Unit 1

Logic of Inquiry in Social Research

Contents

Learning Objectives

It is expected that after reading Unit 1, you will be able to discuss the following themes pertaining to

- The debate over science
- The importance of scientific method
- The nature of sociology as a science of society.

1.1 Introduction

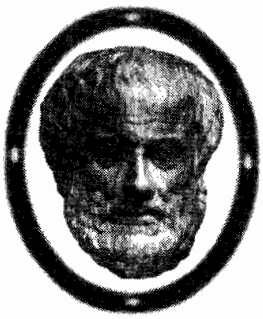
This is the first unit of Book 1 on *Research Methodologies*. In the style of a narrative, the unit begins with a discussion about the nature of sociology as a science of society and looks at science as a way to understand the world around us. The earliest mention of a scientific approach to understanding the nature of the social world along the lines of understanding the natural world is found in the works of Auguste Comte (1798-1857). From Comte's ideas, the discussion proceeds to observation in and methods of the social sciences. A scientific observation is capable of being turned into a higher-level generalisation or to build a theory (Unit 3 has a detailed discussion of theory building). Unit 2 will go into greater detail about how one goes about collecting empirical data in the social sciences and what constitutes "empirical approach" to understanding social reality. Let us now begin the debate over science in the social sciences.

1.2 A Science of Society

Social science research can be understood against the backdrop of a history of evolution of human thought. To begin with it is necessary to understand that the philosophical foundations of the science of sociology began in the West with its roots in Europe or in the early Greek philosophies. Aristotle was the first logician, who gave primacy to the faculty of reasoning of the human mind above what is handed down to us by tradition or custom (see Box 1.1 Aristotle). We are not trying to claim for our discipline lineage from Plato or Confucius, from the Mahabharata and the code of Hammurabi (see Becker and Barnes 1961). Rather we are looking into the logic of social inquiry and hence the reference to Aristotle.

Box 1.1 Aristotle

A student of Plato and the tutor of Alexander the Great, Aristotle lived around 300 BC. He put forward the most elementary form of a logical inquiry, namely a major premise, a minor premise and a conclusion. If the first two were correct or based on facts, the conclusion would be correct too. For example we have a major premise that all humans are mortal and a minor premise that Hari is a human, then the conclusion would be that Hari is mortal. This form of reasoning is known as Aristotle's theory of syllogism or deductive reasoning as opposed to inductive reasoning.



Aristotle
(384-322 B. C.)

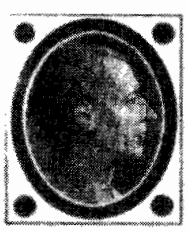
In the history of Western thought, Aristotle's logic dominated until 1600 AD and was also passed on to the Arabic and Latin medieval traditions. After about two thousand years, Galileo Galilei (1564-1642) in Italy, Francis Bacon (1561-1626) in England and Tycho Brahe (1546-1601) in Denmark and others found that though without any logical errors, Aristotle's deductive method of reasoning did not correspond to scientific inquiry about nature. As a result the followers of the new scientific method, known as inductive method of reasoning, turned deductive method upside down.

However for a long historical time, the advocates of logic had to fight with the domination of religion to establish the supremacy of human reason and mind over the supernatural domain or the will of God. Till almost the eighteenth century it proved to be a losing battle, at least in the West. It was with the Renaissance (a movement or period of vigorous artistic and intellectual activity beginning in fourteenth century Italy, lasting into the seventeenth century) that finally it was accepted that society is not a creation of God governed by a divine will but a creation of human beings and an entity that has an objective and changing existence that can be studied from the outside (see Box 1.2: Progressive Evolution of Societies).

Box 1.2 Progressive Evolution of Societies

The historians and philosophers of the late seventeenth and eighteenth century, such as Voltaire (1694-1778), Montesquieu (1689-1758), Hume (1711-1776) etc. projected certain basic premises regarding the truth of social existence. These were in the form of a universal history, holding a basic supposition that all societies are evolved and have gone through various transformations to be what they are today; an idea of progress that things are going towards better and the triumph of reason is the ultimate goal of human kind.

Voltaire (1694-1778)

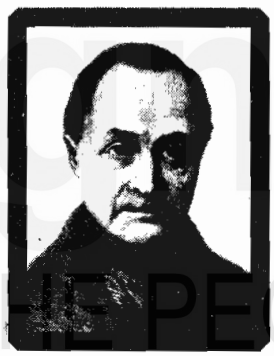


Montesquieu (1689-1758)

Hume (1711-1776)

A science of society became possible when it was clearly understood and accepted by most that society is a creation of humans and not of God. The extent to which we can view sociology as a scientific discipline, a guiding principle of science is that we can derive valid knowledge from strict rules of evidence which are reliable and valid. In this sense, science encompasses along with other disciplines the discipline of sociology. By examining the relationship between sociology and scientific methodology that is followed by the natural sciences, we can understand if sociology is scientific in the same way as a natural science is. It is also possible to find out if sociology can be scientific even when it does not follow the methodology and methods of the natural sciences. For this purpose, we need to examine various methodologies followed by sociologists in their work and then appreciate the claim of calling sociology a scientific discipline.

All of us attach a special status to the notion of scientific knowledge because it depicts the world as it is rather than as anyone of us may wish it to be. In this sense scientific knowledge provides us the possibility of gaining a true understanding of the nature of the social and natural world. This understanding is not based on opinion or unproven faith and superstition. You can find the earliest developments of such understanding of sociology in the work of Auguste Comte. It is no accident that Auguste Comte is known as the founder of sociology. If we look at developments in sociological methodology, the word "sociology" obtains from the work of Auguste Comte. In order to appreciate sociology as a Science of Society, it is a useful exercise to outline Comte's ideas on the nature of sociology. This will give us an insight into the kind of scientific approach early sociologists followed.This approach gave an impetus to sociology to gradually develop into a reflexive science.



Auguste Comte
(1798-1857)

1.3 Comte's Ideas on the Nature of Sociology

Written in the nineteenth century, Comte's works reflect his engagement with the methodology of scientific thought. He argued that, like scientists who studied the natural world and discovered the nature of laws determining the behavior of matter in the physical world, it was possible to discover the laws which determined the behavior of people in the social world. In his book, *Course of Positive Philosophy* (published in 1839-1842), Comte made the point that laws governing the behavior of people in the social world could be discovered through the development of a positive philosophy of human social development. In other words, Comte was saying that social scientists could use the methodology and insight of the natural sciences as the model for the development of social physics or sociology. He gave the idea of positivism as given in Box 1.3.

Box 1.3 Comte's Idea of Positivism

In the ...positive state, the mind has given over the vain search after the Absolute notions, the origin and destination of the universe, and the causes of phenomena, applies itself to the study of their laws...their invariable relations of succession and resemblance. Reasoning and observation, duly combined, are the means to this knowledge. What we now understand when we speak of an explanation of facts is simply establishment of a connection between single phenomena and some general facts, the number of which diminishes with the progress of science.

We can say that in Comte's eyes, the aim of science was not to explain why things came into existence or the cause of their being. He held that the aim of science was the explanation of how things related to one another in terms of invariable and universal laws. In this sense, observable phenomena are the main ingredients of positive science, which aims to establish law-like relations between phenomena through gathering factual knowledge. Gathering of factual knowledge is carried out through observation, experimentation, comparison and prediction. The idea is that after discovering a wide range of laws, it would be possible to explain the laws in terms of their relationship to each other.

