

CHAPTER

3

Social Research - An Introduction

CHAPTER OUTLINE

• Introduction • Types of Research • Importance and uses of Social Research • Salient Features of Good Research • Research Process • Methods and Techniques of Social Research • Observation • Types of Observation • Non-Controlled Participant Observation • Non-Controlled Non-Participant Observation • Questionnaire, Schedule and the Interview Guide • Types of Questionnaire • Advantages and Limitation of Questionnaire • Interview • Types of Interview • Advantages and Limitations of Interview • The Social Surveys • Some Main Forms of Social Surveys • Other Techniques of Social Sciences

INTRODUCTION

Research is an attempt to know new things, facts, information, etc. in a scientific manner. Its main purpose is to diffuse knowledge and establish theories on the basis of the believable facts. As L. V. Reisman and A. V. H. Mory have said, "systematized effort to gain new knowledge we call research".

The method that is followed in order to carry on research is "scientific method". In general terms it can be said that 'research' is the aim and the scientific method is the means of attaining it. Research in whatever science it is carried on, follows the same scientific method.

Definition

According to Pauline V. Young, "... social research is a systematic method of exploring, analyzing and conceptualizing social life in order to "extend, correct, or verify knowledge, whether that knowledge aids in the construction of a theory or in the practice of an art."

Stating it still differently, social research seeks to find explanations to unexplained social phenomena to clarify the doubtful and correct the misconceived fact of social life.

Pauline V. Young has also said that "social research may be defined as a scientific undertaking which, by means of logical and systematized techniques aims to (1) discover new facts or verify and test old facts. (2) analyze their

sequences, interrelationships, and causal explanations (3) develop new scientific tools, concepts and theories which would facilitate reliable and valid study of human behaviour".

According to Wallace and Wallace, "Sociological research refers to the structural observation of social behaviour".

TYPES OF RESEARCH

Ranjit Kumar classified social research from three perspectives (Fig. 3.1):

1. application of the research study;
2. objectives in undertaking the research;
3. inquiry mode employed.

These three classifications are not mutually exclusive -that is, a research study classified from the viewpoint of 'application' can also be classified from the perspectives of 'objectives' and 'inquiry mode employed'. For example, a research project may be classified as pure or applied research (from the perspective of application), as descriptive, correlational, explanatory or exploratory (from the perspective of objectives) and as qualitative or quantitative (from the perspective of the inquiry mode employed).

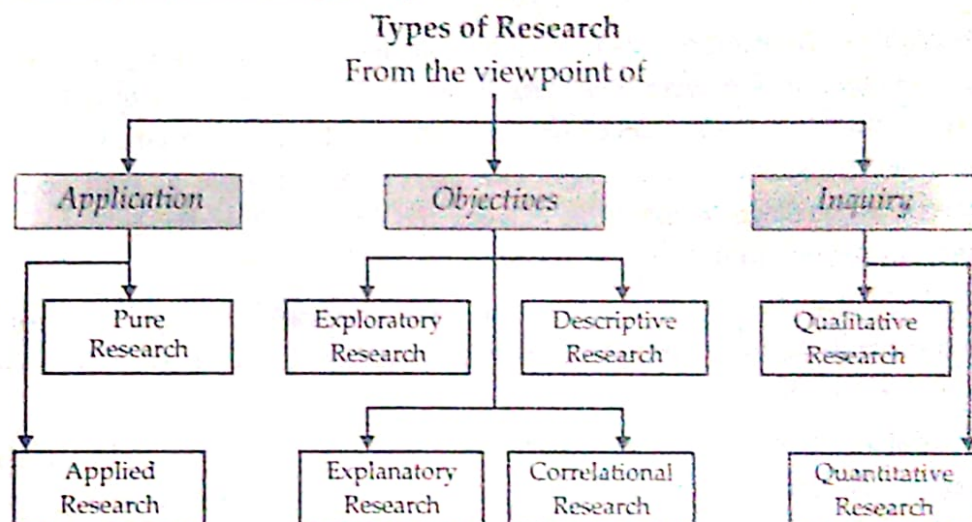


Fig. 3.1: Types of research from three perspectives.

