

## CHAPTER 5

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### DOING SOCIOLOGY : RESEARCH METHODS

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#### What is methodology?

Methodology refers to the study of method. Methodological issues or questions are about the general problems of scientific knowledge-gathering that go beyond anyone particular method, technique or procedure.

#### Objectivity and Subjectivity in Sociology

In everyday language, objective means unbiased, neutral or based on facts alone. In order to be objective about something, we must ignore our own feelings or attitudes about that thing.

The word **subjective** means something that is based on individual values and preferences.

Social scientists study the world in which they live - the social world of human relations. This creates special problems for objectivity in a social science like sociology. Following are the problems:

1. There is the obvious **problem of bias**. Because sociologists are also members of society, they will also have all the normal likes and dislikes that people have. For e.g., a sociologist studying family relations will herself/himself be a member of a family, and her/his experiences are likely to influence her/him. Even when the sociologist has no direct experience of the group s/he is studying, there is still the possibility of being affected by the values and prejudices of one's own social context. For e.g., when studying a caste or religious community other than his/her own, the sociologist may be influenced by the attitudes about that community prevalent in her own past or present social environment.
2. The sociologist tries to take an outsider's perspective on her/his work-s/he tries to look at her/himself and her/his research through the eyes of others. This technique is called '**self-reflexivity**'. The sociologist constantly subjects his/her own attitudes and opinions to self-examination. S/he tries to consciously adopt the point of view of others, especially those who are the subjects of the research. One of the aspects of reflexivity is the importance of carefully documenting whatever one is doing. This ensures that others retrace the steps we have taken to arrive at a particular conclusion, and see for them if we are right. It also helps check and re-check our own thinking or line of argument.

**But, there is always the possibility of unconscious bias.**

To deal with this problem, sociologists explicitly mention those features of their own social background that might be relevant as a possible source of bias on the topic being researched. This alerts readers to the possibility of bias and allows them to mentally compensate for it when reading the research study.

3. The social world involves many competing versions or interpretations of reality. For e.g., a shopkeeper and a customer may have different ideas of what is a good price. There is no simple way of judging which particular interpretation is true or more correct. In fact, sociology doesn't judge in this way because it is really interested in what people think, and why they think what they think.
4. A further complication arises from the **presence of multiple points of view** in the social sciences themselves. This implies that competing and mutually incompatible schools of thought coexist within the discipline.

All this makes objectivity a very difficult and complicated thing in sociology. Objectivity has to be thought of as the goal of a continuous, ongoing process rather than an already achieved end result.

#### **Multiple Methods and Choice of Methods**

There are different ways of classifying various methods.

- a) **Qualitative and quantitative methods** : The former deals in countable or measurable variables like proportions, averages etc, and the latter deals with more abstract and hard to measure phenomena like attitudes, emotions, etc.
- b) **Observable and non-observable meanings.**
- c) **Methods relying on secondary data or already existing data in the form of artefacts, documents, etc. and those that are designed to produce fresh or 'primary' data.**
- d) **Macro and Micro methods** : The former are designed to work in small intimate settings usually with a single researcher. Thus, interview and participant observation are thought of as micro methods. Macro methods are those that are able to tackle large scale research involving large number of respondents and investigators. Survey is such a macro method.

Whatever mode of classification, it is important to remember that it is a matter of convention. The dividing line between different kinds of methods need not be very sharp. It is often possible to convert one kind of method to another, or to supplement one with another.

### **How to choose between various research methods?**

- a) It is dictated by the nature of research question being addressed by the preferences of the researcher.
- b) Time and resource constraints

The recent trend in social sciences is to advocate the use of multiple methods to bear on the same research problem from different vantage points. This is called triangulation i.e., a process of reiterating something from different direction. In this way, different methods can be used to complement each other to produce a much better result than what might have been possible with each method by itself.

### **Participant Observation**

This refers to a particular method by which sociologist learns about society, culture and people that he/she is studying.