Positivism of Comte espoused that science means the progressive discovery of laws and their interrelationships so that science could one day propound a general law from which all other laws emanate. Comte assumed that the social world was as regular and objective as was the natural world. For him, social laws governed the social world just as natural laws governed the natural world. Comte, thus, considered the methodology of the natural sciences the ideal way to discover laws governing the social world and he advocated the development of a new positive outlook, based on the methodology of the natural sciences.

According to Comte, the main task of sociology was to discover the general laws of social development and he divided the general laws into the following categories.

i) Laws of co-existence or social static: These laws governed the relationship between different parts of society and as such they determined the functions and interrelationship between the various parts.

ii) Laws of succession or social dynamics: These laws governed social change and required an exploration of the way the nature and function of social institutions changed over time.

We may describe the above as Comte's positivism. Since there are various types of positivism, it is essential to understand the basic argument of scientific enquiry or inherent methodology of Comte's positivism.

As you know Comte followed the methodology of the nineteenth century natural sciences for positing the principles of natural sciences to the study of human social development.

Auguste Comte made, in the process, some assumptions and observations about social development. His assumptions and observations were according to the science of the nineteenth century.

Comte's first assumption was that societies pass through a process of evolution and their stages of development are from the simple to the complex. In this sense, societies gradually become more complex and institutionally differentiated, performing specific functions.

Next, Comte questioned that if there are incremental differences in societies, what makes them not disintegrate. According to Comte, mechanisms leading to social integration need to involve one or the other form of mutual dependence.

From the above two assumptions, Comte derived that evolution is both a natural and demonstrable fact and it is governed by Laws of Development. Comte argued that the task of sociology was to discover the Laws of Development by i) systematic observation, ii) collection of data or facts and iii) development of theories to explain the facts.

The logic of Comte's ideas is called inductivism (see Box 1.4 Distinction between Inductive and Deductive Forms of Logic).

Box 1.4 Distinction between Inductive and Deductive Forms of Logic

The deductive method takes a few axioms or so-called true statements with the aim of proving other true statements or theorems, which logically emanate from them. The inductive method, on the other hand, makes many observations about nature, with the aim of discovering a few but strong statements about how nature works or about what are the laws and theories that are at the back of how nature appears to us.

In the deductive method, logic is the main operating tool. If a statement emanates logically from the axioms, it must be true. In the inductive method (often called the scientific method), observation of nature is the main operating tool. If an idea is in conflict with what occurs in nature, the idea has to be given up as useless.

Adherents of traditional logic, who were the descendants of Aristotlean Logic, became rivals of those following the new inductive method of natural sciences, with different notions of reasoning or logic.

You may be interested in knowing that although science is inductive by definition (in the sense that observations are the only valid evidence of truth), the process of science can be deductive! *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (updated August 23, 2004) on Aristotle's Logic mentions that 'more recent scholarship has often applied the very techniques of mathematical logic to Aristotle's theories, revealing (in the opinion of many) a number of similarities of approach and interest between Aristotle and modern logicians'.

We can also call Comte's logic as Inductive Positivism. This is also referred to as the nineteenth century positivism. (Positivism as a methodology developed in the twentieth century was quite different from what we have just learnt. You would learn more about positivism in later units of this book.) Based on the reasoning of his inductive positivism, Comte

gave three stages of evolution of human society, namely,

i) the age of religion
ii) the age of metaphysics and
iii) the age of reason.

This was a position counter to the one professed by the Church that society in its most perfect form existed at the beginnings of creation and that human kind is going towards degeneration and more importantly the division of the world into Christians and non-Christians, to be equated with savages and non-humans. In the following Reflection and Action exercise, we are going to critically look at the methodological problems inherent in inductive positivism.

Reflection and Action 1.1

We will work out the basis of Comte's notion that it is possible to discover social laws in the same manner as scientists discover natural laws and then debate over the scientific approach of the nineteenth century sociology through the case of Comte's ideas. This exercise has four parts. Complete the first two parts (A and B) now and the last two parts (C and D) in Reflection and Action 1.2.

A

Answer the following questions and bring out Comte's assumptions about human development and write down the answers to the questions given below, on a separate sheet of paper.

Questions

- Does Comte answer the question of why do the laws of development governing the social world exist? Does he avoid answering this question? What is the implication of avoiding this question?
- Does Comte simply assume that social development is evolutionary or does he offer any evidence to prove this position?
- Is Comte assuming that the social world has a rational order, which is over and above the capacity of human consciousness to change it?
- Does he assume that the universe has some form of natural order that as sociologists we need to discover?

B

Based on your answers, work out if the nineteenth century sociology that relied heavily on data (facts) collection and theorising at the most abstract level, as evidenced in Comte's writings, was a victim of logical forms of methodological error, inherent in inductive positivism. For this exercise you would need to answer the following questions.

Questions

- Do you think that facts are self-evident things?
  Is it not the case that what I consider as a fact, you may interpret to be something else?
- Does or does not Comte's positivism tell us how to identify a fact in the first place?
- How are we to arrive at a common understanding of what is or is not a fact?
- Do the answers to the above questions imply that if facts have to be interpreted and not simply discovered to be facts, it is obvious that we tend to make a subjective judgment? Would you say that this is then not an objective method of scientific inquiry? Would you also say that it is not possible to theorise on the basis of such a non-scientific method of inquiry?

The issue coming out of the above exercise is as to how one identifies a social fact and how it is the same or different from a natural fact. The comparison of social science with natural science poses a clear problem, for while in the natural sciences the objects of study have a definite material existence, in the social sciences only human beings and their manifest behavior is the material but observation of behavior from the outside yields very little knowledge about the explanation of behavior. The existence of a rationally deductive objective reality is philosophically linked to what is known as the notion of duality exemplified in the philosophical notions of Descartes, best known as Cartesian duality (see Box 1.5 René Descartes (1596-1650).

Box 1.5 René Descartes (1596-1650).

Born on March 31, 1596 in Tourain, France, René Descartes was one of the most significant and influential thinkers in human history. He was also an outstanding mathematician.

Cartesian duality presupposes the division between the outer objective reality of the phenomenon and the inner subjectivity of the observer. The premise is that for a scientific observation the two must remain separate and that the objective world has a rational reality that is akin to mathematical truth. Together with Spinoza (1632-1677) and Leibniz (1646-1716), he formed a part of what is known as the 'rationalist' school.

Descartes (1596-1650)

Spinoza (1632-1677)

Leibniz (1646-1716)

Let us now complete the Reflection and Action 1.2, that contains the other two parts of the earlier exercise. You need not worry about the right or wrong answers to questions. The idea of completing the exercise is to reflect and develop the skill of arriving at an understanding of how we employ logic to understand and know and on what basis.

Reflection and Action 1.2

C

If facts are the bases of theories, that is, if we develop theories to explain the relationship between facts, then as scientists we do not have any reasonable basis to make a distinction between good and bad or true and false theories. This is so because our theories are based on a collection of facts and we identify facts according to our subjective judgments about what is a fact. The whole process then is not conducive to production of valid knowledge that has been derived on the basis of irrefutable facts.

You can illustrate this idea by considering the following statement.

It is a fact that men are socially superior to women.

Questions

- On what evidence would you base your judgment that this is, or is not, the case?
- Are you able to explain this fact in another manner, if yes, how?
- Suggest how it is possible to make a distinction between different interpretations of the facts.

D

On the basis of the exercise you have just carried out, answer the following questions:

Questions

- If a sociologist agrees with the fact stated above, what sort of theory would she or he develop to explain the relationship between superior social status and gender?
- If a sociologist does not agree with the fact stated above, what sort of theory would she or he develop to explain the relationship between superior social status and gender?
- How can we show that the theory developed in the first is more, or less, valid than the one developed in the second?