BY APPLICATION

If you examine a research endeavor from the perspective of its application, there are two broad categories: pure research and applied research.

1. Pure Research: Pure research is also concerned with the development, examination, verification and refinement of research methods, procedures, techniques and tools that form the body of research methodology. Examples of pure research include developing a sampling technique that can be applied to a particular situation; developing a methodology to assess the validity of a procedure; developing an instrument, say, to measure the stress level in people; and finding the best way of measuring people's attitudes. The knowledge produced through pure research is sought in order to add to the existing body of knowledge of research methods.

2. Applied Research: Most of the research in the social sciences is applied. In other words the research techniques, procedures and methods that form the body of research methodology are applied to the collection of information about various aspects of a situation, issue, problem or phenomenon so that information gathered can be used in other ways – such as for policy formulation, administration and the enhancement of understanding of a phenomenon.

BY OBJECTIVES

If you examine a research study from the perspective of its objectives, broadly a research endeavor can be classified as exploratory, descriptive, explanatory and correlational.

1. Exploratory Research: It is the research in which a researcher knows nothing about the problem. He does not go deep into the problem of the people. This research is useful for the study of other researches. In this research the basic information for the problem is found which helps in understanding the conditions of the people. The purpose of research is clearly indicated in this type of research.

A research which is done in search of some new indicator is called exploratory research. Such events and situations are brought under study on which research has been done so far. The researcher searches a new way during this research.

2. Descriptive Research: Most of the knowledge in sociology is descriptive. Many researches are of descriptive type. The data available in Sociology is mostly of this nature in which the social relations are not measured in numbers. Such information of social relations is very important in the study of sociology. The gathering of people at Hajj occasion, at polling stations, in factories, college students in classes, the people at marriage ceremony provide us descriptive information of that social condition.

After getting descriptive information, the researcher can go deep into another research in which the relationship among variables can be determined. General conditions of social life are brought under study in this research.

3. Explanatory Research: The desire to know “why” to explain is the purpose of explanatory research. It builds on exploratory and descriptive research and goes on to identify the reasons something occurs. The main emphasis of explanatory research is on causes and reasons of phenomena (Neuman, 2008). For example, a descriptive research may find that 30 percent of students get fail in the graduate examination, whereas the explanatory researcher is more interested in knowing ‘why’ these students get fail in the examination.

4. Correlational Research: The main emphasis in this research is to discover or establish the existence of a relationship/association/interdependence between two or more aspects of a situation. What is the impact of an advertising campaign on the sale of the product? What is the relationship between stressful living and incidence of heart attack? What is the relationship between technology and unemployment? These studies examine whether there is a relationship between two or more aspects of a situation or phenomena and, therefore, are called correlational studies.

BY INQUIRY MODE

The third perspective in our typology of research concerns the process you adopt to find

answer to your research questions. Broadly, there are two approaches to inquiry:

1. **Qualitative Research:** Unstructured approach to the inquiry is called qualitative research. It deals with soft data, in the form of impressions, words, sentences, photos, symbols, and so forth. For example, happiness, sadness, friendship, love and hatred etc. are the types of qualitative data. The concepts used in this type are in the forms of themes, motifs, generalizations, and taxonomies. Theory used in this type can be causal or noncausal but often inductive in nature. Data are in the form of words and images taken from documents, observations and transcript which is difficult to show in the form of table and graphs. Research procedure used in this research is particular hence replication is rare.

2. **Quantitative Research:** Structured approach to the inquiry is called quantitative research. It deals with the hard data, which is in numerical and digit form. For example, age, income, education, height and weight etc. are the quantitative data. Theory, in this research, is causal and deductive in nature. Its concepts are in the forms of hypothesis, which are tested by applying statistical techniques. Data are presented in the form of table, graphs and charts which shows the relationship with the hypothesis. In this type, replication can be made by following the same procedure and concepts.