Features of participant observation:

1. This involves a long period of interaction with the subjects of research. The researcher spends many months or a year living among the people being studied as one of them. As a non—native or outsider, the researcher has to immerse him/herself in the culture of the natives by learning their language, participating intimately in their everyday life to acquire all implicit and explicit knowledge and the skills of an insider.
2. The overall goal of participant observation is to learn about the whole way of life of a community.
3. This method is often called Field Work. This term originated in the natural sciences, especially like botany, zoology, geology. In these disciplines, scientists could not only work in laboratory, they had to go out in the field to learn about their subjects like rocks, plants, etc.

### **Beginning of Field Work in Anthropology**

1. The early anthropologists were amateur enthusiasts interested in exotic primitive cultures.
2. They were armchair scholars who collected and organised information about distant communities (which they had never themselves visited) available from the reports and descriptions written by travellers, missionaries, etc. for example, the famous book "The Golden Bough" written by James Frazer, was based entirely on second hand accounts.
3. Towards the end of 19th century and first decade of 20th century, early anthropologists began to carry out systematic surveys and first hand observation of tribal languages, customs, rituals, and beliefs. Reliance on second hand accounts came to be thought of as unscholarly, and the good results obtained from first hand work helped cement this growing prejudice.

### **What did the social anthropologist actually do when doing fieldwork?**

1. They began by doing a census of the community they were to study. This involved making a detailed list of all the people who lived in a community, including information such as their sex, age group and family.
2. This could be accompanied by an attempt to map the physical layout of the village or settlement including the location of houses and other socially relevant sites.
3. One very important thing that they do in the beginning of their field work is to construct a **genealogy** of the community. This may be based on the information obtained in the census, but extends much further since it involves creating a family tree for individual members, and extending the tree as far back as possible. For example, the head of a particular household or family would be asked about his relatives in his or her own generation; then about his/her parents' generations; then about the grandparents and their brothers, sisters and so on. This would be done for as many generations as the person could remember. The information obtained from one person would be cross-checked by asking other relatives the same questions, and after confirmation, a very detailed family tree could be drawn up. This exercise helped to understand the kinship system of the community-what kind of roles different relatives played in a person's life and how these relations were maintained.
4. A genealogy would help the anthropologist get acquainted with the structure of the community and in a practical sense would enable him/her to meet with people and become familiar with the way the community lives.
5. The researcher would constantly learn the language of the community.
6. S/he would observe the life in community and make detailed notes in which the significant aspects of the community life would be described. Festivals, religious or other collective events, modes of earning livelihood, family relations, modes of child rearing-these are some of the topics that researchers would specially be interested in.
7. Learning about these requires the anthropologist to ask endless questions about things that are taken for granted by the members of the community. This is the sense in which anthropologist would be like a child, always asking questions.
8. In doing this, the anthropologist depends on one or two people for most of the information. Such people are called informants. They act as the anthropologist's teachers and are crucially important actors in the whole process of anthropological research.

9. Equally important are the detailed field notes that the researcher takes during the field work; these notes have to be written everyday without fail, and can be supplemented by, or take the form of a daily diary.

### **Field Work in Sociology**

1. Sociological fieldwork differs from anthropological fieldwork not so much in content but in its context i.e. where it is done; and in the distribution of emphasis across different areas or topics of research.
2. A sociologist would also live among a community and attempt to become an 'insider'. However, unlike anthropologist who went to a remote tribal community to do fieldwork, sociologists did their fieldwork among all sorts of communities.
3. Sociological fieldwork did not necessarily involve living in, although it did involve spending most of one's time with the members of the community.
4. William Foote Whyte, an American sociologist, did his fieldwork among members of a street-gang in an Italian-American slum in a large city and wrote a book called — The Street Corner Society. He lived the area for three and a half years 'hanging out' or just spending time with members of the gang, who were mostly poor unemployed youth, the first American — born generation in a community of immigrants.

