
UNIT 1 RESEARCH IN SOCIAL SCIENCES*

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1.0 OBJECTIVES

After going through this Unit, you will be able understand:

- What is Social Research?
- What are the alternatives to Social Research?
- The Sociological Imagination in Social Research;
- Durkheim and his perspectives on research; and
- Qualitative and Quantitative Research.

1.1 INTRODUCTION

All human beings are some type of researchers who give meaning to, interpret and predict their social world. This work of researching and theorising about society encompasses an infinite number of topics. Some of us may be concerned with the election taking place in the social surrounding, while others may be concerned with drug addiction and violence in the society, some in the problem of unemployment, and some in the farmer's suicides that are taking place in the country, while some may be concerned with their personal lives, some may be concerned with the climate change taking place. We may as a whole be concerned with both the micro and the macro issues that are happening in our village and to those happening at the global level. We are interested in understanding and

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explaining our everyday experiences. This basic sense of curiosity is the foundation of social science research.

Human beings are not receptors of ideas but react to it accordingly. Because of this nature of human beings, the social reality, which is always changing, poses many questions to the human race to understand, interpret give meaning and predict to this changing social reality. Because of this dynamic character of both the human beings and the social reality, research in social sciences holds a special place. In such a situation research becomes an important tool in understanding the reality and the causes that are leading to changes as well as resisting changes. Therefore, social research is a systematised effort to gain new knowledge. Social research helps us in adding new knowledge by supporting or disagreeing with the existing forms of knowledge.

Various definition of social science research has been put forward by scholars. Some of the important definitions of social research are as follows.

Social science research can be defined as the act of re-examining the social world with the goal of better understanding or explaining why or how people behave. This definition emphasises the rediscovery process that is always rooted in research. Therefore, the word 'research' can be interpreted as 'renewed search' or 're-examination'

P.V. Young defines social research as "the systematic method of discovering the new facts or verifying the old facts, their sequences, inter relationship, causal explanations and the natural laws which govern them." Stephenson defines social research as "a manipulation of things concepts or symbols for the purpose of generalizing to extend correct and verifying knowledge, whether that knowledge aids in the construction of a theory or in the practice of an art." Social research is also defined as comprising of defining and redefining problems; formulating hypothesis or suggesting solutions; collecting organising and evaluating data, making deduction and making conclusions; and at last carefully testing the conclusions to determine whether they fit the formulated hypothesis.

From the definitions discussed above it is clear that research in social sciences seeks to add to the existing knowledge about the reality. However, social research is not as simple as it seems and the doing of social research includes methods and tools and techniques of research, which helps us to draw causal relationships, inter-relationship between variables and testing of hypothesis. From the definitions it is also clear that the research is not a work for an ordinary person but a specialized work that needs to be done by trained and qualified people, so that the inquiry, re-examination of the reality is done in a systematic manner, which therefore depends on the disciplinary orientation of the researcher.

Social research involves learning something new about the social world. A researcher therefore, needs to think logically, follow rules and repeat steps over and over. S/he combines theories or ideas with facts in a systematic way and uses his or her imagination and creativity.

1.2 ALTERNATIVES TO SOCIAL RESEARCH

Many things that we know today are learned through an alternative to social research. A great part of our knowledge is based on what our parents and others

have told us. You may also have knowledge based on personal experiences. An individual can acquire information/knowledge also through the use of common sense. Whereas, the social research is more structured, organized and systematic process, these alternatives are not. Some of the alternatives that we encounter in our daily lives are commonsense, media myths and personal experiences.