The art of observation itself became a central methodological issue for social scientists, especially for those who had as their objective the study of society, as against the study of individuals (as in Psychology). The school of philosophers, known as the "empiricists", gave primacy to empirical facts as against the logical knowledge of the rationalists. Some of the philosophers of the empiricist school are John Locke (1632-1704), George Berkeley (1685-1753) and David Hume (1711-1776). The tussle for primacy between empiricism and logic is resolved in the social sciences by the need for both to come to a conclusion regarding social reality. The two ways of understanding social reality are known as the inductive and the deductive methods (see Box 1.4). By now most social scientists agree that the processes of inductive and deductive reasoning run simultaneously as one attempts to make sense of what is observed empirically, one has to rely on logic for interpretations. And again logic cannot be applied in a vacuum, it needs some kind of a solid referendum; even the imagination has its limits and cannot go beyond the frontiers of human comprehension that is ultimately linked to what can be humanly observed. Let us discuss the craft of observation as practiced in the social sciences.

1.4 Observation in Social Sciences

It is clear that unlike the observations conducted in the natural sciences that depend only on the senses of the observer, the observations in social sciences need the participation of the observed. While one can rely on the senses to see what is happening, one needs to inquire from the actors as to what is the meaning of their acts for any explanation to take place. Let us take for example the utter bewilderment a complete outsider would face if taken to witness a cricket match. The meaningless actions (observably) of adult men hitting a round object and running

around for no practical purpose and, worse, thousand of spectators getting so emotionally charged at the sight of such meaningless acts, would not appear reasonable to any outside and objective observer. The observer may put forward the verdict of collective insanity if not made familiar with the meaning systems that prompt the actions as well as a large amount of conceptual data as to: What is a game? Why is it played? What is the relationship between a game and national pride, and so on and so forth.

So it is with every act of observation of society that we need to refer to more generalised concepts and also meaning systems of the actors. This is not to say that one relies only on explanations given by the actors but true explanation in the social sciences would then contextualise the observations, the meanings and the actor's frame of reference to a larger and more generalised system of concepts and relationships, to try to get at a true meaning, truth or explanation. Thus inductive data is contextualised by a logical process or deduction. Social scientists have devised ways to make observation more meaningful or, as it is put, more scientific.

To understand this a little better we must go into the history of what constitutes data for the sociologists and anthropologists who have society and culture as their objects of study. As is evident, the nature of the data is itself sufficiently different from the data of natural sciences, as whatever we observe is a construct (Did you not find the same to be the case when you carried out the Reflection and Action 1.1 and 1.2 exercises?). Like when we observe a cricket match, the term "game" is a construct and unless we use this construct to explain whatever we are seeing physically, the entire observation would become meaningless. Thus as Dan Sperber (1982) has argued, there is only one-way to describe cultural (and social) phenomena and that is by interpretation. But even before we go into the problem of interpretation, we must be clear about what it is that we are going to interpret, in other words what is the nature of observation on which we rely as our base data.

To begin with, social scientists interpreted data or basic observations made by anyone. In the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, travellers, missionaries and administrators collected large parts of data used. It is true that some of it still forms the basis of much of social theory, especially those accounts that could never be duplicated, as the situations, societies and cultures depicted in them have since disappeared. In the nineteenth century, the vogue was on a pure scientific methodology or on nomothetic generalisations (see Box 1.6 Nomothetic and Ideographic Explanations).

Box 1.6 Nomothetic and Ideographic Explanations

As Windelband (1914) said, all explanations are of two types, nomothetic and ideographic. The former refers to generalised laws and the latter to individual facts. We may for example call the laws of evolution nomothetic and the specific event of history ideographic.

Since sociology is deemed to be a science of society, it aspires to be nomothetic rather than ideographic[◎]. The attempt of the classical sociologists was thus to find the laws that make society run and the assumption was that society too has an objective existence like all natural objects and like all natural objects it too follows same laws or principles. The assumption of society as a natural phenomenon following laws of nature was to dissociate it from its earlier conceptualisation as a divine entity following supernatural dictates. However, to make society an object capable of being subjected to scientific analysis another criterion of scientific analysis had to be fulfilled, namely of ethical neutrality. Society and its norms had for long been entrenched within religion and cosmology so that most rules of society were viewed as divinely sanctioned rather than as a creation of humans; like incest taboos, norms of femininity and masculinity, etc. A science of society has to proceed from the premise that all such rules and norms are variable and human-made and therefore a science of society has to follow some principles of causality rather than of divine sanction. In other words all aspects of society have a purposive existence that can be explained rationally.

At this point, let us here remind ourselves about what Turner (2000) pointed out– that study of society uses, on the one hand, formal theory, with assumptions, concepts, propositions and laws and in this sense is similar to natural science, and as such it explores empirical data, practices and institutions and tries to find causal and generalisable statements (for example see Rudner 1966: 59-67, Braybrooke 1987: 21-29, Hempel 1942, Kincaid 1990, McIntyre Lee 1991). On the other hand, many sociologists and anthropologists (for example, Geertz 1983, McIntyre Alsdair 1973, Turner 1974, Sahlins 1976) have argued that given the diversity and multiplicity of the social world, it is not possible to develop generalisable and causal explanations. They hold that sociology's focus on observation of local action and interaction helps it to develop analyses of various social contexts. Irrespective of which perspective one accepts, in Turner's (2000:12) words, "social theory thrives and survives best when it is engaged with empirical research and/ or public issues". As a matter of fact, even the nineteenth century sociology was linked to a critical agenda toward the then social reality, for example, August Comte was linked to "programmes of political action" (see Barnes 1977: 42).

1.5 Logical Understanding of Social Reality

The question arises, what, then, is the legacy we have for logically understanding social reality? One way is to carry on with a discussion of ideas of sociologists (like we have done in this unit regarding Auguste Comte). They constructed their theories around an explanation of what they considered was new and unique in social reality. This exercise will take us to unmanageable detail and the unit will be extraordinarily long. So ending here with one example (of Comte's ideas) only, we will refer you to be alive and attentive to such discussions as and when they

appear in subsequent units of Book 1 and also in the units of MSO 001 (the course on Sociological Theories and Concepts). At this point in our discussion, it may suffice to say that important characteristics of scientific inquiry into social reality would include emphasis on relevant empirical sources of data, the general line of demarcation between observation and theory, the focus on logical consistency and deductive coverage. For understanding social reality, as Elster (1989) and Little (1991) say, social science research needs to discover regularities, derived from underlying causal properties of social phenomena. It is not necessary for us to draw an analogy between social sciences and natural sciences in order to stress the explanatory significance of discovering regularities in the social world. It is by now clearly understood that the social sciences cannot emulate the way natural scientists derive laws from the properties of physical phenomena. You may say that the social sciences do not require scientific explanation in terms of law-like regularities, all the same causal hypotheses, confirmed by empirical data are parts of the nuts and bolts of social science research. Methodologically, sociology, like any other social science, offers weak generalisations, which have only tentative predictability.

What kind of generalisations or regularities are we talking about? A law of nature refers to a governing regularity, that is, as per a particular law of nature, there will always be generation of a particular kind of behavior. For example it is a governing regularity that forces of electrodynamics affect protons and electrons. Phenomenal (or phenomenological as labeled by Cartwright 1983) regularities refer, on the other hand, to common features of social entities and their effects on individual agency. For clarification on this point see Box 1.7 Example of Phenomenal Regularity from Little (1992: 6).

