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## Research Methods and the Confusion in Humanities Studies in Nigeria: The Example of Literary Studies

Dul Johnson & Mary Adebayo

### Abstract

*Research remains an integral and critical concern in the academia, and it is the mainstay of all disciplines. But different disciplines have different ways of research, the reason why there are different styles, methods, and manuals for its conduct and presentation. This paper seeks to discuss the concept of research in the Humanities, which seems to be endangered by the encroachment of the methods of research in the Social Sciences. The paper therefore examines the methods employed by the Sciences, the Social Sciences, and the Humanities in their conduct of research, highlighting the relationship and the intersection between the disciplines. It argues that the encroachment of the methods of research in the other disciplines into those of the Humanities has brought in confusion for students and scholars in the Humanities - a very unhealthy development that is threatening the vibrant study of literature and the arts. The paper concludes by urging experienced researchers in the humanities to defend and popularize the methods of the Humanities rather than succumbing to the pressures of the other disciplines.*

**Key words:** Research, Humanities, Disciplines, Confusion, Methods

## **Introduction**

Virtually every area of our lives depends on one form of research or another. Our health, movements, communication, education, daily comfort, and what we eat all depend on it. In fact, all human advancement depends on it. It is with the knowledge acquired from research that we are able to initiate new things and improve on how we do others. It is a process that involves the study and investigation of ideas or phenomena with the aim of advancing knowledge, or finding answers to certain questions, or solutions to identified problems. It adopts certain parameters and structures in order to arrive at a logical conclusion. Research is needed in almost all spheres of life, both in the academic and non-academic circles.

Research may be carried out to reinforce or corroborate previously held opinion or knowledge possessed, but this must be done by isolating areas of weakness or points that need to be buttressed or on which the opinion or knowledge may be anchored. This may be done in order to simplify, clarify or amplify fundamental grey areas that could lead to the acceptability of the projected idea/concept. The manner in which research is carried out varies from one sphere or discipline to another, depending on the purpose, which often dictates the methods used. Our concern in this paper, however, is with research in the academia, which has remained germane to the existence and continued relevance of all the disciplines.

In the Nigerian academia, especially in the arts and humanities, and particularly with regard to literary scholarship, the way research has been perceived and carried out is fraught with confusion. In spite of the existence of the Modern Language Association of America (MLA) style, (not minding the slight controversy the title suggests), the arts and humanities have been

coerced into approaching research in the way it is done in the social sciences and other disciplines. But then, scholars of the arts and humanities have been complicit in the conspiracy that has made this coercion possible. The result is that younger scholars, and students of the arts at different levels are drawn into a whirlpool of confusion on how to prosecute their research projects or carry out critical discourses in literary articles.

It is hoped that this paper will make clear the differences in the disciplinary pursuits of the arts and humanities on the one hand, and the social sciences on the other — the goals and motivations for their researches, which in turn give rise to the methods that each adopts — thereby liberating Nigerian literary (and liberal arts) scholars and students from the stranglehold of the social science methods. Furthermore, it will give them a clear direction and make them enjoy what they do. When this happens, there will be greater productivity and quality in literary scholarship.

### **Concept and Definitions of Research**

If we look at the etymology of the word from its French origin, *research* suggests an intense, rigorous, even forceful search (and therefore even a hunt) for something. It may sound farfetched but not entirely unreasonable to give the word a modern interpretation, re-search: re- and search, meaning to search and search again, even several times, through something. What is being sought could be knowledge, answers to questions, or solutions to problems. A good number of definitions, especially those from dictionaries tend to accommodate this idea of a broad and rigorous search. However, many definitions by individual scholars would make one conclude that research was designed for the sciences mainly, be they natural, medical, or social and management sciences.

In their conception, research is a process or procedure that necessarily investigates a problem, asks questions, seeks answers, formulates a hypothesis, and collects data to analyse, which will lead to solutions to the problems or answers to the questions. We shall look at some of these definitions in order to reveal the fundamental differences between the concept of research in the sciences and the arts and humanities. We begin with definitions from the sciences (mainly the social sciences), which seem to be the main source (and cause) of the confusion.

Research, according to Olajuyigbe, "is (the) process of evolving dependable solutions to problem through planned, procedural and systematic collection, analysis and interpretation of data". In other words, research attempts to answer intellectual and practical questions through the application of systematic methods. Research methodologies vary and are often classified into categories. Specific academic fields tend to apply certain methodologies in their approaches to research. We will look at some definitions from the science/social science point of view vis-a-vis the (bibliographical) dictionary meanings of the word and concept.

