? We may spend a lot of time debating the issues raised by these and similar questions, but how do we find reliable answers to our questions? How do we get the knowledge we seek?

'Knowledge' can be defined as a description of the state or operation of some aspect of the universe upon which people or groups are prepared to act. If I 'know' that it will rain, I am likely to take my umbrella, or wear a raincoat. If I 'know' that completed tertiary education is reliably associated with higher levels of income, I am more likely to make some effort to attend and graduate.

Knowledge does not hang in space; it is a product of social processes. The production of knowledge usually begins when the public, governments or groups

of experts recognise that the state of knowledge in a particular area is inadequate. Next, funding bodies, corporations and universities accept research proposals and decide which are the most relevant and deserving of support. Successful proposals are carried out by teams of researchers who produce findings through their combined experience and skills. Research findings are communicated and endorsed by professional organisations, which decide what research should be published and how it should be presented. Finally, communities and governments 'have a say' in how new knowledge is applied by debating and legislating for its appropriate uses. In this way, knowledge is both a product and the property of social groups.

Answering our questions

One of the first issues to address is whether we will answer questions ourselves or rely on others for the information we need. If we want to know whether it is raining outside, we can look ourselves or go online to a weather site. If we want to know what Australians think about politicians, we can ask ourselves and our friends, or look at the recent polls. Whatever the question, we are faced with roughly the same choice. We can do research—that is, collect the evidence ourselves—or consult an authority.

Consulting an authority as a way of knowing

Usually when we have a question, we look at websites, articles in journals, newspapers or books; we ask a friend who 'knows'; or we consult an expert—such as a medical practitioner, a lecturer, a religious leader, the police, a lawyer or an umpire. The most common way in which we get answers to our questions is by consulting authorities. As long as the authority consulted knows the answer, this can often be the most efficient way to answer questions.

People and organisations can have at least two kinds of authority: authority due to position and authority due to knowledge. The kind of authority that is most useful for answering our questions about the nature and operation of the world—particularly the social, biological and physical world—is authority due to knowledge.

The problem with consulting authorities is selection. On what basis do we select authorities? When we are looking for an answer to a question or problem, the essential guideline should be that the authority has the knowledge we need. However, other reasons sometimes influence our choice.

We may be influenced by a person's position, popularity or appearance. The critical point is that no matter how prominent the person, no matter how much authority or power they have, their opinion on a subject is of no more value than any other person's unless they have expertise in the area. A bishop, a physician,

a judge or an Olympic gold medallist may hold opinions about unemployment, taxation, the way families should be raised, or the role of government in foreign aid. These opinions, unless based on special knowledge of the issue in question, are no more valid than those expressed on the same topic by anyone else.

Inevitably, a problem with consulting authorities will arise—two recognised authorities in the same field will disagree. For example, it is very common to encounter conflicting opinions regarding the extent of unemployment, gender discrimination and racial discrimination; benefits and costs of domestic welfare programs, foreign aid and affirmative action policies; and the incidence of health infections or work-related injuries. Authorities also fail us when they cannot answer questions with assurance. Sometimes their opinions are unconvincing. On many issues that are or appear to be new, there may be no authorities at all.

Research as a way of knowing

To evaluate the opinions of authorities, we review their research. For this, we need to understand the 'research process'—the generally adopted approach to doing research. Then we can make informed inquiries and judgments of authorities. Has the authority chosen the most appropriate research method? Have all stages of the research been conducted properly? Does the authority's research address the relevant aspects of the question? Has the authority made a valid interpretation of the research findings? What are the limitations of the research?

When authorities cannot answer our questions or we are dissatisfied with their opinions, we conduct research ourselves. To obtain findings in which we can have confidence, we must be familiar with the research process.

The research process is guided by rules and principles for making confident statements about knowledge of the world based on our observations. As the rest of this book will show, the research process is a not an activity that we know intuitively and can just 'go and do'. It is an activity that others have spent much time developing through practice and critical discussion. You will not become familiar with the research process unless you study and practise it.

Set out below are examples of the types of important questions that face groups in today's societies. To pursue valid answers to such questions, knowledge of the research process is essential.

1 Corporations need to have an informed idea of public preferences for products or services. Will the public accept changes in packaging or product performance?
2 Social workers need to know what it is like to live under certain conditions, with certain levels of ability, or in certain ethnic groups and sub-cultures, in order to design appropriate service delivery systems.
3 Professionals such as doctors need to assess the validity of theories that have consequences for the way they practise. Does taking a regular low dose of aspirin reduce the incidence of cardiovascular disorder?

4 Governments need to know about the effects of policies. What have been the consequences of the immigration policies of the past two decades? What are the consequences of prison terms for juvenile offenders?

If the subject of the research is controversial, it will encounter considerable scrutiny. The researchers will be challenged to provide solid and carefully collected evidence. If the results of their research are clear, then they may be able to settle the controversy, not by appeal to authority, but by appeal to the evidence they have collected and are able to show to others.

Summary

Research is conducted to settle disputes about the nature and operation of some aspect of the universe. The research process is a disciplined way of coming to know something about our world and ourselves.

QUESTIONS FOR REVIEW

1 When is research carried out?
2 In what ways is the expertise of an authority limited?
3 Discuss some of the problems involved in consulting authorities in order to answer questions. For example, who would you consult about child-raising techniques? Who would you consult about the impact of explicitly violent television on the play routines of children?
4 List the authorities you regularly consult. How do you know they know? What characteristics of these authorities are important to you? Gender? Age? Social position?
5 Is it possible to live without accepting the word of authorities?

SUGGESTIONS FOR FURTHER READING

Bynner, J. & Stribley, K. M. (2010) *Research Design: The Logic of Social Inquiry*, Aldine Transaction, New Brunswick, chapters 1–5.

May, T. (2011) *Social Research: Issues, Methods and Process*, McGraw Hill, Berkshire.

Punch, K. (2014) *Introduction to Social Research: Quantitative and Qualitative Approaches*, Sage, London.

Wallace, W. L. (2009) *Principles of Scientific Sociology*, Transaction Publishers, New York, chapter 1.