1.2.1 Common Sense

Sociology draws a great deal from commonsense as the former touches the everyday experiences of lay persons. As a result there is a tendency to use one in place of the other. Sociological knowledge tends to be general, if not universal, on the other hand commonsense knowledge is particular and localised (*Beteille* 2009). Commonsense is not only localised it is also unreflective since it does not question its own origin and presuppositions. Further, sociology also helps us to show that commonsense is highly variable. Sociology helps us to understand a society and this could be deepened and broadened by systematic comparison between one society with other whereas commonsense is not in a position to reach such an understanding. This becomes possible because sociology makes use of its tools and techniques for systematic investigation of the object while commonsense involves preconception, which is rejected by sociology. Commonsense easily constructs imaginary social arrangements which is utopian whereas sociology is anti utopian in its central preoccupation with the disjunction between ideal and reality in human societies. Sociology is also anti fatalistic in its orientation. it does not accept the particular constraints taken for granted by commonsense as eternal or immutable. It provides a clearer awareness than commonsense of the range of alternatives that have been or may be devised for the attainment of broadly the same ends. Sociology is further value neutral and free of all forms of biases and value judgements but commonsense is often a source of biases and errors.

Commonsense knowledge is the routine knowledge people have of their everyday world and activities. Different sociological approaches adopt different attitudes to commonsense knowledge. The concept is central to Alfred Schutz's phenomenological sociology, where it refers to organized and typified stocks of taken for granted knowledge upon which activities are based and that in the natural attitude are not questioned. For ethnomethodologists commonsense or tacit knowledge is a constant achievement in which people draw on implicit rules of how to carry on and which produce a sense of organisation and coherence. For symbolic interactionists and other interpretive sociologists there is a less rigorous analysis of commonsense knowledge, but the central aim of sociology is seen as explicating and elaborating people's conceptions of the social world.

However, some sociologists see commonsense knowledge as different from, if not opposed to, sociological understanding. For Durkheim sociology must break free of the prejudice of commonsense perceptions before it can produce scientific knowledge of the social world. For Marxists much commonsense knowledge is ideological or at least very limited in its understanding of the world. Therefore, to begin with we should see the difference between knowledge derived from commonsense and those having origin in sociological research and systematic methods.

1.2.2 Personal Experiences

Many things in this world are understood to be true on the basis of personal experiences and it is considered to be a legitimate source of knowledge. However, knowledge based on personal experiences can lead us astray. What is considered to be true may be the result of some form of distortion in judgement which leads to errors. Research avoids such errors but unfortunately many times such error prone personal experiences are accepted as the truth. Personal experiences may therefore lead to four types of errors. These errors are overgeneralization, selective observation, premature closure and halo effect.

Overgeneralization occurs when you have some evidence that you believe and then assume that it applies to many other situations. Sometime this may go far beyond what can be justified based on the data or empirical observation that one has.

Selective Observation occurs when an individual takes special notice of a small portion of the reality and generalize from them. Selective observation involves making observation in a way that it reinforces pre-existing thinking rather than observation in a neutral and balanced manner.

1.2.3 Premature Closure

It operates with and reinforces the first two errors. Premature closure occurs when the researcher feels that he has all the answers and do not need to listen, seek information or raise questions any longer. It means that the researcher makes a judgement, or ends the investigation before one has the amount or depth of evidence required by scientific standards.

1.2.4 Halo Effect

The halo effect states that we overgeneralize from what we believe to be highly positive or prestigious. It means that we allow the prior reputation of the person, places or things to colour ones evaluation rather than evaluating all in a neutral and equal manner.

1.3 SOCIOLOGICAL IMAGINATION IN SOCIAL RESEARCH

The sociological imagination is the sociological vision, a way at looking at the world that can see connections between the apparently private problems of the individual and important social issues. The sociological imagination requires us, above all, to 'think ourselves away' from the familiar routines of our daily lives in order to look at them anew. Sociological imagination argues for a humanist sociology connecting the social, personal and historical dimension of our lives and which is critical of abstracted empiricism and grand theory alike. Consider the simple act of drinking a cup of coffee. What could we find to say, from a sociological point of view, about such an apparently uninteresting piece of behaviour? An enormous amount. We could point out, first of all, that coffee is not just a refreshment. It has symbolic value as part of our day-ta-day social activities. Often the ritual associated with coffee-drinking is much more important than the simple act of consuming the drink. In all societies, drinking and eating

provide occasions for social interaction and the enactment of rituals - and these offer a rich subject matter for sociological study.