IMPORTANCE AND USES OF SOCIAL RESEARCH

Research is carried on in the social field not just with academic interests. It has both academic and non-academic purposes and importance. Importance of research can be briefly stated here.

- Research is essential to diffuse knowledge and to expand its horizon.
- Research helps us to verify or disprove, confirm or reject, modify and re-assert the existing theories and to establish new ones.
- Research provides practical clues, to undertake measures that leads to social improvement, social change and social progress.
- Research by probing into the perplexing problems of the day... provides new insight regarding their nature. Research helps us to know the nature and the magnitude of the problems.
- Researches have commercial importance also. Industries, business firms and commercial establishments can get lot of information and clues about their endeavors in society.
- Research can provide all the required data and facts to the administrators to adopt and undertake appropriate policies, plans and programs.
- Research has educational importance. It is mainly an intellectual activity. Information obtained through research may have their educational importance.
- Research motivates interdisciplinary studies. It stresses the interdependence of different sciences. It thus strengthens the "interdisciplinary approach" which is emerging out these days.

Other uses and Importance

- (i) Those working in the academic field can obtain a new degree known as Ph.D. [Doctor of Philosophy] by successfully carrying out research as per the stipulated rules.

- (ii) Those working in the research department attached to industries, other types of establishments have made research their profession and obtain salary for their service. It provides job opportunities for a few intellectuals.
- (iii) For the philosophers and scientists research can be intellectually delighting and mentally satisfying, and
- (iv) Those who are in the field of literature, art, architecture, etc., can seek to establish new styles and trends through research.

SALIENT FEATURES OF GOOD RESEARCH

Following are the salient features of a good research.

- (i) The objectives of a good research are very much clear and precise in nature. It is known both to the researcher as well as reader.
- (ii) The research questions are properly phrased in good research. The scope, importance and limitation of the study are clearly defined.
- (iii) A good research is extremely based on the review of the relevant literature and grounded theory.
- (iv) Methodology is also one of the important factors in deciding the fate of research. Well-articulated methodology, keeping in view of the requirement of the study, is the guarantee of the reliability and validity of the facts. So a good research must possess an excellent complete research route (methodology).
- (v) In good research, steps of data collection, coding, analyzing and interpreting are done with extra care and objectively.
- (vi) A good research has the ability of generalization to the homogenous population, and can also be replicate.
- (vii) In good research, facts are fairly presented to the reader instead of twisting it for gaining particular results.
- (viii) Objectives of the study are the key target of a research and a good research is always conducted keeping in view of the objectives of the study.

RESEARCH PROCESS

Suppose you wanted to conduct some sociological research. Exactly how might you go about it? Most research in sociology—and indeed in all science—follows the same basic, step-by-step procedure. Ian Robertson outlined here is merely an ideal model, and not all sociologists stick to it in every detail, but it does provide the guidelines for most research projects.

1. *Define the problem.* The first step is to choose a suitable topic for a research project. The general area selected will usually be one in which the sociologist takes a personal interest. The specific topic can be chosen for a variety of reasons: perhaps because it raises issues of fundamental sociological importance; perhaps because it has suddenly become a focus of controversy; perhaps because research funds have become available to investigate it.

2. *Review the literature.* The existing sociological research bearing on the problem must be

tracked down and reviewed. Knowledge of the relevant literature is essential. It provides background information, suggests theoretical approaches, indicates which areas of the topic have already been covered and which have not, and saves the sociologist the labor and embarrassment of unwittingly duplicating research that has already been done.

3. *Formulate a hypothesis.* The research problem must be stated in such a way that it can actually be tested. This is achieved by formulating a *hypothesis*, a tentative statement that predicts a relationship between variables. The hypothesis might be "Exposure to a material reduces racial prejudice." However, ideas like "exposure," "antiracist material," and "racial prejudice" are too vague to operate with effectively, for their meanings are open to different interpretations. For each idea in the hypothesis, therefore, the researcher must create an *operational definition*—one that states a concept, for the purposes of research, in terms that can be measured. Thus, "exposure" might be an intense one-hour session repeated once a week for three weeks; "antiracist material" might be a specific series of films; "racial prejudice" might be measured by a particular questionnaire. Different researchers may produce different operational definitions of the same terms, which is one reason why investigations of what seems to be the same subject may produce varying conclusions.

