

Revision Notes
Chapter 5
Doing Sociology: Research Methods

- Sociological research can provide explanations for issues that affect us both as individuals and as members of larger groups.
- It can help us to make the links between personal troubles and public issues, understanding, for example, how your social background can affect your educational attainment and why people in some countries die from diseases that have long since been eradicated in other parts of the world, etc.
- People hold a vast range of views on social issues, such as why certain people become criminals, why women are massively underrepresented in positions of power in the political and business world, and why fewer people attend religious services now than in the past.
- The findings of sociological research should help lessen the misconceptions and prejudices that often form the basis of commonsense views on many important social issues.
- Sociological research produces facts, knowledge, ideas, etc. Each of these has a particular meaning but can be seen as dimensions of a larger concept that is 'evidence'. Evidence can be referred to as information that supports a statement. It can also be seen as a form of knowledge derived from various sources. Thus, sociological knowledge is derived from research.

Steps in Research Process

1. Selecting a topic and defining a problem: It relates to what a sociologist wants to know about. The selection may depend on the sociologist's personal interest, relevance and even availability of funds.

The selected topic is defined in the form of a problem/a puzzle/question. This puzzle represents a gap in knowledge or understanding. For example, within the topic a lot of research questions can be framed, how far does the economic position of women lag behind that of men or does education lead to better sex ratio etc.

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2. Review of secondary literature: Here the sociologist familiarises himself/herself with existing literature on that topic. This literature could be in the form of books, journals, studies, newspaper articles etc. It helps the researcher sharpen his own research questions and also helps in making his own research questionnaire as well as the interview questions.
 3. Formulating the hypothesis: Hypothesis is an educated guess about what is going on. The hypothesis tries to answer the research questions before the data collection on the basis of the secondary review of literature. The factual material gathered will provide evidence either supporting or disapproving the hypothesis.
 4. Choosing the research method: Any one or a combination of one or more research methods can be used. There are a number of research methods and techniques of data collection such as surveys, observation, case study and interview. The choice of research method or technique depends on a number of factors:
 - (a) The nature of research question being asked.
 - (b) The time and resources available to researcher.
 - (c) Size of community that needs to be studied.
 - (d) Preferences of the researcher while some researchers are more comfortable with statistical method and others are more comfortable with anthropological method.
 5. Collecting the data and recording the information: The data that is collected needs to be both valid and reliable. It should be valid to the problem that the researcher seeks to find answer for.
 6. Analysing the result: It is at this step that the hypothesis is tested. Analysis of the result requires specific technique ranging from statistical analysis to content analysis.
 7. Sharing the result: The final report is written or published and shared with other social scientists. This stimulates ideas for further research.

Methodological issues in social research

Objectivity

- It is difficult to be objective because human world cannot be studied in isolation. Human beings may develop bias views and influence the thinking about the group as being a part of it.
- The researcher who carries the research will also have his/her own values and prejudices about the social context they are studying and this may present as

difficulty while gathering objective information.

- Since the problem of objectivity cannot be eliminated, a social researcher should try and reduce the problem of objectivity in the following ways:

1. By rigorously and continuously examining one's own idea and feelings about the subject of research.
2. Through reflexivity: By taking an outsider's perspective on the work and looking at the research through the eyes of others.
3. By consciously adopting the views of those who are the subjects of research.
4. Making a careful documentation of what one is doing, all procedures undertaken and formal citing of all sources of evidence
5. Objectivity should be approached as the goal of a continuous ongoing process and not as an already achieved end result.

Subjectivity

- Subjectivity refers to the knowledge existing in the mind belonging to the thinking subject (the respondents) rather than the object of thought (the social issue being researched).
- It is necessary to study of the ways in which people understand and interpret the world in which they live.
- People attach meanings to what they do and while doing sociological research the researcher has to acknowledge this and attempt to interpret those meanings.
- Sociological research is directed by values which are cultural products and the status of knowledge will differ from culture to culture due to its subjective nature.
- The sociologist should not overlook the subjectivity of social world while doing social research rather he/she should make use of it to interpret meanings that will provide answers to the research questions.