Adopting a sociological imagination allows us to see that many events which appear to concern only the individual actually reflect larger issues. Divorce, for instance, may be a very difficult process for someone who goes through it - what Mills calls a 'personal trouble'. But divorce is also a significant 'public issue' in many societies across the world. In Britain, over a third of all marriages ends in divorce within ten years. Therefore, the use of sociological imagination in social science research leads us to the larger picture. It allows us to generalize from experiences in everyday life.

1.4 DURKHEIM AND HIS PRESCRIPTION FOR SOCIOLOGICAL RESEARCH

Social science research is different from the natural science research. Durkheim advocated two basic procedures for establishing sociological proofs. The first procedure involved the examination of the cause and effect relationship between social phenomena. The second procedure was the method of concomitant variation. But the question was how do we examine this cause and effect relationship. Durkheim was of the opinion that a comparison could be made of those phenomena where both were simultaneously present and see whether the variations they display in these circumstances suggest that one depends upon the other. When the phenomena can be artificially created at the will of the observer the method is called experimental method. On the contrary, if the production of facts is not within our control and we can only bring them together in the way that they have been spontaneously produced. The method employed is called the indirect experiment or the comparative method.

For Durkheim sociological explanation rests exclusively in connecting a phenomenon to its cause or a cause to its effect. Since the social phenomena are beyond the control of the researcher and can escape the experimenter, comparative method, for Durkheim was the only method suitable for sociology. In this manner he rejected the historical method advocated by Comte. Further, Durkheim tried to establish the sociological proofs, rejected John Stuart Mill's declaration that even indirect experimentation is inapplicable to sociology. He in particular attacked Mill's postulate that the same effect can be the result from various causes. Therefore, if we wish to use the comparative method by conforming to the principle of causality to demonstrate the sociological proof we have to follow the following proposition '*A given effect has always a single corresponding cause*' (Durkheim 1958: 128).

However, Durkheim argued that not all forms of comparative method were equally applicable to the study of social facts. He, in order to illustrate this, critiqued the five canons of experimental inquiry contained in Mill's *System of Logic*. More specifically, Durkheim objected Mill's Method of Agreement, Method of Difference, Joint Method of Agreement and Difference and Method of Residue. The fifth canon of the concomitant variable was however not criticized by Durkheim.

Durkheim then proposed three methods by which such serial systematic variations might be formed. First when dealing with very general facts about which we

have extensive statistical data, the sociologist might limit his study to a single unique society. But a second method i.e. collecting facts from several societies of the same social type makes available a more extensive field of comparison. The sociologist could now confront the history of one society with another, to see if the same phenomenon evolves over time in response to the same conditions. But this method is applicable only to phenomena which have arisen during the existence of the societies in question and thus ignores that part of a society's social organisation which is inherited, ready made from earlier societies.

The Third method was the genetic method. The genetic method yields both an analysis and synthesis of the facts under study by showing how each component element of the phenomenon was successively added to the other, it reveals them in their dissociated state and by means of the broad field of comparison, the fundamental conditions on which the formation and association of these elements depend are determined. *'Consequently, one cannot explain a social fact on any complexity save on condition that one follows its entire development throughout all species'* (Durkheim, 1958:139). Durkheim warned in attempted to judge the direction of social evolution, the sociologist compares the state of a social fact during the decline of one society with its state during the early stages of its successor. Durkheim concluded, to arrive at a just comparison *'it will suffice to consider the societies compared at the same period of their development'* (Durkheim, 1958:140).

Therefore according to Durkheim the characteristics of social research is that it is independent of all preconceptions whether philosophical or practical and it is objective.

1.5 QUALITATIVE AND QUANTITATIVE RESEARCH

Researches in social science can be divided into two primary categories, the qualitative and the quantitative research.