4. *Choose a research design.* The sociologist must now select one or more means of gathering data—a survey, an experiment, an observational study, the use of existing sources, or a combination of these. The advantages and disadvantages of each method must be carefully weighed because the *research design*—the actual plan for the collection and analysis of the data—is the crux of the research process.

5. *Collect the data.* The conclusions will be no better than the data on which they are based, so the researcher must take great care in collecting and recording information. As we have seen, each research method has its limitations, and the researcher must scrupulously take them into account at all times.

6. *Analyze the results.* When all the data are in, the sociologist can begin to classify the facts, clarifying trends and relationships and tabulating the information in such a way that it can be accurately analyzed and interpreted. This task also requires scrupulous attention,

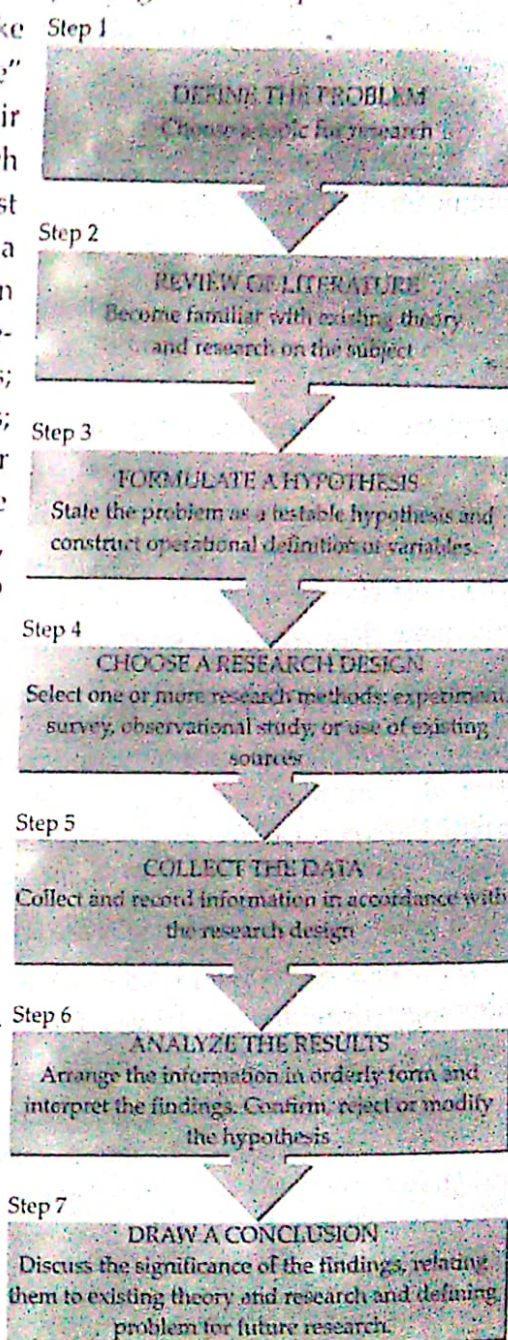


Fig. 3.1: This research chart shows the seven basic steps involve in sociological research that a researcher might follow.

for a given set of facts can often be interpreted in several different ways, and the researcher has to evaluate each of these possibilities with as much objectivity as possible. The theory, as expressed in the hypothesis, can now be confirmed, rejected, or modified.

7. *Draw a conclusion.* Assuming that all has gone as planned, the sociologist can now draw up a succinct report of the project, tracing the steps, ready mentioned and concluding with a discussion of the findings. The report will relate the conclusions to the existing body of theory and research suggesting where current assumptions should be modified to take account of the new evidence. The report may also identify unanswered questions and the sociologist may suggest new hypotheses that others can explore. If the research makes a significant contribution to sociological knowledge, it may be published, probably in the form of an article in a scholarly journal. It then becomes the common property of the scientific community, whose members can attempt to "replicate" the study—that is, repeat it to verify the findings—if they wish to do so.