There are some difficulties in conducting fieldwork in sociology. They are:

- a) Sociologists don't deal with primitive tribes but modern communities, where people are literate. This implies that some of these people will read the research report. If s/he disguises the name of the district, many outsiders apparently will not discover where the study was actually located. The people in the district, however, know that it is about them, and even the changed names don't disguise the individuals for them.
- b) In such a situation, the researcher carries a heavy responsibility. The researcher would like the research to be of some help to the people of the district. Researcher wants to minimise the chances of doing any harm, fully recognizing that certain individuals may suffer through the publication.

### **Field work in Indian Sociology (Why were village studies important part of Indian Sociology?)**

1. In Indian Sociology, an important way in which fieldwork was used was in village studies.
2. The village acted as the equivalent of the tribal community studied by the earlier anthropologists. It was a bounded community, and was small enough to be studied by a single person i.e. the sociologist could get to know almost everyone in the village, and observe life there.

3. Anthropology was not very popular with nationalists in colonial India because of its excessive concern with the primitive. Many educated Indians felt that disciplines like anthropology carried a colonial bias because they emphasised the non-modern aspects of colonised societies rather than their progressive side.
4. Village studies were important also because they provided Indian sociology with a subject that was of great interest in newly independent India. The government was interested in developing rural India. The national movement and specially Gandhi had been actively involved in 'village uplift programmes'.
5. Even urban educated Indians were very interested in village life because most of them retained some family links to villages.
6. Villages were places where most Indians lived.

#### **Advantages of Participant Observation**

1. Provides a rich detailed picture of life from the perspective of the 'insider' which is the greatest return on the substantial investment of time and effort that field work demands.
2. Allows for correction of initial impressions, which may be biased or mistaken.
3. Permits the researcher to track changes in the subject of interest, and also to see the impact of different situations or contexts.

#### **Disadvantages of Participant Observation**

1. By its very nature, fieldwork involves long drawn out and intensive research usually by a single scholar working alone.
2. It can cover only a small part of the world.
3. We can never be sure whether what the researcher observed during the fieldwork is really very common in the larger community or exceptional.
4. We are never sure whether it is the voice of the anthropologist or that of the people being studied. It is always possible that the anthropologist is selecting what will be written down in his/her notes, and how it will be presented to the readers of his/her books or articles. Because there is no other version available to us except that of the anthropologist there is always the chance of bias or error.
5. This method is criticised for the one-sided relationship it is based on. The anthropologist asks the questions and presents the answers and speaks for 'the people'.

#### **What is dialogic format of participant observation?**

This implies that people and respondents can be more directly involved. This involves translating the work of the scholar into the language of the community, and asking their opinion of it, and recording their responses.

## **Surveys**

1. A survey is an attempt to provide an overview. It's a comprehensive perspective on some subject based on information obtained from a carefully chosen representative set of people.
2. Such people are usually referred to as 'respondents'— they respond to questions asked of them by the researchers.
3. Survey research is usually done by large teams consisting of those who plan and design the study and their associates and assistants. They are called investigators.
4. Survey questions can be asked through telephone conversations, during personal visits by the investigators. Responses may be sought in writing, to questionnaires or sent through post.
5. Internet and various other media are also used now to collect data.
6. It allows us to generalise results for a large population while actually studying a small proportion of this population.
7. It requires manageable investment of time, effort and resources.

## **Sampling theory to select a sample**

1. This was a contribution of statistics.
2. The selection is done through two main principles.
3. The first principle is that all the relevant sub-groups in the population should be recognised. This is called stratification. The notion of stratification tells us that the representativeness of a sample depends on its being able to reflect the characteristics of the all the relevant strata in a given population. Which kinds of strata are considered relevant depends on the objectives of the research study.
4. The second principle is the actual unit should be based purely on chance. This is referred to as randomisation which depends on probability. After relevant strata in population are identified, the actual choosing of sample respondents should be a matter of chance. This can be ensured in various ways-
  - a) Lottery
  - b) Rolling of dice
  - c) Random numbers generated through the computer
5. The statistical properties of a scientifically selected sample ensure that the characteristics of the sample will closely resemble the characteristics of the population it is drawn from. There may be small differences, but the chance of such deviations occurring can be specified. This is known as margin of error or sampling error. It arises not due to any mistakes made by researchers but because we are using a small sample for a large population.