Box 1.7 Example of Phenomenal Regularity from Little (1992: 6)

It has been observed, for example, that land-tenure systems with a particular structure create common incentives for individuals wherever they are implemented; it is then a regularity of these systems that they have common features (e.g. under investment in capital improvements). But these regularities are strictly derivative from features of individual agency, and they do not represent governing regularities of a certain kind of social institution.

1.6 Conclusion

Since social reality is highly diverse, and constantly experiencing cross cutting varieties of causation, it is possible only to produce scientifically valid knowledge in terms of "exception-laden phenomenal regularities" and "the highly qualified regularities that derive from institutional-logic analyses" (Little 1992: 20). In methodological terms, in the social sciences (that include sociology) we need to be aware of the scope and limits of generalisations possible in the light of the nature of our subject matter. Concluding this unit with the above note, we end at this point our debate

over science in the context of methodologies of social science research. We shall continue the debate in Unit 2 by discussing the theme of empirical approach, which social scientists use extensively in their researches and on that basis claim their endeavour to be scientific.

Further Reading

Worsley, Peter et al (ed) 1970. *Introducing Sociology*. Penguin Books: Harmondsworth(Unit 1 on 'Sociology as a Discipline', especially pp. 19-38 for sociology's main concern with 'learnt' behavior/ culture, interface between biology and culture, divisions of social sciences, relationships between sociology and other social sciences, scope of sociology and what sociologists do.

Giddens, Anthrony 1987. *Social Theory and Modern Sociology*. Polity Press: Cambridge (Unit 1 on What do Sociologists Do?, especially pp. 1-21 about sociology and lay knowledge and current issues

Aaron, Raymond 1965. *Main Currents in Sociological Thought*. 2 vols. Harmondsworth: Penguin

Unit 2

Empirical Approach

Contents

Learning Objectives

It is expected that after reading Unit 2, you will be able to answer the following questions.

- What is empirical research?
- How to collect data with rules in mind?
- How to explain the concept of cultural relativism?
- What are the problems encountered while collecting data?
- What are the issues of ethical and normal viewpoints in social research?
- How does one understand the facts collected?
- How does one problematise the object of study?
- How is one to manage diversities in social research?

2.1 Introduction

In Unit 1 we discussed the tension between giving primacy to ideas and logical understanding of society and to empiricism that relies on observable facts. As already mentioned in Unit 1, to the extent sociological theories need to be based on observations of the social world, you can regard empiricism to be at the center of the modern scientific method. In Units 5 and 6 you will read more about such proponents of empirical research as Francis Bacon (1561-1626), John Locke (1632-1704), George Berkeley (1685-1753) and David Hume (1711-1776).

Francis Bacon
(1561-1626)

Empiricism© refers to the view that experience, particularly of the senses, is the only source of knowledge. This view of

empiricism has been contrasted with rationalism, which holds that all knowledge is based on introspection and a priori (as far as one knows), deductive reasoning. Such a contrast, and the ensuing debate, held for quite some time the interest of many philosophers and classical sociologists. Whether supporting total adherence to empiricism or not, social scientists never gave up their abiding interest in the empirical approach to social research.

In Unit 2 we will discuss what is meant by empirical© approach and how the data for social research is to be collected with certain rules in mind. Further, we will discuss the various problems encountered in the application of the empirical approach and conclude with the observation that while it is necessary to look at the social reality, it is also important to find out how it came to be so.

When it comes to determining the object of one's study, social scientists have come to recognise that we need to investigate power relationships and their formations, including the subject position of the scholar engaged in the research. Reading through the various sections of this unit, you would be able to appreciate the inevitable empirical orientation of social science research and at the same time the requirement of handling diverse points of view in it.

2.2 Empirical Approach

Let us also clarify at the outset that you will find many supporters of empiricism while there are enough social scientists who follow the empirical approach without subscribing to empiricism. This means that they do not accept the theoretical premises of empiricism and do not like to support it as a doctrine. All the same they find it acceptable to follow the empirical approach as a methodology. This is why you find here our discussion of the empirical approach.

Empirical approach refers to the methodology of collecting facts through observation and other first hand methods of data collection. There is a difference of opinion and method in whether one relies on the data collected only by a particular method designated as "scientific" or on the data collected by any lay person. In the initial period of the growth of the social sciences, scholars, such as Herbert Spencer (1820-1903), Auguste Comte (1798-1857) and even Edward Burnett Tylor (1832-1917) and Lewis Henry Morgan (1818-1881), depended largely on the data collected by travellers, missionaries and administrators passing through various territories. The emphasis at this time was on the logical process of analysis, the data served only to illustrate the ideas and fill in the schema, whose origin lay in the brains of the "armchair" scholars. The scholars relied on their own intuitive judgment to select data and to compare them. Against such practices came up the insistence on scientific collection of data, with some rules to be strictly followed if one was to claim authenticity of the facts gathered.

2.3 Rules of Data Collection

Durkheim (1858-1917) in his *Rules of the Sociological Method* (1964, first published in 1895) recognised that the data must be collected not just anyhow, but keeping certain rules in mind. As Durkheim perceived it, social phenomena must have an external existence and must be treated separate from the representations of them in the mind. Descartes (1596-1650), in his book, *Meditations on First Philosophy* (first published in 1641; English translation published in 1991), laid the basis of the scientific method by the simple rule of doubt and advocated the strategy of beginning by doubting the truth of everything. You can say that in the same spirit, a truly scientific approach does not accept anything without proof and this discounts much of the second hand data relied upon by the "armchair" scholars. Also, scientists rely on data collected explicitly for the goals of the scientific endeavor. Collecting data is a part of the overall methodology of science and cannot be dissociated from the process of understanding. This step takes us further to considering the issue of collecting data without pre-existing biases that we may have in our minds.

Emile Durkheim (1858-1917)

2.4 Cultural Relativism

From the notion that the collection of data must be done without any subjective understanding, preconceived notions or prejudices came up the dictum that the scientist must remain ethically and emotionally neutral. The rule of cultural relativism is the outcome of such a mind set. For, one must accept that whatever does not belong to one's own culture is not "wrong" or "strange". The principle of getting over "ethnocentrism©", or regarding only one's own conceptions and values as proper, is something that is taught to all students of the social sciences but is the most difficult to overcome. I give one instance from my own field experience. While on a fieldwork tour to an interior village of Rajasthan with a batch of students, we realised that in most marriages that took place in this region the bride was older in age to the groom. While talking to one man, whose wife was eight years older to him and whom he seemed to love very much, I asked a rather foolish but to me at that time obvious question, "Why are the women older to their husbands?" The man looked at me in surprise and asked a counter question, "Are they not in your community?" and seemed surprised when I told him that they were almost invariably younger. His surprise made me realise the ingrained nature of our values and how difficult it is to overcome them, as we tend to take many things that are common in our own culture as "natural" rather than social. Similarly, Margaret Mead (1901-1978) in her work, *Sex and Temperament in Three Primitive Societies* (1935), had undermined all notions of femininity and

masculinity held as "natural" in western societies. My own class went into squeals of laughter when I described the men in their curls and make-up flirting with the plain-looking women of the Tchambuli, New Guinea (for details see Box 2.1). Whether or not Mead's descriptions were correct, they certainly dispelled the myth of "what is natural".

Box 2.1 Margaret Mead's Study of Tchambuli Culture

In December, 1931, Margaret travelled to New Guinea to study the Arapesh and later the Mudugumor and Tchambuli cultures. Here, her fieldwork consisted of studying sex roles in culture. Mead found that in Arapesh culture, both men and women were expected to be equal. This culture was found to be very simple as both genders actively raised the children. On the other hand, Mudugmor culture was very fierce. Both men and women were mean and aggressive. Often the children were left to fend for themselves and infants of the wrong sex were commonly cast into the river to die. This, in itself, was a very alarming experience for Margaret.