As it should be expected, there are various definitions of research. In the Nigerian academia, most works done on research methods have come from the social and management sciences. Naturally, these works tend to slant heavily towards the disciplines of the authors; the social and management scientists. We will use one example of an author who has excerpted many others to make our case. Emmanuel E. Eguzoikpe (9,10), excerpts several definitions of research and we shall pick a few of his excerpts, which, collectively, make up his own idea of what research is, or should be. According to Eguzoikpe, research is:

1. "... [A] quest for information for the *solution* of a specific problem and for adding to man's store of knowledge" – The New Book of Knowledge."
2. "The process of arriving at dependable *solution* to problems through planned and systematic collection, analysis and interpretation of data."
3. "The motivating force in all research is the *existence of a problem and the urge to take care of or solve it. Without a problem situation there would be no research.*"
4. "A systematic, controlled, empirical and critical investigation of hypothetical proposition about presumed relations among natural phenomena."

Here then, is his startling conclusion: "... [R]esearch may be regarded as *"the application of scientific methods to the study of a problem"*." (All italics are ours, and added for emphasis)

The keywords and phrases here are, "solution", "existence of problem", "systematic, controlled, empirical and critical investigation", "application of scientific methods", and the idea of a "hypothetical proposition about presumed relations among natural phenomena". If research is defined for the scientists, (natural or social) only by these terms, then the arts and humanities have no business getting involved in research work. To put it differently, the process of investigation for the advancement of knowledge that takes place in the arts would need to be defined differently and perhaps given a new name.

We shall now look at some dictionary definitions, not because the reader has no access to the source, but because it will reveal the wide scope that is the concept of research. It will, also, depending on the dictionary you use (and there are many), expose the confusion even more. This is because the dictionaries are not

exactly in agreement with one another as far as the concept is concerned.

Here is a definition from the Apple dictionary: Research is *“the systematic investigation into and study of materials and sources in order to establish facts and reach new conclusions”*. The question here is, do the words “materials” and “sources” include novels, plays and poems? It is doubtful. And when we study these, do we seek to *establish facts* in order to reach *new conclusions*? Perhaps, yes. But perhaps, not. The *Webster’s Dictionary and Thesaurus for Students* defines research as a *“careful study and investigation for the purpose of discovering and explaining new knowledge”*. This seems to accommodate the arts. It does not talk about materials, or data analysis. The *Chambers 21<sup>st</sup> Century Dictionary* has a more interesting entry: *“detailed and careful investigation into some subject or area of study with the aim of discovering and applying new facts or information.”* This certainly suits the liberal arts and humanities even more than Webster’s.

If we put the dictionary definitions together (and there are many others) we would come to the conclusion that the concept is flexible; that it accommodates all forms of academic investigation. The details of definition that arise from the peculiarities of the disciplines are inevitable and should be understood and respected. Whether it answers questions, solves problems or draws attention to hidden treasures of whatever kind, every research ultimately shares information and advance knowledge. How to acquire and share the information and knowledge does not matter as long as the method is ethical. No method is superior or inferior to another.



### **Research in the Sciences**

The Sciences may be grouped in three broad categories when we talk about research. These are the Physical (Natural) Sciences, the Management Sciences, and the Social Sciences. Because they are all sciences, there are similarities in the way they conduct their researches as distinct and different from the way the Humanities do theirs. The sciences adopt a scientific methodology, which hinges on two main pillars: logical validity and empirical validation. They follow a five-step method or structure that comprises: a Research Question or Problem, a Hypothesis, the Procedure (methods), the Results, and the Conclusion.

### **The Physical/Natural Sciences**

Research in the physical/natural and medical sciences, however, requires that accurate tools be employed in order to arrive at deductions and exact conclusions. Precision is the word here. For that reason, accurate instruments and tools are used, which are exclusive to the physical and medical sciences. This kind of research is based on experimental methods, which often require laboratory investigations and observation. Here, facts and evidence count, not reason. But the use of specific instruments and experiments clearly marks this out as different from the methods and aims of the arts.

### **The Social and Management Sciences**

The social sciences are described broadly as the study of people and society. It is also referred to as the study of human beings and their social environments. Research in this discipline consists of investigations of culture, economics, geography, politics, psychology, sociology, etc. Hence, research here involves the study of man and his behavioural pattern; it is about answering the

questions we have about human behaviour and seeking to understand its “hows” and “whys”.