RESEARCH METHODS

- Research methods can be classified into micro and macro research methods, primary and secondary methods, qualitative and quantitative methods.

Macro vs Micro Research

1. **Micro Method:** It is designed to work in small, intimate settings usually with a single researcher. Thus the interview and participant observation are thought of as micro method.
2. **Macro Method:** It is designed to tackle large scale research involving a large number of respondents and investigators. Survey research is the most common example of a 'macro' method.

Primary vs Secondary Research

1. **Primary Research:** It is designed to produce fresh or 'primary' data. Interviews generate primary data.
2. **Secondary Research:** It relies on 'secondary' or already existing data (in the form of documents or other records and artefacts). Historical methods typically rely on secondary material is found in archives.

Quantitative vs Qualitative Research

1. **Quantitative Research:** It deals in countable or measurable variables (proportions, averages and the like). Example-Survey.
2. **Qualitative Research:** It deals with more abstract and hard to measure phenomena like attitudes, emotions, values etc. Examples: interview, observation, content analysis of paintings, advertisements. etc

SURVEY METHOD

- A survey is a quantitative macro research method. It is an attempt to provide a compressive perspective on same topic.
 - (a) It is used to collect information about people's attitudes, beliefs and behaviour.
 - (b) It involves the collection of standardised information from the population being studied.
 - (c) Standardised information is gathered by asking same questions to all respondents in exactly same order.

Surveys rely on questionnaires as the main technique of data collection.

Surveys are of two types:

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1. Descriptive survey: They provide an accurate measurement of the distribution of certain characteristics in a given population. For example, income distribution, extent of literacy in a particular area.
 2. Analytical survey: It is concerned with different variables. For example, a researcher may want to look at the relationship between level of prosperity and sex ratio.
 - The information collected through a questionnaire in a survey is statistically analysed to reveal the pattern of regularity. These findings are presented as pie charts.
 - Survey research is usually done by large teams consisting of those who plan and design the study (the researchers) and their associates and assistants who may get the questionnaire filled up.
 - If the population of the study is too large, the survey will be based on information gathered from a representative sample of the population.

Advantages of survey

- It allows to generalise result for a large population by actually studying only a small portion of the population. Therefore, with the help of survey one can study with manageable investments of time, efforts and money.

Disadvantages of survey

1. In a survey it is not possible to get in-depth information from respondents. This is because the time spent on each respondent is very limited.
2. Since a survey involves a large number of investigators, it becomes very difficult to ensure that the complicated questions are asked from all respondents in exactly the same way.
3. Questions that are asked in survey cannot be of personal or sensitive type. This is because there is no long-term interaction between the investigator and respondents.
4. In a survey unlike what is in an observation method, it is very difficult for the investigator to know for sure whether the response given by the respondent is true or not.
5. Survey as a method is not very flexible as once the questions are set one can not add any more questions.

For a survey to be successful it is highly dependent on a well formed questionnaire and a

well selected sample.

Basic principles of sample selection process:

- A researcher selects a representative sample from the population they are studying depending on the methodological preference and on the basis of the hypothetical questions formed.
- The selection of sample is based on two main principles:
 - Representation of relevant sub groups of the population to be surveyed
 - Actual sample units selected
- Statistical properties of a sample mean that the sample is distributed equally. It ensures that the characteristics of the sample closely resemble the characteristics of the population under study.
- Margin of error: Sometimes there might be small differences for the result obtained and the population but there will be no huge difference if the sample selected is correct. Such small errors are termed as 'margin of error' or sampling error.
- Researchers must specify not only the size and design of their sample but also the margin of error related with their sample.
- Non-sampling errors occur due to the fault or shortcomings of the research design and the manner of its implementation. Some of these errors are difficult to foresee and cannot be guarded against. Such errors may lead to surveys going wrong and produce misleading results.