
Chapter 5

Doing Sociology: Research Methods

❖ **Scientific Methods**

- Social research is conducted with the help of scientific methods and techniques.
- Methodological issues arise about the general problems of scientific knowledge-gathering that go beyond any particular method.

❖ **Objectivity and subjectivity**

- Objective means unbiased, neutral and based on facts alone while subjectivity is related to individual values and preferences.
- The problem of objectivity arises in sociology because the researcher (sociologist) being a social person might get affected by his/her personal biases related to the area of study. There are also many different perspectives to things.
- To deal with the problem of objectivity, sociologists take the help of technique of 'self-reflexivity' or 'reflexivity' by taking an outsider's perspective to evaluate their work.

❖ **Field work**

- Research methods are classified on the following basis:
 - i. qualitative and quantitative
 - ii. primary and secondary data-based
 - iii. observable and non-observable behaviour
 - iv. micro and macro methods
- Participant observation, survey and interview are methods to generate primary data. The choice of method is decided by the nature of research.
- Fieldwork methods have been mainly used in India to conduct village studies.
- **Participant observation method**
 - It is used by anthropologists and sociologists to study small areas. In this method, the researcher stays with the natives for a long period of time to interact with them and acquire knowledge about their way of life.
 - The native informants provide knowledge to the researcher about their institutions and practices.
 - Participant observation provides the most detailed picture of life from an insider's perspective.
 - The major disadvantages of such method are its limited coverage in terms of area and the chance of bias.

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- **Survey method**
 - Survey method is applied in a large area of study. It is conducted among a representative set of people known as respondents.
 - The respondents are asked questions by researchers.
 - It allows the generalisation of results for a large population while actually studying only a small part of it.
 - The problems that are not visible at the micro level are identified through sample surveys.
 - The samples are representative of all the relevant sub-groups of the population and selected on the basis of randomisation.
 - The disadvantage of survey method is the lack of depth in coverage as complicated questions cannot be asked of the respondents.
 - Errors creep because of differences in the manner of questioning. The questions asked in surveys cannot be of a personal nature.
 - **Representative sampling**
 - Representative sampling is done in such a way that it represents the characteristics of all the strata of the community.
 - The selection of strata depends on the type of study to be conducted.
 - The combined study is conducted on the basis of these samples.
 - The samples are randomly selected through lottery method, rolling of dice, use of random number tables prepared for this purpose and random numbers generated by calculators and computers.
 - Errors in sampling occur mainly due to the substitution of a large population by a small sample.
 - **Interview**
 - An interview is a guided conversation between the researcher and the respondent that is shaped by certain guidelines and questions.
 - The main advantage of an interview is its flexible format.
 - The disadvantage of an interview is the vulnerability to mood changes on part of the respondent and concentration lapses on part of the interviewer.
 - **Questionnaire**
 - The questionnaire can be filled by the respondent at his place and sent through post and e-mail or the sociologist himself/herself goes to the respondent and fills the questionnaire.
 - The questionnaire contains written questions that are to be answered.
 - Various answers are given by the different respondents for the different questions. Questionnaires are helpful in surveying large areas.

❖ **Important Terms and Definitions**

- **Census:** A comprehensive survey that covers each member of a population.
- **Genealogy:** An extended family tree outlining familial relations across generations.
- **Population:** In the statistical sense, the larger body of people, villages or households from which a sample is drawn.

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- **Probability:** The likelihood or odds of an event occurring in the statistical sense.
 - **Questionnaire:** A list of questions to be answered by the participant in a survey or an interview.
 - **Randomisation:** Ensuring the dependence of an event on chance.
 - **Reflexivity:** The researcher's ability to observe and analyse oneself.
 - **Sample:** A selection taken from and representing a larger population.
 - **Stratification:** The subdivision of a population into distinct groups based on the appropriate criteria such as gender, religion, age etc.