Being an ideal, this model does not reveal the messiness that often accompanies the actual process of research. It tells us nothing, for instance, about the sheer frustrations, the inspired guesses, or the pure luck involved in research. Then, too, some researchers hardly use the model at all; they are more interested in describing social behavior and leaving it at that. Some researchers start with a vaguely defined hypothesis but continually modify it and their operational definitions as they go along. Sometimes the data disprove the hypothesis the researcher had in mind at the beginning but seem to prove some other hypothesis he or she had not thought of. The researcher may then try to fit the facts to the new hypothesis. The final report, however, should make clear what happened and why it happened.

METHODS AND TECHNIQUES OF SOCIAL RESEARCH

Social research is systematic and scientific. It is not just guesswork and imaginative work. Guesswork, intuition, and common sense all have an important part to play in sociological research, but they cannot produce reliable evidence on their own. Reliable evidence can be produced only by using a research methodology.

"A methodology is a system of rules, principles and procedures, that guides scientific investigation".

The sociologist is interested in what happens in social world and why it happens. Research methodology provides guidelines for collecting evidence about what takes place and for explaining why it takes place. These findings can be checked and verified by other researchers.

The heart of the research process constitutes the actual procedures that sociologists use to collect their facts. Sociologists use a variety of research methods, systematic techniques for gathering and analyzing facts about theories or new phenomena. The following section gives us an overview and examples of the four most common research methods used in sociology today: (i) *Observation*, (ii) *Questionnaire*, (iii) *Interview*, and (iv) *The Social Survey Method*. Each of these has its advantages and its drawbacks, and the success of the research project depends largely on the researcher's choice of an appropriate method.

1. OBSERVATION

Observation is one of the principal techniques of research in social sciences. Some of the

difficulties arising out of the use of interviewing in sociological data-collection can be overcome by combining observation with interviewing, or perhaps by using observation alone. In fact, observation is essential for any scientific study or research. Science begins with observation and must ultimately return to observation for its final validation. Observation may take many forms and is at once the most primitive and the most modern of research techniques. It includes the most casual uncontrolled experiences as well as the most exact firm records of laboratory experimentation. There are many observational techniques and each has its own uses.

Definition of Observation

P.G. Gisbert. "Observation consists in the application of our mind and its cognitive powers to the phenomena which we are studying".

Ian Robertson. "Observational studies usually involve an intensive examination of a particular group, event, or social process. The researcher does not attempt to influence what happens in any way but aims instead at an accurate description and analysis of what takes place."

Wallace and Wallace. "In an observational study the researcher actually witnesses social behaviour in its natural setting".

In general, we can say that observation is a systematic, direct, definite and deliberate examination of the spontaneous occurrences at the time of their occurrence.

TYPES OF OBSERVATION

Observation may be of three broad types:

- i. Non-Controlled, Participant Observation.
- ii. Non-Controlled Non-participant Observation.
- iii. Systematic Controlled Observation.

i. Non-Controlled Participant Observation

This procedure or type is made use of when the observer can so disguise himself as to be accepted as a member of the group under study. The degree of participation of the observer depends largely upon the nature of the study and the practical demands of the situation. The observer must identify himself closely with the group studied, since the subject matter is quite new and requires intensive study.

The sociologist need not carry out exactly the same activities as others in order to be a participant observer. He may find a role in the group which will not disturb the usual patterns of behaviour. This participant observation may vary from complete membership in the group to a part-time membership in the group.

It can be taken for granted that if the members are unaware of the scientist's purpose, their behaviour is least likely to be affected. Thus, we may be able to record the natural behaviour of the group. The observer has access to a body of information, which could not easily be obtained by merely looking on in a disinterested fashion.

Limitations of Participant Observation

Participant observation has its own limitations.

