

Towards a Definition of Socio-Economic Research for the RESPECT Project

A draft working paper by Ursula Huws, RESPECT Project Director

Introduction

The term 'socio-economic research' is in widespread use in the European Commission's work programmes and elsewhere. In the Fourth Framework Programme, for instance, there was a programme entitled 'Targeted Socio-Economic Research' (TSER) and in the Fifth Framework Programme there were numerous calls for proposals to carry out socio-economic research related to Information Society Technologies (in the IST Programme) and to other issues of relevance to EU policy. At national level, there are also economic and social research funding councils in most European Countries. However, nowhere in this documentation, as far as I can tell, is any definition offered of 'socio-economic research'.

For the purposes of the RESPECT project, however, it is necessary to have some sort of functional definition. This short discussion paper is designed as the first step towards the development of such a definition. As the project develops, this definition will be tested in relation to the actual practices of socio-economic researchers, whose activities, qualifications and professional affiliations will be profiled as part of the project's work.

In the meantime, a brief survey of projects described as socio-economic research projects indicates that they cover a very broad range in relation to the backgrounds and qualifications of the researchers, the methodologies used and the subject matter addressed. It is clear that drawing a clear boundary around these projects that will distinguish them from other fields of endeavour, is likely to be extremely difficult, if not impossible. The word 'society' (and hence the prefix 'socio-') applies in its broadest sense to all human activity. There will therefore inevitably be areas of overlap with many other types of research, for instance with medical research, with mathematical modelling, or with documentary art. The outputs of socio-economic research may also be difficult to distinguish from other types of publication, for instance from journalism, biography or technical manuals.

In drawing up a definition it seems important to avoid at one extreme constructing something which is so broad as to be meaningless, and at the other, something which is so narrow that it fails to capture the full reality of the practices which are currently designated as 'socio-economic research' by the EU-funded research community.

Because the RESPECT project has been funded by the European Commission's IST Programme, and because of the special challenges which have been raised for the research community by the concept of an 'information society', it is proposed that the starting point for this definition should be these existing practices within the framework of the IST Programme. We hope, however, that this does not mean that they will be irrelevant in other areas. The increasingly inter-disciplinary nature of socio-economic research across all fields in the current rapidly-changing global landscape suggests that IST-related socio-economic research may well represent a more extreme example of more general issues and that our results will have broader applicability.

Five approaches to the problem of definition

In attempting to construct a definition, five possible approaches suggest themselves. These are:

1. discipline-based
2. methodology-based
3. policy-based
4. issue-based
5. hybrid

1. A discipline-based approach

A discipline-based approach to defining socio-economic research would define it as any research carried out by people who are qualified in one of the recognised socio-economic disciplines.

There are, of course a very broad range of such disciplines and their number is continuously increasing as a result of the development of new sub-disciplines and areas of applied research which all too often form the basis of new University departments. There are also important differences in national approaches to the definition of disciplines, the grouping of university departments and the development of qualifications.

Kuper and Kuper, in their monumental *Social Science Encyclopedia*¹, group the social science disciplines as shown in the left-hand column of Table 1. No doubt these categories correspond with major divisions in the literature but they lack coherence, appearing to combine those which can be genuinely said to be 'discipline-based' (such as economics, or philosophy) with some which are more focussed on particular issues or fields of study (such as 'family and kinship').

¹ Kuper A and Kuper J, *Social Science Encyclopedia*, Second edition, Routledge, London and New York, 1996

I would therefore like to propose that, for the purposes of RESPECT, we amalgamate some of these categories, for instance by integrating 'government, politics and public policy' with 'political theory' into a combined category called 'political science'; and by including 'Social administration, social work, "social problems"' with sociology. Although it is a separate discipline, I have also proposed that anthropology should also be amalgamated with sociology. Insofar as it is relevant to the study of advanced industrial societies, it is arguable that the main contribution of anthropology is the use of ethnographic methodologies, which are in practice increasingly used by sociologists carrying out qualitative research.