Social scientists use a variety of approaches and methods to conduct their research; they might run experiments, analyse statistics and data, interview, or observe people. This happens when the researcher is involved in a prolonged and detailed look at the behaviour of an individual or a group of people over a period of time. Case studies would involve direct contacts with behaviour often in the field of sociology, and psychology. As a result, social science research is commonly associated with the quantitative method. This method, unlike the qualitative technique, requires quantifiable data involving numerical and statistical explanations. Quantitative researchers seek to explain the causes of change primarily through objective measurement and quantitative analysis (statistics). Qualitative researchers, on the other hand, seek to explain why things are the way they are, and what they could be under different circumstances; the kind of investigation the artists/critics do. Obviously, it is the similarity in the investigation methods of the social and the physical sciences that qualifies the study of human beings to be considered as a science. On the other hand, it is the similarity in the subjects of concern between the social sciences and the arts and humanities that is partly responsible for the confusion.

The scientific method is systematic in the sense that it is ‘a process in which the investigator moves inductively from his observation to hypothesis to logical implication of hypothesis’ (Eguzoikpe 37). Complete and absolute assumptions are made in the sciences. None of these assumptions are made in literature and the arts. As for the medical sciences, the researcher must rely on systematic processes and observations to be able to arrive at interpretations. As it is in the physical sciences, specimens may be



required here, but certainly not with an array of instruments the physical or medical scientist needs. The major difference between research in the physical/natural and social sciences is that, while the former relies on experiment and observation/monitoring to gather data, the latter depends on the use of field survey and interrogation. In a way, therefore, all of the sciences have similar methods of doing research, with very little differences in design because of the difference in purpose. With the arts and humanities however, there is a wide gap, both in design and purpose.

### **Research in the Humanities**

Research in the humanities can take a variety of forms; it might include studying language, literature, philosophy, religion, culture, and many other disciplines and interdisciplinary studies. Its main business is the production and advancement of knowledge without necessarily seeking to answer questions or solve real or perceived problems. In rare cases it may do these, but this would depend on the particular discipline of the humanities we are dealing with. For example, we can make an exception for a discipline such as Language Studies, which, in a way, is a science.

In investigating mother-tongue interference for example, one may employ the social science (quantitative) method in order to determine the degree of interference on the speakers in a given population. Data may be collected and analysed and conclusions drawn based on the results. Likewise, if one wanted to know how much reading for pleasure took place in a particular community, one would have to design a questionnaire, like that of the social scientist, which would be administered to a sample population. The data would then be analysed, and we may get to know how much (or how little) reading for pleasure is done among the population,

and why. But when this happens, the particular research is no longer strictly in the domain of the arts.

What the foregoing examples establish, however, is the unique, overarching and accommodating nature of the humanities as a discipline. But this may also be the reason, or one of the reasons, for the confusion that is being experienced by our students and scholars. Because of its broad scope, research in the humanities is not dogmatic about its methods. But this flexibility does not mean that just anything can be imposed on the discipline. Research in the humanities, and particularly in literary studies, is predominantly archival because it is predominantly qualitative. All information needed by the literary critic may be found in the library, in primary and secondary sources stored in written forms such as books, journals, newspapers, magazines and other retrievable formats such as tapes, CD/DVDs and the Internet. No experiments are needed. No data is gathered nor questionnaire administered.

The foregoing discussion reveals the striking difference between the preoccupations of the natural and the social sciences on the one hand, and those of the humanities on the other, and hence the differences in their methods of investigation. The difference between the natural sciences and the arts is as clear as that between day and night. But it is not quite so between the arts and the social sciences as earlier indicated. Yet, the basic differences should be obvious and clear to all. While research in the social sciences is involved with statistics, case studies, interrogations, observations and measurements, the arts and humanities, and especially literary studies are not involved with any of these; the goals are not the same, neither are the designs.

### **Reasons for the Confusion**

Based on the similarities in the subjects of interest as identified earlier, it is easy to understand how Nigerian researchers and scholars in the arts and humanities got entangled in the confusion. But it is safe to say that this is a Nigerian problem, as the deeper roots seem to be in the problems of development. Since independence, Nigeria has been faced with lack of development and it is believed that the solutions lie in scientific advancement. Science became the "solution" to all "problems". The way to achieve scientific advancement, it was believed, was by turning every Nigerian into a scientist! Secondary schools were divided into science and ordinary secondary schools, emphasis shifted to the sciences and everyone had to pass mathematics in order to gain admission into the university, even if they were going to study law or literature. Science courses were promoted and were given more attention even in budgetary terms.