Margaret Mead
(1685-1753)

In Tchambuli culture, Margaret found that the sex roles were reversed. The women were brisk and hearty and the men were in charge of the household. These cultural differences were then published in another book, *Sex and Temperament in Three Primitive Societies.*

Source: The above excerpt is from www.mnsu.edu/emuseum/information

The objectivity© that Durkheim had aspired to introduce into the social sciences presumed that things could be identified according to their external observable characters and that it was also possible to classify similar phenomena. A very important dimension of classifying was how one defined a certain trait or institution. Many a time a feature may remain invisible or unrecognised if one looks for superficial resemblances only. In this sense, the definition of "external visibility" is to be exercised with caution. For example, the early anthropologists could not locate anything resembling a political institution among the so-called primitive societies. But later with their seminal work, *African Political Systems*, Fortes and Evans-Pritchard (1940: 6-7) recognised the political as embedded in other social institutions, such as kinship, and they identified it not by its overt form but by its function.

Durkheim undertook the analytical task of apprehending a mode of classification. In their essay, *Primitive Classification*, Durkheim and Mauss (1963; first published in 1903) distinguished symbolic classification of a moral or religious nature from practical schemes of technological distinctions (see Needham 1963: xi). At the end of his Introduction to Durkheim and Mauss's essay (English translation), Needham says, "It is the cardinal achievement of Durkheim and Mauss's essay, with all its imperfections, to have conceived the analytical notion of "classification" in sociological inquiry".

2.5 Problems Encountered in Data Collection

You may say that the scientific approach or even the social scientists' approach is to accept something only by way of its inherent properties, and not by any ideas regarding it. However, as has been realised with respect to social data, such an observation without interpretations, or the quest for inherent properties, is an illusion. Everything about society follows a system of meaning bestowed on it by culture or by humans. For example concepts like femininity, masculinity, etc., are all parts of meaning systems. There may be many societies where such terms hold one meaning and in others they may mean quite different things.

There is also the question of subjectivity as to what extent we can remain objective as observers when something that we see evokes intense emotions in us as human beings. In the social sciences the question has still not been resolved completely but certainly many social scientists have abandoned the stand of neutrality and you will find many scholar activists who consider it ethically wrong to remain neutral and emotionless when dealing with human situations. There is a recognition among such scholars that we can set up some universal criteria such as universal concept of human rights to intervene in situations that we enter as observers. Sometimes the entry may be for the specific purpose of intervention as in development studies or when social scientists are called in as advisors and consultants. But the debate whether to intervene or not to intervene is never-ending.

2.6 Difference between Common Sense and Science

If in the ultimate analysis what we need to rely upon is our sense perception of the social, the major question is how to exercise the use of the sensory with the caution that no ideas should be formed independent of the sensory perceptions. This is the fundamental difference between common sense and science, the common sense views rely on perceptions formed not necessarily with reference to scientific methods of causality. The natural sciences and the social sciences give more attention to the underlying causality rather than to superficial resemblances or lack of resemblances. It is for the scientist to look beyond individual manifestations to identify and classify phenomena.

We need to consider the significant contribution of social science research to highlighting false notions dearly held by people about the social world. Such ideas often manifest themselves as prejudices and become a source of unnecessary social conflict. Social science research findings, on the other hand, often tally with commonly held views and in those cases social scientists appear to be talking rather common sense things about social reality because their findings become an integral part of the everyday stock of knowledge. We have already considered the example of the

political. It can be shown that as far as the function of the political is the exercise of power or to negotiate such power differentials, it can be achieved through institutions and mechanisms that normally are identified as the family, kin relationships or religious rituals. All the same a social scientist has to go beyond dispelling false notions about social reality. There are rather complex issues facing social scientists who have to invariably deal with not only what are obvious, well known, routine matters, but also with digressive activities, which you may call not normal and sometimes also not ethical. It is not easy to define what is ethical and normal. Let us first discuss the issue of ethics (relating to morals) and then take up the issue of "normal".

2.7 What is Ethical?

Everything in society does not follow the same pattern. Whenever a social scientist observes actual human behavior and activities, there are always some differences of opinion about what is right and what is wrong. We have already discussed that the scientist is the one without any moral bias, such that what is right or wrong cannot be determined according to any particularistic principles, such as one's own value systems, but must have a universal referent. There has to be some universal criteria of well being, such as health, life and so on, by which we may judge an action to be right or wrong. But this is a question that has continued to plague the social sciences. By what criteria do we construct a universal code of morality or ethics? How do we reconcile the idea of cultural relativity with transcendence of ethnocentrism? For example, anthropologists have been accused of trying to find a justification for every custom found in any society including human sacrifice and infanticide. It is still a very big question mark as to how we judge the concept of right and wrong when they do not apply to us. As Barnes (1977: 2) has put it,

> The intellectual task of the natural scientist is greatly simplified because his data are, comparatively speaking, hard and reliable, and because the separation between him and the natural phenomena he studies is clear-cut. The social scientist, however, deals with data that usually are unreliable and fuzzy and, more importantly, his relation to the phenomena he studies is two-sided. The people he studies not only talk, they also talk back to him. Consequently it is his kind of science, rather than that followed by the physicist or chemist, that should be called hard if we wish to indicate the difficulty of the task he faces. Certainly the small amount of success achieved so far in social science, as compared to natural science, suggests that social science is indeed a hard undertaking. Ethical problems constitute a major component of its intrinsic difficulty.

Ethical questions come up also for the natural sciences. For example, we are all aware of ethical questions regarding weapons of mass destruction and genetic engineering. But, as Laszlo and Wilbur (1970) pointed out, it is only after scientific discoveries affect the humankind that we raise ethical questions about natural sciences. Otherwise, humans as such do not figure

into the theories of physics. In contrast to this situation, in the social sciences, we are dealing with human beings all the time and that is why we in social sciences have to continuously face ethical questions and it is just not possible to ignore them.

At this juncture, it seems a good idea to complete Reflection and Action 2.1 exercise for appreciating the ethical problems in studying the social reality around us.

Reflection and Action 2.1

Read the excerpt, given below, from Thapan (2004: 253) about her fieldwork in Rishi Valley School in 1981. Identify the nature of the problem in her fieldwork. Discuss both its ethical and moral aspects in terms of 'not to betray participants and lose their goodwill and credibility in the field' and 'the trust and confidence which has been placed in the ethnographer and which, in human terms, is not usually possible to betray'. In the light of your discussion, answer the following questions on a separate sheet of paper.

The Excerpt from Thapan (2004: 253)

It is the ethnographer who seeks to elicit the participants' cooperation and has thus to take the initiative to negotiate, cajole, and use alternative strategies to tease out, as it were, information which is secret and therefore restricted. This may include presenting different fronts to different kinds of participants, as I did, to make oneself acceptable to the entire community and thereby eligible for receiving secret information. Success with participants depends on the ethnographer's ability to handle interaction in a manner that engenders confidence and trust. Some participants may of course decline to enter into interaction and the ethnographer has no power to make them do so. Once the ethnographer has obtained information from others, who become friends and informants, the balance of power shifts from the participants to the ethnographer inasmuch as the latter may choose to use the information in any desired manner.

Questions

- Is it fair to drop some significant findings of the research because of the feeling of betraying 'my informants in the field'?
- Does the researcher really possess the kind of power she has after obtaining the sensitive and significant pieces of information?
- Is it necessary that practical, moral and human considerations need to determine the ethnographer's use of the material obtained during the course of research?