Limitations and Disadvantages

1. The observing researcher has no control over what happens and may have difficulty in putting the observations into systematic form in order to draw conclusions.
2. The number of subjects or people the researcher can observe is small. There are often serious problems in gaining entry into a natural setting.
3. The participant observer may become so emotionally involved as to lose objectivity. Instead of keeping himself as a neutral observer he may become a dedicated partisan.
4. In participant observation one may have to sacrifice scientific precision to some extent. The observer may misinterpret events, may unwillingly ignore some important things that are very much relevant. He may focus on unimportant things and may become emotionally involved with the lives of the subjects.
5. Another disadvantage is that the findings of single observational study cannot be generalized to all apparently similar cases. The phenomenon that has been studied may have been an exceptional one. Hence its findings cannot be uncritically applied to parallel situations.
6. To become a participant observer one must at least share sufficient cultural background with the actors involved in the phenomenon under study. Only then he is able to construe their behaviour meaningfully.
7. As it is in the case of the interviewer, the observer's role is conditioned by his age, sex and possibly by his caste, ethnic or racial status. A man will find much of the behaviour of women beyond his observation and vice versa.
8. As Horton and Hunt have pointed out this method of observation gives rise to some ethical questions also. "It is ethical to pretend to be a loyal member of a group in order to study it? Is such a deception justifiable?" Is he sure, that his role as an observer does not harm the interest of the members of the group under study? The best answer though it is difficult to practice is that a reputable scientist will be careful not to injure the people being studied.
9. The eyewitness account of the participant observer has definitely its own limitations. Many of the happenings and events are beyond its purview. Like disaster, an earthquake, or a bomb explosion. Rarely we find a visiting sociologist with a pen in hand really to record the event.

The Relative Merits of Participant Observation

Participant Observation has certain advantages or merits also. Some of them may be pointed out here.

- (i) Since the observer is not a stranger but a known person, it is possible to observe the natural behaviour of the group;
- (ii) This type facilitates gathering quantitatively more and qualitatively better information about the people or events;
- (iii) It is also possible to get better insights into the inner dynamics of the phenomena since the observer happens to be an insider;

(iv) Even the so called *secret behaviour* (relating to sex, crime, business tactics, etc.) can be observed through this method;

(v) *The dependability of the data collected through this method is believed to be greater* because it is gathered first-hand.

ii. Non-Controlled Non-Participant Observation

The non-participant observation is difficult to conduct. We have no standard set of relationship or role patterns for the non-member who is always present but never participating. Both the group and the outsider are likely to feel uncomfortable. In many research situations, an outsider cannot become a genuine participant. The sociologist, for example, cannot become a criminal in order to study a criminal gang. Neither can he become a true member of the criminal gang.

Merits and Demerits of Non-Participant Observation

Merits

- (i) This type *contributes to a higher degree of objectivity* on the part of the observer. There is no need for him to become emotionally involved in the event.
- (ii) Since the observer observes the events with an "open mind" *he is able to collect more information.*
- (iii) The people who are being observed can also be *more free* with the observer for he is an outsider.

Demerits

- (i) Observation in this category is *mostly limited to formal occasions and Organizations.* It fails to provide information regarding many aspects of our social life.
- (ii) Since the observer is an outsider *he may fail to understand the behaviour of the observed in its entirety.* The observer may not get insights into different aspects of behaviour.

iii. Systematic Controlled Observation

Here the observer tries to systematize the process of observation and does not try to limit the activities of the observed individuals. This is most useful in exploratory studies. The observer makes use of the carefully drawn schedules and questionnaires and better techniques of observation. He tries to check his own biases, his selective perception, and the vagueness of his senses. He makes use of standardized instruments like camera, tape—records, maps, sociometric scales etc. to record his observation with more precision.

Merits and Limitations of Systematic Controlled Observation

Merits

(i) Observation, whether of participant or non-participant type, has, it is to be acknowledged, its own advantages. As Robertson has pointed out "Observational studies have the advantage that *they come to grips with real-life situations* and so offer insights that years of experimenting and surveying might overlook".

(ii) "The great advantage of the observational study is that the research is accomplished by