It may be the case that Nigeria is crazy about scientific advancement (even when we are ill-prepared for it), and that in the academia, the physical, medical and social sciences put together control an overwhelming majority of student intakes (because of the undue attention given to them). But one would not get on a plane simply because there are more people travelling on it. Artists should not, and cannot want to do research by the methods of the scientists; it would be the case of two people travelling in different and opposite directions boarding the same plane. At their inception, many Nigerian universities house arts and humanities departments with those of the social sciences in one faculty. The reasons are more administrative and for space management rather than for similarities in the disciplines. As co-tenants they get to do things together, such as holding meetings, seminars, conferences, and so forth. During the seminars and conferences (with the

majority coming from the social sciences) people pay much attention to methodologies, data collection, and finding “solutions” to the “problems” that particular papers (research) are meant to solve. Often, there are debates about how an abstract has not stated the problem of the research (paper). Could it be that the sheer numbers of people asking for “data” and “problems” to be stated have forced even the literary artists to start looking for *problems* where none exists?

We can see the influence of this coexistence in the way many literary scholars (and their students) form their conference topics, which also reflect in the titles of the individual essays they present at such conferences. Often, one finds topics that have no literary relevance, as the critics have joined in the search for solutions to the country’s socio-political problems. Thus, it is common to read things like “Literature and Socio-economic Development in Nigeria”, “Literature and National Development”, “Literature and Social Insecurity”, etc. of course, literature has a lot to do with all those. But who says that we can no longer phrase such pointed topics as “Symbols of Underdevelopment in Soyinka’s *The Trials of Brother Jero*”, or “Images of Imperialism in *The Trial of Dedan Kimathi*”?

The phraseology of the conference themes or topics reveals the inability of our literary scholars to boldly resist the encroachment of the solution-seeking social scientists. While it may be true that the writer is concerned about the problems of the society, the critic (researcher) is (and should only be) concerned about *how* literature (the writer) is concerned about the problem. Scholars of the humanities have succumbed to these pressures. No one reads a book for pleasure anymore; every book (every reading exercise) must be a search for solutions to Nigeria’s development problems. The result is that students of the humanities, (and

especially students of literature), who are forced to produce a "statement of problem" spend weeks in frustration and confusion. But a "statement of problem" they must produce! What most of them have ended up doing is produce a social science "statement of problem"; they look at the problem they believe the author, playwright or poet is addressing, and state it as their own problem. But this cannot be. The writer looks at a social problem (if, and when it is a social problem that is his subject), but the critic looks at the "way", the *how* the writer looks at the problem. It should only be in the "way" that the critic can find a problem. Unfortunately, that is not possible either, because the critic cannot tell the writer "how" to look at the problem. His business is to analyse that "way" and make it accessible to more readers. No amount of suggestions from a critic can change the situation or solve the problem the writer has addressed. Nor can it change the writer's work.

The artist, who works like the social scientist, is the writer, not the critic – the African writer most especially. And this can be easily explained. Modern African literature was born in a period of social and political upheavals that had been ushered in by colonial domination and oppression – a mental form of slavery. African literature launched itself as a response to these issues. Since then, African (and Third World) countries have been embroiled in numerous social problems to which the writers have continued to respond. The writers – many of who do a lot of research on their subject matter – seek to draw attention to these problems with the hope to thereby proffer solutions. The critic, a secondary observer and analyser of the problem cannot be expected to solve the problem. The most he can do is to help readers appreciate the way the writer has perceived and commented on the problem. Therefore, going into literature research looking for data or problem



is almost an impossible task. It is simply imposing on the researcher a method that would not work.

One of the worst nightmares this imposed method has brought to students and junior scholars of the liberal arts and humanities is the fact that the method is cast in such an iron-hard and archaic formula that makes absolutely no sense, and yet must be followed. Apart from the frustrating search for a problem and finding none, they must state the "methodology", "significance", "aims and objectives", "scope and limitation" (the most ridiculous) "justification", and "contribution to knowledge". Depending on the whims of the lecturer, other laughable demands would include "data analysis" and "research question". And the list seems to be growing, some of it due to lecturer's carelessness, ignorance or misconception. What on earth is something like data analysis doing in a study of Ngugi's Marxist posture in *Petals of blood*? And why would the student (or scholar) justify such a study except that the text exists and must be studied? To ask for justification is to ask the student to justify his being alive.