*** The academic counsellor is to please organise the debate on ethical and moral issues of social research and encourage the learners to articulate and express their views in this matter. Efforts may be made to record the discussion for broadcasting by Gyanvani.**

2.8 What is Normal?

The other dimension to studying the social world relates to what is normative that conforms to standard/ regular/ usual/ typical pattern. The task is to decide what is normative and what is pathological. To Durkheim (1964: 47-75), the decision of what constitutes the normal is the moot point on which social science rests. In the earlier phase of social science research, a kind of society was taken for granted that was

homogenous or everyone had the same values and norms. But increasingly it was realised that such a society was only the dream of ethnographers. There exists practically no human society without any differentiation and this means that for different sections of society, there may be varying values and points of view. An increasing criticism arose with the rise of the feminists and the also the subaltern and the Third-World perspectives. It was increasingly brought to the notice of the readers that what had been portrayed as normal and regular was such only for a section of society and even in the simplest society, this was only the world of men (See Box 2.2 Restudy by Weiner 1976 and 1977).

Box 2.2 Restudy by Weiner (1976 and 1977)

The path breaking restudy of Malinowski's field, the Trobriand Islands, by a woman anthropologist, Weiner (1976 and 1977), showed that what Malinowski had depicted as true for the entire Trobriand society was true only for the world of men. The world of women had been left out as if it did not exist, but it did and was an important dimension of life on the Torbriand Islands.

Such considerations led to revision of theoretical stances including that of "multiculturalism" that has now become an important dimension of social research in the context of the global movement of people from one country to settle down in another country.

Here we return to the scientific study of society and the assumptions and clarifications it entailed. Earlier, the evolutionary social scientists had assumed that it was possible to have a universal referent to judge the normal and more importantly there was something that was normal as compared to the pathological. The method to go about doing so could be statistical but ultimately, as even Durkheim (1964: 53-54) realised, one had to fall back on use of deductive logic.

One way to look for a normal social phenomenon was to look for its distribution in various societies of the human species, and if one kind of phenomenon is found in most communities, in spite of having variable manifestations, it may be taken as normal. For example, almost all human societies have some kind of grouping we can call a family, thus a family, of no matter what form, is usually supposed to be a normal condition of human societies and the breakdown or absence of this institution may be taken as pathological. This again indicates that there cannot be any truly objective and external conditions of normality, if normality is to be contextualised to its occurrence in different societies. Moreover while considering distribution or occurrence in space one cannot overlook temporal distribution of a phenomenon, again raising the question that what is normal at one point of time may not be so in other historical periods. For example, in the modern world, the term family may also denote a single parent family or a family with parents of the same sex; certainly such families would have been considered abnormal only a couple of decades back. In Durkheim's time, variability in time and space were

both explained by the concept of evolution, but today history has replaced evolution, making an important difference, progress is no longer seen as an inbuilt mechanism of transformation. In fact just as we had the concept of cultural relativity across space, the same can now be applied across time. We can truly be neutral about things that have happened and also about those that are going to happen. But as we have seen time and again such neutrality is not humanly possible about something that is occurring in the present. The acceptance of human subjectivity in the social sciences has ultimately given impetus to the emergence of the post-modern theory, about which you will read in later units of this book.

The "logical" normality of which Durkheim (1964: 54) spoke came under criticism as the logic of a particular observer. But Durkheim had been careful to point to the existence of "cultural relativism", to counter the "universal" laws of evolution posited by his predecessors such as Comte. He was also astute enough to separate the cause of existence of a phenomenon from its function, a teleology to which later generations of functionalists often fell.

This takes us to the question about how to make sense of the facts collected during a research.

2.9 Understanding the Data Collected

For a beginner in the social sciences, the use of the empirical approach means the collection of data that can be subjected to a theoretical analysis. Some kind of data had been rejected for scientific purposes when the emphasis was on a homology between the natural sciences and the social sciences. For example, the data collected by travellers and missionaries was rejected; as also the reasoning rejected historical data. One could not take the reliability of such data for granted. There was a presumption that we could view society as a functioning body that could be explained in terms of timeless laws like the functioning of a natural organism. The idea of "social order®" was one such concept that sought to explain many things, so were the concepts of "system®" and "equilibrium®". The only reliable data was the one collected by trained social scientists in the field by themselves. Even for purposes of comparison, one could legitimately refer only to the work of other social scientists and not to that of the "lay person" including the historian. In addition, as more and more "observers" entered the field it became apparent that the role of the "impersonal" observer was almost a myth. The raging debate between Margaret Mead and Derek Freeman over the data of the Samoans is a case in point (see Kloos 2004: 140).

The entry of the Conflict theorists challenged the build-up of theory around the concepts of equilibrium and social order. Increasingly it was felt that the observer tends to observe according to an unconscious and simultaneous process of 'internal' analysis.

The ignoring of history became an issue as it became apparent that no society is without a history. Historical documents, life histories, narratives and the verbatim statements of the observed became more and more a part of the observed data in order to overcome the subjectivity of the observer. Instead of "logic", the role of intuition became more recognised in the process of scientific observation (See Box 2.3 Dan Sperber's Comment on Intuitive Understanding).

Box 2.3 Dan Sperber's Comment on Intuitive Understanding

Sperber (1982) said that the knowledge that is acquired in the field is brought home as loads of data, in the form of field diaries, films, recorded interviews, filled schedules, maps, historical documents, life histories, pictures and genealogies. But along with it is the intuitive understanding that a scholar acquires into this field area by his/ her long exposure to a culture.

It has been recognised that to get an intuitive understanding a researcher has to spend a long time with the people or situation to be studied. By the time the work is complete, along with the factual or material data, the scholar acquires an empathetic understanding by which he/she starts to understand the world through the eyes of the people she/ he has spent time with. Things that appear strange in the beginning start to fall in place. While presenting the data the social scientists then recast it in the mould of a general level of conceptual understanding shared across the discipline and tread an intermediate path between the intuitive understanding that is purely personal and the interpretation of data that presents this understanding in the form of a general conceptual framework.

What remains important is that just the collection of data or mere observation does not serve the purpose of understanding. What makes the crucial difference between a good work and a mediocre one is the level of intuitive understanding that a scholar can bring to the data.

One important dimension of collection of material for analysis is that in spite of one's best efforts it is not possible to see and observe each and every thing in the field situation. Scholars who believed in the scientific and objective nature of their work, abstracted from the particular to the general, and concluded that there existed a homogenous society. In this sense, what was being said was meant for the entire society as a whole. To a large extent such a method is followed even today but attempts are made to identify the diversities within groups and cultures. Therefore, everything that does follow a set pattern is not assumed to be deviant but diverse. A method often used that of statistical frequency does not always yield results that are true representations of the situation. A statistical frequency often yields only a result the causes of which have to be deciphered by more qualitative and intuitive-deductive analysis.

Let us take for example the statistical data regarding sex ratio. A mere statement that there are many missing women in Indian populations

does not tell even the beginnings of a story of woman's marginalisation and trivialisation in a male dominated society. Moreover even an attempt to go into causality does not lead to uniform causes of the same phenomenon, thus the neglect and even willful killings of female children and even adult women has many deep seated and immediate causes and not all stem from tradition. In fact the alarming fall in the sex ratio as India is getting more and more modern and global has led many scholars to look for causes not in the past but in the present itself.