1.5.1 Qualitative Research

Qualitative research in social sciences basically depends on observation and interaction in the field where the research is being conducted. The interaction with the subjects is done in the language of the subjects and this tradition of doing research owes a lot to anthropology. Anthropologists like Franz Boas, Evans-Pritchard have contributed immensely towards the development of this tradition of doing research. In sociology this way of doing research gained prominence under the guidance of Robert E. Park. He encouraged his students to observe in detail the diversity, heterogeneity and complexities of the city. Qualitative research is naturalistic, participatory and ethnographic in its approach.

Qualitative research employs a number of method of data collection but the most important is the participant observation, which entails the involvement of the researcher among those whom (s)he seeks to study with a view to generate a rounded in-depth account of the group, organisation etc. Qualitative research is an approach to the study of the social world which seeks to describe and analyse the culture behaviour of humans and their groups from the point of view of the those being studied. Along with the participant observation unstructured interview,

in which the researcher provides a minimal guidance and allows considerable latitude for interviewees, is also a favoured technique. Life history method, which entails the reconstruction of the lives of the one or more individuals is also another method used in qualitative research. The sources of data are varied and includes diaries and autobiographies, the two most important sources of for generating histories. Group discussion is another method used by qualitative approach. It is essentially a form of unstructured interview but involves more than one subject. This method is gaining importance gradually these days.

1.5.2 The Intellectual Underpinnings of Qualitative Research

Qualitative research derives from a different intellectual underpinnings than the quantitative research. The main intellectual undercurrents which tend to be viewed as providing qualitative research with its distinct epistemology are: phenomenology, symbolic interactionism, verstehen, naturalism and ethnogenics.

1.5.3 Phenomenology

Phenomenological perspectives in sociology reject many of the assumptions of positivism. It involves a systematic investigation of the consciousness which is considered to be the only phenomenon that we can be sure off. They argue that the subject matter of the social and natural sciences is fundamentally different. Therefore they assume that the methods and assumptions of the natural sciences are inappropriate to the study of man. They are of the opinion that natural sciences deal with matter and to understand it, it is enough to observe them from outside as they do not have consciousness, meaning and purpose which direct their behaviour. They react to external stimuli. Phenomenologists believes that unlike matter man has consciousness thoughts, feelings meanings, intentions, and an awareness of being. Because of this his actions are meaningful, he defines situations and gives meanings to his actions and those of others. As a result, he does not simply reacts to external stimuli, he does not simply behave but he acts. Man does not just react to fire, he acts upon it in terms of the meaning he gives to it. If action comes from the subjective meanings it follows that sociologists must discover those meaning in order to understand action. Sociologists cannot simply observe action from the outside and impose an external logic upon it. he must interpret the internal logic which directs the action of the actor. Max Weber was one of the first sociologists to outline this perspective.

1.5.4 Symbolic Interactionism

Symbolic Interactionism advocates that meanings emerge through the process of interaction. It views social life as a process in which the individual interprets his environment and acts on the basis of this interpretation. There are two important concepts in this theory, the definition of the situation and the social self. The definition of the situation means that the idea that people's actions are shaped more by the subjective meaning given to their situation than by the purely objective aspects of the situation. individuals construct the meaning of the situation on the basis of their experiences, needs and wishes and also on the basis of the customs and beliefs of the social group. The social self is a process. Self is the result of the dialectic of I and me. Action and interaction is part of the process—we do not simply act but we act on the basis of how we define the situation and how we think others will view our actions. The theory has four key foci—

- 1) It focus on the ways in which human beings are distinctly ‘symbol manipulating animals.’ It is through symbols men are capable of producing culture and transmitting history.’
- 2) For the symbolic interactionist the social world is a dynamic and dialectical web, situations are always encountered with unstable outcomes and lives and their biographies are always in the process of shifting and becoming, never fixed and permanent.
- 3) Social world is always interactive i.e. humans are always connected to one another.
- 4) Symbolic interactionism looks beyond symbols, processes and interaction in order to determine underlying patterns or forms of social life.