These suggestions are presented in the right-hand column of Table 1. Other proposals include the elimination of some disciplines that, whilst of course making an important general contribution to any kind of research in any field, do not appear

Table 1: Disciplines involved in Socio-economic Research

Kuper and Kuper categories	Suggestions for RESPECT
Anthropology	✓ but integrate with sociology?
Business Studies, Industrial Relations and Management Studies	✓
Demography	✓ and include statistics?
Economics	✓
Education	✓
Family and Kinship	Include with anthropology/sociology?
Feminism, gender and women's studies	Should perhaps be seen as integral part of other disciplines, not as separate discipline?
Geography	✓ (but limit to human and economic geography?)
Government, politics and public policy	Include with political theory as 'political science'?
History	Exclude?
Law, criminology and penology	✓
Linguistics	Exclude?
Methods of Social Research	Exclude?(implicit in other disciplines)
Philosophy	Exclude?
Political theory	✓
Psychiatry, Psychoanalysis and clinical psychology	Include with psychology?
Psychology	✓
Social administration, social work, 'social problems'	Include with sociology?
Sociology	✓
	Add new category: 'socio-technical studies' to include ergonomics, human-machine interface studies, technology impact studies and what is known in Sweden as 'work science'

central to the kinds of applied social research most likely to be carried out with Commission funding. These include history, philosophy, and linguistics. The exclusion of linguistics may appear controversial to those who are aware of the new importance of linguistics in the development of many advanced computer applications, such as those involving artificial intelligence. I have nevertheless proposed that we exclude it, on the grounds that when it is integrated into technology-related research in this way, its role is that of developing the *content* of the new technologies, rather than looking at how the technology is socially shaped or its social and economic impacts.

In addition to eliminating several categories, I have also made additions. One, relatively minor one is to include 'statistics' with 'demography'. Although many statisticians are economists there are also many who practice in other fields; and it is clear that there is a major role for statisticians to play in socio-economic research related to public policy.

The other addition is the creation of a new category to cover the range of socio-technical disciplines that have arisen in relation to the study of human-machine interfaces. Many of them (though by no means all) come within the remit of what is called 'work science' in Scandinavia, or 'Arbeitswissenschaft' in German-speaking countries. Unfortunately, the term does not exist in some other European countries but many contain groups of experts who carry out similar functions, ranging from ergonomics to society-wide technology impact or technology assessment studies. Given their specific importance to the IST programme, it seems important to make visible this group of specialists if we are to adopt a discipline-based approach in the RESPECT project. I have designated this group 'socio-technical studies', which also allows for the possibility to extend such studies beyond the workplace, but would welcome suggestions for a more apt name.

Combining these groups and amending the list as proposed gives us ten broad disciplines:

1. Business studies, industrial relations and management studies
2. Demography and statistics
3. Economics
4. Education
5. Human and economic geography
6. Law, criminology and penology
7. Political science
8. Psychology and related disciplines
9. Sociology, applied social studies and anthropology
10. Socio-technical studies

2. A methodology-based approach

Adopting a methodology-based approach would lead to a definition of socio-economic research as any research involving one of a range of recognised socio-economic methodologies (once again including a wide range, from the qualitative to the quantitative and from the theoretical to the applied).

In the literature on social research methodology, one of the most comprehensive attempts to draw up a comprehensive taxonomy has been by Reinharz¹, summarised in the left-hand column in Table 2.

In surveying this list it becomes clear that not only are there are considerable overlaps between these categories (for instance typical case study research will include both interviews and observations) but several of these methods are not exclusive to socio-economic research. If a methodology-based definition were to be offered, perhaps the second problem can be minimised by adding a rider to the extent that these methodologies are regarded as socio-economic ones insofar as they involve the collection or analysis of economic data, or data which relates to human behaviour, opinions, living or working conditions, or social institutions (see section 5 below).