In most societies, no matter how small and confined, many voices exist. In day-to-day life people do not act according to already laid-down scripts. The normative is often expressed in words but not followed in deed. Even the normative is being constantly manipulated and modified as Barth (1987) has shown in his book, *Cosmologies in the Making*. The person who has the repository of oral knowledge has also the means to modify it. Thus oral traditions transform themselves as they pass from mouth to mouth and from generations to generations and travel across space and time. Another kind of activity of digression may be simple individual convenience or exigency. Most of us are familiar with such 'adjustments' in rituals and performances of daily life and even life cycle activities like marriage. A third kind of digression may be deliberate, an act of rebellion or defiance. Such acts have been studied under the label of contra-culture and often refer to the acts of resistance of marginal groups in society like women and the underprivileged.

2.10 Managing Diversities in Social Research

While collecting data for sociological research, we need to recognise that diversities have to be both accepted and also explained in terms of the meanings they express. Social science observations are time consuming and require painstaking sincerity in recording data. There is no short cut if one wants to get a real understanding of social phenomena, for all such phenomena are complex and have multiple causations and effects. As Holmswood and Stewart (1991) explain it, when explanations in the social sciences become problematic, one has to accept rather than ignore or reject them. Moreover the search for a perfect explanation is also illusory and one has to accept that human beings are creative and have freedom of expression. This is again not to say that no regularities can be observed or no generalisations can be made, for if this were so, there would be no social science possible. The social scientists often tread a delicate balance between regularities that are real and those that one would wish to impress upon one's data. This is the classic duality between structure and action that has to be faced in the social sciences. You can argue that the wider the applicability of our generalisations, the more we lose out on ground level explanations of particular events. The general often remains an essential condition for explanation of the specific.

There is still another problem that empirical observations and

interpretations have to deal with. What do we do when certain things that seem to lie beyond our own sensory perceptions appear to be well within the sensory perceptions of others, or at least that is what they claim? How do we interpret it when we are told in the field by our informants that they see spirits on a regular basis or they converse with the dead as they converse with the living or that they have spouses and children in the other world with whom they communicate all the time (See Box 2.4 The Saora Example)?

Box 2.4 The Saora Example

The Saoras, a tribe of Orissa, do not observe a division between the dead and the living. According to them, the dead have simply gone to live in another place, quite near to their own place of residence. They meet on a regular basis and converse. To the Saoras this poses no problem and they often talk about a person they had met while gone to the field or to the market, but the only problem for the social scientist would be that the person is long dead. They also have their spouses and children in the spirit world with whom they keep in constant touch.

How does one explain the Saora example given in Box 2.4? If one should follow the 'scientific' rationality of relying only on one's senses then the only way to explain this would be to either say that everyone in that culture is suffering from hallucinations or is speaking lies.

Another way to explain this could be that people of different cultures have different cognitive abilities and can actually see things that we cannot. This would be something like the work of Castaneda (1971) that went beyond the credulity of many but was also accepted by many others.

A third way to explain it would be that there are culturally learnt mechanisms of deriving meanings from some optical and other sensory perceptions that elude us. For example, while working with a mountain community I was told that when a person was about to die, a *lama* was called in to observe the passage of escape of the soul from the body. I asked the obvious question as to how did a *lama* observe such a phenomenon and was answered by equal incredulity as to why should he not! Thus what is incredulous to us may be very obvious and commonplace to another, but if it stretches the limits of our credibility then what is to be done?

Evans-Pritchard (1937), on the other hand, explained the phenomenon of witchcraft among the Azande by reducing the entire experience to a positivist one, and subjected it to a rational positivist, functional analysis. Here he ignored the apparent subjective experience of the actors and concentrated on the overt or even covert functions that were performed by the experiences. He took them as given conditions without comments. To the analyst it does not matter

E E Evans-Pritchard
1902-1973

what the Azande felt emotionally or experientially about witchcraft. The analyst focused on the role that witchcraft played in maintaining the social order.

In yet some other cases the analyst may concentrate on the meanings that these experiences have for the actors and then integrate the individual experiences into webs of significance. This is the approach taken by Geertz (1975). But most scientists have skirted the issue of truth of the experiences and of the "seeing" and "experiencing" of the actors.

Some more recent scholars have not shirked the issue of sharing in the experience of the actors in the field situation. For example, in one instance, Sax (2002), who participated in the performance of the Pandava Lila in Garhwal, recounts being transported into an other-than-ordinary experience while participating in the dance. One more dimension about the study of culture is the relative importance of the verbalised behavior and the non-verbal one. Scholars of culture have often equated culture with language, prioritising the verbal over the non-verbal by the logic that human beings are more into verbal communication and that non-verbal behavior, being more "natural", is in the realm of "animal" rather than human behavior.

Yet another category of scholars, such as Ingold (1986) and Gell (1992), has looked upon culture as a way of engaging with the world and the manner of this engagement is a dialectic relationship with the environment. Human beings engage with their environment forming their own interpretations as a result of this interaction and not the other way round. In other words, we do not always interact with a culturally created environment of meanings but that our physical interactions that are natural to begin with imbue the environment with meaning that then becomes transcribed into it. Such meanings , in the absence of written records, may be only partly passed down and partly recreated each time an individual engages with his/her environment. Thus a child born into a hunter-gatherer group learns about the environment by walking in the forests, by trying to satisfy hunger by plucking fruits and catching animals and trying to survive and find its way around. An illustration of such a work is *Nisa: the Life and Words of a !Kung Woman*, which deals with the real life of a hunter-gatherer woman who lived in the bush and that was recorded by Shostak (1981).

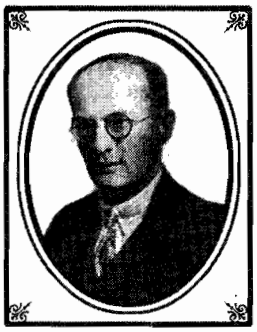
The lengthy section on managing diversities in social research takes us to the subject of understanding the basic goal of one's research. Let us discuss this issue in the next section.

2.11 Problematising the Object of Study

We need to be prepared to problematise the object of our study. How do we understand the basic goal of our study, how do we conceptualise society and culture? Unlike the natural sciences we do not have anything concrete in front of us that we *see* as society or culture. What we do

actually is to *infer* it from our observations and our assumptions.

The process by which we can infer can become quite fuzzy and debatable.



E B Malinowski (1884-1942)

For example one way in which one can refer to society as one's object of study is by its geographical definition. For example, Malinowski (1884-1942) studied in 1922 the Trobriand Islanders as a unit of study, Mead (1901-1978) studied in 1928 Samoa, Radcliffe-Brown (1881-1955) carried out his major research in 1922 among the Andaman Islanders and so on. One would presume that each of these exotic locations also contains a unique culture. The society can also be defined in terms of some other boundary, say of marriage. Thus a caste or *jati* can be defined by the boundaries of endogamy. There can be other criteria of membership as well. But not all units have such boundaries; say if one wants to study a religion like Hinduism, the field would appear vast and unbounded. Sometimes what one wants to study may not be defined in one location; say a *diaspora* or an immigrant group that cannot be studied with reference to one location only. Even when one is bound to a location, the social phenomenon need not be bounded, thus one cannot study a village in rural India without understanding the effects of mass media and national politics on it. Increasingly the availability of a bounded society is being questioned and we have techniques such as multi-sited ethnographies and networks to replace the earlier concept of a system.