The other intellectual underpinnings are versthenn, naturalism and ethnogenics.

1.5.5 Characteristics of Qualitative Research

A Subject’s Perspective: The most important characteristic of qualitative research is that it sees events, action, norms values etc. from the point of the people being studied. Therefore, it becomes important for the researcher to spend long time in the field.

Description: One of the very essential characteristic is to describe the social setting that is being studied in greater details. It helps to understand what is happening in a particular context and gives hint to realities. However, qualitative research goes beyond description and also tries to provide analyses of the environment they examine. Description gives a social context to view the events and situations being studied.

Context: Qualitative research entails that we understand social entities as a whole in their entirety. The implication of context is that the meanings people give to their own behaviour have to be seen in the context of the norms and values, beliefs and practices and underlying structure of the appropriate entity as well as the multiple perceptions that spread.

Dynamic Social Life: Qualitative research views social life as a process and not in static terms. It looks at social life as a series of events so tends to emphasis on changes. The emphasis on process is a response to the qualitative researcher’s concern to reflect the reality of everyday life which they tend to argue takes the forms of streams of interconnecting events.

Flexible and Lack of Structure: Qualitative research is open and unstructured and do not seem to decide what to study beforehand. Because of this, proponents of qualitative research argue that it allows them access to unexpected but important topics.

Theories and Concepts: Qualitative research reject the formulations of theories and concepts in advance at the beginning of their studies. It favours testing of theories and concepts in tandem with the fieldwork findings.

1.5.5.1 Nature of Quantitative Research

Quantitative research exhibits many qualities of natural sciences approach. Quantitative research is supported by natural science model which means that the logic and proceedings of the natural sciences are taken to provide an epistemological standard against which empirical research in social sciences are evaluated before it can be treated as valid knowledge. It is associated with a number of different methods of data collection. Social survey is one of the main methods of data collection. Most survey research is based on an underlying research design which is called correlational or cross-sectional. Surveys and experiment are the main methods of quantitative research but three others are also important.

- 1) Analysis of previously collected data like the official statistics. Durkheim's analysis of suicide statistics is often treated as an example of this tradition.
- 2) Structured observation, whereby the researcher records observation according to a predetermined schedule and quantifies the resulting data.
- 3) Content Analysis, the quantitative analysis of the communication content of media such as newspapers.

The epistemology upon which quantitative research is based on a set of preconditions, and mere presence of numbers is unlikely to be sufficient. Collection of practices and assumptions are part and parcel of quantitative research. It is important to follow the natural science approach because it provides sound basis against which knowledge can be judged. It is argued that the methods of natural science are applicable to the study of society. Therefore the precise nature of scientific method forms the basis of quantitative research.

1.5.5.2 The Positivist Position

Many of the founding fathers of sociology believed that sociology could be based on the principles and procedures of natural sciences. This is the basic premise of positivism. Auguste Comte believed that the application of the methods of the natural sciences would produce a positive science of society and this could reveal that the evolution of society followed the 'invariable laws'. It would show that the behaviour of man was governed by the principles of cause and effect which were just as invariable as the behaviour of matter, the subject of the natural sciences.

The positivist approach makes the following assumptions:

- 1) The behaviour of man, like the behaviour of matter can be objectively measured. Just as the behaviour of matter can be quantified by measures such as weights, temperature and pressure, methods of objective measurement can be devised for human behaviour.
- 2) Emphasises on the behaviour that can be directly observed. It argues that factors which are not directly observed such as meanings, feelings, and purpose are not particularly important and can be misleading. This emphasis on the observable behaviour is largely due to the belief that human behaviour can be explained in much the same ways as the behaviour of the matter.

Therefore, it means that those phenomena which are not observable directly or indirectly are considered to produce valid knowledge. This means that knowledge is derived through verified facts.