6. The unique advantage of the surveys is that it provides an aggregated picture, i.e., a picture based on a collectivity rather than on single individuals taken separately. Many social problems and issues become visible only at this aggregative level. They may not be identifiable at micro level.

#### **Disadvantages of Survey**

1. It is at the cost of depth of coverage.
2. Time spent on each respondent is limited. Thus, one may not get in-depth information.
3. Since the survey questionnaire is taken by a large number of investigators, it is difficult to ensure that complicated questions or those requiring appropriate prompting will be asked in the same way.
4. Differences in the way questions are asked or answers recorded could introduce errors.
5. Given that there is no long term relationship between the investigators and respondents, no familiarity or trust, questions that can be asked in a survey have to be of the kind that can be asked and answered between strangers. Questions of a personal or sensitive kind cannot be asked or of asked are likely to be answered safely rather than truthfully. These are sometime referred to as non-sampling errors.
6. In order to be successful, it must depend on tightly structured inflexible questions.
7. Its success depends on the nature of the interactions between investigators and respondents and especially the goodwill and cooperation of the latter.

#### **Interviews**

1. It is basically a guided conversation between the researcher and respondent.
2. It occupies the space between a structured questionnaire like in surveys and completely open-ended interactions like in participant observation.
3. Its chief advantage is the extreme flexibility of the format.
4. Questions can be re-phrased or even stated differently; the order of the subjects or questions can be changed according to the progress in conversation; subjects that are producing good material can be extended and built upon others that provoke unfavourable reactions can be cut short, all this can be done during the course of the interview.
5. There are different styles of conducting them. Some prefer a very loosely structured interview with only a checklist of topics whereas others prefer a structured interview with specific set of questions.

6. How it is recorded also differs—video, audio, detailed note taking, relying on memory, recorders.
7. Recorders frequently make respondents uncomfortable and uneasy and introduce a degree of formality into the conversation.
8. Sometimes the physical or social circumstances in which the interview is conducted determine the mode of the interview.
9. Sometimes important information goes unnoticed or not recorded when other less comprehensive methods of record keeping are employed.
10. The way in which the interview is written and sent for printing can differ widely. Some researchers prefer to edit the transcript and clean up the continuous narrative whereas others wish to retain the flavour of the original interview.
11. Interview is used as a supplement to other method especially in participant observation.
12. Long conversations can provide account that situates and clarifies the accompanying material.
13. Intensive interviews can add depth to the findings of the survey.
14. However, it depends on personalised access and the degree of rapport or mutual trust between the respondent and researcher.

#### **Disadvantages**

1. The flexibility can make it vulnerable to changes of mood on the part of the respondent or to lapses of concentration on the part of the interviewer.
2. Thus, it becomes unstable

**All the boxes and the word meanings have to be done from the book.**

#### **TERMS AND CONCEPTS**

1. **Census:**
  - A comprehensive survey covering every single member of a population.
2. **Genealogy:**
  - An extended family tree outlining familial relations across generations.
3. **Sample:**
  - A subset or selection (usually small) drawn from and representing a larger population.
4. **Sampling Error:**
  - The unavoidable margin of error in the results of a survey because it is based on in from only a small rather than the entire population.

**5. Non-sampling Error:**

- Errors in survey results due to mistakes in the design or application of methods.

**6. Population:**

- In the statistical sense, the larger body (of persons, villages, household, etc.) from which a sample.

**7. Probability:**

- The likelihood or odds of an event occurring (in the statistical sense).

**8. Questionnaire:**

- A written list of questions to be asked in a survey or interview.

**9. Randomisation:**

- Ensuring that an event (such as the selection of particular item in the sample) depends purely on chance and nothing else.

**10. Reflexivity:**

- The researcher's ability to observe and analyse oneself.

**11. Stratification:**

- According to the statistical sense, the subdivision of a population into distinct groups based on relevant criteria such as a gender, location, religion, age, etc.