To prove the ridiculousness of the demands for scope and limitation (to which even more ridiculous attempts have been made to amend to delimitation), one finds such pathetic responses from students as "lack of money and time", and other such responses. Because of the demands of this hard-cast formula and the frustration and confusion about what to put under each, and also because of the similarity in the demands of the sub-heading—justification and significance, for instance, students always say the same things under different sub-heading, and sometimes interchanging them. Thus, it is common to find what should be objectives stated understatement of problem, and scope under justification.



## **Conclusion**

Research in the arts (and in literature in particular) is not designed to solve problems; at least, not in the way that the sciences seek to do, since that is not its main purpose. But even when it does, it must do so by indirection; the critic (researcher) must be a leading, instigative interpreter. For example, when a poet, playwright or novelist draws attention to a problem in his work, he does so with the hope to influence the reader to take some action, but he does so in a complex coded language. It then becomes the job of the critic to reveal to the reader what the writer seems to want him to do. This is the aim, and the essence of the literary researcher – to advance the knowledge of the reader about the creative work he is dealing with. This is all the critic does – advance the knowledge of the reader – whether the work draws attention to a social problem or simply paints a beautiful picture of the subject.

However, it is easy to identify and state research problems in the sciences. Why are the products of XY Company not selling now as they did two years ago? What can we do to improve the sales? Why do people in WZ town prefer AB soft drink to BB's? Why do so many people fall ill in a particular village at a particular period? A literature researcher (also known as critic) who raises a question such as "Why does the desert imagery predominate North African poetry?" or questions the prevalence of images of violence in Apartheid South African writing would be seen as being plain ignorant and one with no business in the discipline. His research business would be to explain to the ignorant reader why this happens, and *how* the writer's use of such imagery impacts on the reader's understanding of the work of art, and also of the situation depicted. The critic, as earlier stated, rarely sets out to answer questions or solve problems. What he does that is closest to solving a problem – but which is not, in the scientific sense – is what we

often refer to as filling an identified gap. A literary piece may receive wide critical appraisal with most or all critics agreeing on a particular angle of interpretation or meaning to the neglect of other possibilities. Someone realises this and chooses to draw attention to the neglected aspect or aspects. This is where the literary scholar or student may find a "problem": the neglect or misdirection. What then, would a scholar or student do, in a situation where the aim of the research is simply to advance knowledge, to open up the text or piece, to readers for better understanding and/or appreciation and he is told that he must state a problem? Nothing, except to fake one.

All works of art have one primary goal: to entertain, irrespective of whatever message the writer may want to pass across to the audience. Any writer who fails to pay attention to this important enterprise or sacrifices it on the altar of social content (message/propaganda) will ultimately fail in both. This is also the fate of any scholar/researcher in literature who insists that there must be a problem, which the critic must help the writer and reader solve.

### **Recommendations**

This study establishes that research in the Arts and Humanities differs from the Physical/Natural, Social and Management Sciences. As such, researchers in the Arts and Humanities should not be confused or compelled to adopt methods common and peculiar to the Social Sciences. Bodies responsible for procedures and documentation in the humanities such as the MLA should ensure clearer, more pointed and humanities-specific definitions of research for the discipline.

Scholars of the humanities, and particularly, literary scholars should resist the temptation to go with the crowd; they must resist the intimidation of the social sciences at all costs.

Teachers of research methods in the humanities have a responsibility to explain to their students the nuances in the purposes of research, and hence the differences in the methods. Scholars of the Humanities and literary arts should not forget that they are training people who will replace them. If there is going to be a change, future scholars must be part of the move, to ensure that it becomes a reality. A research in literature is not necessarily solving a problem; in fact, most times it is not solving any problem. Therefore, "Statement of Problem" should not be part of what a student is required to do. What may be emphasized is "Critical Perspective" or "Theoretical Framework" as others choose to put it.

The structure of a literary research or project must be devoid of the convoluted formula of the social sciences. Specifically, there should be no such sections as "background to study" (because there is really no background to it), "data analysis", "statement of problem" (because it has no problem to solve), and "significance of study" (because every literary investigation is significant to the extent that it adds to knowledge). "Statement of problem may be made optional, and may be brought in only when there is a real literary problem. This may be at the discretion of the supervisor. There is an option to the "research project" in the course outlines of the English Departments, which is the "long essay". This seems to be in recognition of the fact that the long essay may be more suitable to this group. In particular, students of literature may be asked to write long essays instead of projects.

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*Dul Johnson & Mary Adebayo  
Department of English  
Bingham University, Karu  
Nasarawa*