- 3) Knowledge derived through verified facts helps in theory building.
- 4) Positivism is also often taken to require a particular stance in relation to value. This can be understood in two ways. First, the scientist should eradicate all his values which may impair his objectivity and so undermine the validity of knowledge. Second is to draw a sharp distinction between scientific issues and statements on the one hand and normative ones on the other. Positivism denies the appropriateness of the sphere of the normative to its purview because normative statements cannot be verified in relation to experience.

1.5.5.3 Some Preoccupations of Quantitative Research

1) Concepts and their Measurements

Concepts provide central focus of research but they are loosely related to theoretical considerations. To test a causal processes a researcher needs to associate these concepts with one another. therefore the social world is broken into composite parts like the social class, race, racial prejudice, caste, caste discrimination, religion etc. Hypotheses are not derived from theories but from doing literature review relating to concepts. The positivist leanings of quantitative research strongly reveal that concepts have to be made observable that is measureable. It is also necessary that we have a definition of concepts so that it can be measured and a precise standard is developed to know its presence or absence. The measurement of concepts is done with the help of tools like questionnaire or structured observation.

2) Causality

Quantitative research is preoccupied with establishing the causal relationships between concepts. The use of independent and dependent variables shows the tendency to use causal imagination during investigation. The two main approaches used to generate causality is associated with the experimental and cross-sectional social survey research design. Internal validity helps to cancel all other alternative explanation related to the causal relation between variables.

3) Generalisation

The quantitative researcher is concerned to establish that the results of a particular research can be generalised beyond the confines of the research location. This preoccupation is manifest itself in a great deal of attention being paid to sampling issues and in particular the representativeness of the samples. Establishing generality leads the quantitative researcher to copying the methods and styles of natural science. With generality quantitative research draws nearer to the law like findings of the sciences because of this quantitative research is given less importance by qualitative researchers as they believe that establishing general laws in the study of society is utopian.

4) Replication

The replication of established finding is often taken to be a characteristic of the natural sciences. Replication can provide a means of checking the extent to which

findings are applicable to other contexts. Few quantitative researchers subscribe to a view that research can be value-free, therefore replication can act as a check on any excess use of value judgements. Quantitative researchers criticise qualitative researchers as qualitative researches are not suitable for replication. However, replications are rare in social sciences research.

5) Individualism

Quantitative research tends to treat the individual as the focus of empirical inquiry. This focus on individuals is derived because survey instruments are administered to individuals as discrete objects of inquiry. Their responses are then aggregated to form overall measures for the sample. This individualism in quantitative research arises due to its techniques of investigation which use the individual as the source of data, largely independently of other individuals.

1.6 LET US SUM UP

In this Unit, we have tried to discuss the nature of social research and its alternatives. We have focused on the use of sociological imagination and how it is useful in social research. We have also tried to understand Durkheim's perspective on social research. Most importantly we have discussed in details the two primary approaches to social research, qualitative and quantitative methods of doing social research and significance of positivism as a research method has been highlighted. In this section we have tried to bring to your attention the theoretical underpinnings of both these approaches.

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GLOSSARY

Verstehen: The term means to understand in German. Weber recognised two forms of understanding: 'direct observational understanding' of the subjective meaning of a given act and 'explanatory' or 'motivational' understanding in which the particular act has been placed in an understandable sequence of action, the understanding of which can be treated as an explanation of the actual course of behaviour.

Naturalism: The term can be understood in two different senses. First, it is understood as a term which describes the belief in the applicability of the natural science model to the study of social reality. Second, the term implies that the researcher should treat the phenomena being studied as naturally as possible and should to minimise the adulteration of the setting under investigation as far as possible.

Ethogenics: It is an approach which understands the episodes of social life. Episodes are sequences of interlocking acts by individuals.

Internal validity: it helps us to identify whether or not the instruments and procedures used in the research measured what they were supposed to measure.

Replication: Repeating a study in exactly the same format to check whether the same results are obtained every time it is conducted.

FURTHER READINGS

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