Table 2: Methodologies involved in Socio-economic Research

Reinharz categories	Suggestions for RESPECT
Interview research	Make into a broader category that includes oral history, focus groups <i>etc.</i>
Ethnography	Expand to include other observation-based methods
Survey research and other statistical research formats	Suggest breaking down into (1) surveys and (2) secondary analysis of existing data
Experimental research	✓
Cross-cultural research	Suggest making this into a more general category which also includes comparative policy analysis
Oral history	Include in interview research
Content analysis	Integrate into a broader category which includes other desk-based research including analytical literature reviews, scoping exercises and theoretical work
Case studies	✓
Action research	✓
Multiple methods research	Suggest omitting Suggest adding a new category: evaluations

¹ Reinharz, S. *Feminist Methods in Social Research*, Oxford University Press, New York and Oxford, 1992

In the right-hand column of Table 2, I have attempted to rationalise these categories in order to create a list that encompasses the main methodologies likely to be used in Commission-funded research. Summarising these gives us a list as follows:

1. carrying out interviews, whether in person or by telephone or email, with individual informants or groups
2. observations, including the use of ethnographic methods
3. surveys
4. secondary analysis of existing data
5. non-medical experimental research involving human subjects
6. comparative analysis, including cross-cultural research
7. analytical literature surveys, scoping exercises and content analysis
8. case studies
9. action research
10. evaluations.

3. A policy-based approach

Adopting a policy-based approach would involve defining as socio-economic research any research that relates to social or economic public policies.

These might include:

1. economic policy
2. employment policy
3. social policy, including equal opportunities policy, social protection policy *etc.*
4. environmental policy
5. health policy
6. education policy
7. policy relating to the protection of cultural minorities
8. immigration policy
9. trade and development aid policy
10. policy relating to telecommunications, transport, energy and other infrastructure provision
11. information society policy

and no doubt others too.

One of the difficulties here is that most of these policy fields also involve research that is *not* socio-economic. An attempt to narrow the field to include only those aspects of research which can be described as socio-economic might run the risk of simply duplicating some of the definitional parameters already discussed. However, it is possible that this approach could be used in combination with some of the other dimensions, in order to produce a more finely targeted definition.

4. An issue-based approach

Adopting an issue-based approach to the definition of socio-economic research would focus on the subjects under study, and would classify as socio-economic any research that focuses on socio-economic *issues*. This too involves covering a vast field, ranging from issues of individual perception and consciousness at one extreme, through to macro-economic issues at the other.

It seems to me to be impractical to attempt to come up with an exhaustive list of such issues. However, it might well be that the concept of the issue addressed could make a useful contribution to a combined definition, if only by making it easier to decide what should be *excluded* from any definition.

5. A combined approach

It seems likely that in practice some combination of the above approaches might provide the best way forward for the RESPECT project. For instance, we could define as socio-economic research:

- any research which is carried out by people qualified in (certain named disciplines)
- *or* involving (certain named methodologies)
- that addresses issues of relevance to (certain named policies)
- excluding (certain named issues).

The final bullet point is necessary only if the combination of the first three turns out in practice to be too broad in its scope; it would enable the definition to be narrowed to fit the specific circumstances of the IST programme or to reduce it to more manageable proportions.

On the basis of the proposal outlined above, this would give us the following definition:

Socio-economic research is defined as any research carried out by people qualified in business studies, industrial relations and management studies, demography and statistics, economics, education, human and economic geography, law, criminology and penology, political science, psychology and related disciplines, sociology, applied social studies and anthropology, or socio-technical studies;

or involving carrying out interviews, whether in person or by telephone or email, with individual informants or groups, observations, including the use of ethnographic methods, surveys, secondary analysis of existing data, non-medical experimental research involving human subjects, comparative analysis, including cross-cultural research, analytical literature surveys, scoping exercises and content analysis, case studies, action research or evaluations;

that addresses issues of relevance to economic policy, employment policy, social policy, (including equal opportunities policy, social protection policy etc.), environmental policy, health policy, education policy, policy relating to the protection of cultural minorities, immigration policy, trade and development aid policy, policy relating to telecommunications, transport, energy and other infrastructure provision or information society policy.

Conclusion

This paper has been written as a starting point for discussion, not a definitive proposal. All comments and suggestions for improvement and amendment are welcome. Please email any comments to analytica@dial.pipex.com

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