Often the term society is reduced to a subjective rather than an objective unit. A society or community is one because the actors or participants define it as such. Thus the simple way to study Hinduism would be to study those who call themselves Hindus rather than trying to devise an external definition for it. A culture could thus be the maximum amount of shared representations about the world that exist across a unit we call a human group. Often such a group by the very fact of sharing of representations is defined as a society. Such sharing of representations or culture is not rigid, it transforms and diffuses and transplants itself. While studying a unit of society in India, say among the youth, we cannot overlook the influence of various cultures, including that of the USA and Japan and so on. Here the task would be to separate the imposed from the original, but even such a task may become very complex, as one must take into account the historical development of ideas and interpretations of the world.

A R Radcliffe-Brown (1881-1955)

In a more conventional sense, Anthony Giddens (1984: 163), in *The Constitution of Society*, mentions the following two primary senses of the concept of society.

i) The generalised connotation of social association or interaction, (the standard definition that is given in the classrooms of a network or pattern of interaction between social actors)

ii) A relatively bounded unit of social relationships forming a system of interdependency that distinguishes it from other such systems.

(This was the manner in which societies were distinguished in classical times. But today such bounded units are hard to locate and define and increasingly it is being realised that such units may have always been an anthropologist's wishful thinking.)

What does a social scientist look for while trying to find a unit of study to be defined as a society? In some cases one may look for the boundaries of linguistic understanding, so that it becomes synonymous with a culture, or it may be a self-defined tribe, or caste or a geographical unit like a village.

However what problematises society is its original dissociation from the individual by Durkheim (1964: 4). The social scientist in the field has to interact with and observe individuals and not society. If the individual is seen analytically opposed to society, then to make sense of one's findings a social scientist would ignore the actors altogether and create one's own version of the structure through a process of abstraction. But if society is the product of a process of theorising then like all theories it is contextualised in time and space. What is society then becomes itself a social activity subject to rules of power. Take for example the manner in which Indian society was defined in the colonial era by the colonial administrators with the help of social elites of India, like the Brahmins and rulers. The version of Indian society and history that was thus constructed prioritised both Brahmanism and patriarchy. Paradoxically the constructions are not mere abstractions but if created by a source of power they translate themselves into reality and thus as social historians have been able to demonstrate, colonial rule did reconstruct Indian society into the form into which the colonials had imagined it. But in spite of this reconstruction there was a reality about society that never made it to the official version. Much later subaltern historians made attempts to salvage this history.

2.12 Conclusion: Return to Good Old Empirical Approach

Considering the various problems encountered in trying to make sense of the data collected, we keep coming back to the sanctity of the term empirical reality, while dealing with the terms of society and culture. The greatest tension lies in the relationship between individual and society. The theoretical disparity remains for us to resolve regarding whether we accept the positive school, which admitted an existence of society over and above that of the individual or we merge the two in a subjective post-

modernist interpretation. The status of the text as a document of reality or as a script for the subjective interaction of the observer and the observed is still a subject of debate.

Even if we take the latter stand that all reality is interpretative and a form of reflexivity then also the guide for successful presentation of data would rest in the truthfulness of the representation. In fact those advocating for the latter approach accuse the positivists of imposing their own rules while systematising the data. In other words things have been distorted to fit into neat compartments whereas the reality is never so neat. Those who had talked about regularities and systemic patterns overlooked the validity of the irregular. In fact the definitions of the regular and irregular were tailor made to fit into the preconceived notions of the observer. What ultimately emerge are the perceptions of the observer neatly and systematically validated by selectively presented data. Foster (1965), restudying the village of Yucatan, accused Robert Redfield of seeing harmony and social order where the reality was fraught with suspicion, disharmony and covert conflict.

Robert Redfield (1897-1958)

The only way is to keep as close to the observed reality as possible, to act as a mediator rather than as an interpreter of data. The present genre of social scientists especially those dealing with field realities prefer to stick as close to the narrative mode as possible, thus acting more as translators on behalf of the actors in the field. The best mode is to assume that the knowledge lies with the actors and not with the interpreters that society is what it is as a result of the interactions and activities of the actors as they engage with the world. The Durkheimian dialectic of the actor and the society is seen as more or less not valid just because society is no longer viewed as the systemic, bounded reality of shared representations as positivist scholars held it earlier.

There is also an attempt to view things not only as they are but also how they came to be. Thus history has become an integral part of social science interpretations as well as power relationships and their formation.

A part of power relationships is also the vantage position of the scholar, the position from which he/she speaks and represents the world. It was increasingly felt that the subject position of the scholar has been assumed to be "white' and "male" thus "othering" all those who belonged to the Third World, the Black and the Female. The word "I" used in many ethnographic narratives always invoked the male, white scholar with his western scientific rationality. For example, while almost all male white scholars looked at the world as patriarchal and male dominated, women scholars often found contra cultures where women had their own modes and ways of countering male domination and their own strengths and

voices. Contrarily men often missed out on forms and manners of oppression that were visible to women. This is only one example, others can be of studies of the caste system from the bottom up, studies of feminism from the perspective of black women, studies of indigenous people by indigenous scholars and so on.

Let us end our discussion in this unit by completing Reflection and Action 2.2 exercise for working out the ways of dealing with differences between the researcher and the researched.

Reflection and Action 2.2

The following excerpt from Karlekar (2004: 378-379) shows the theme of her search for women's voices. Read the excerpt and if possible read Karlekar's article itself and consider the possibility of yourself carrying out a research among the people of a socially marginalised group of society in India. In that case how would you face the dilemma of facing the differences between your gender/ class/ caste/ social status and the consequent sense of unease at a personal level and methodological assumptions of social sciences at the professional level? Write your answer to the question on a separate sheet of paper and discuss the issues raised in the following excerpt with fellow-learners at your Study center.

Excerpt from Karlekar (2004: 378-379)

When at the end of fieldwork I told my respondents that they had been of considerable help to me, Shanta, who had become quite a friend, said, "Bibiji, aap to apni kitab likhengey, par hamara kya hoga?" (Bibiji, you will write your book, but what will happen to us?) I had no honest answer to give her, just as I had not really been able to deal with the persistent question of many women: "Bibiji, hamey issay kya milega?" (Bibiji, what will we get out of this?)... ...I rarely allowed myself to think too much about these uncomfortable questions during my visits to the colony. When I sat down to write my report, however, many images continued to flit through my mind. .... I was not always sure of how I should write about the lives of the women I had spent days with. While I knew any act of telling to be interpretive in nature, I was nonetheless anxious to be as "true" to my respondents' reality as was possible. I also knew that when those under study are physically and mentally subjugated by society and by men, the moral overtones of a fieldworker's intervention and probing have implications of a different order. Inadvertently, one may be initiating a process of self-analysis, of consciousness-raising, among a group, which has little hope of escaping from the bondage of daily life. The resultant frustration and anger are in this case the direct responsibility of the fieldworker, who becomes an agent of exploitation.

Further Reading

Glaser, Barney and L. Anselm 1968. *The Discovery of Grounded Theory*. Weidenfeld & Nicolson: London (For its focus on developing theory in the process of doing research)

Winch, Peter 1958. *The Idea of Social Science*. Routledge: London (For its argument regarding subjectivist version of what social science should be about)

Unit 3

Diverse Logic of Theory Building

Contents

Learning Objectives 

It is expected that after reading Unit 3 you will be able to answer the following questions.

- What do we mean by theory?
- What are the constituents of theory?
- Why do we need theory?
- How do we build theory?
- What is the use and scope of social theory?
- How do values held by researchers affect theory building?

3.1 Introduction

After discussing in Unit 2 the basic logic of understanding social reality around us in terms of empirical investigation, we will discuss in Unit 3 why and how sociologists arrange in fairly compact theories their propositions about the social world.

Before reading Unit 3, it would be well to appreciate that emphasis on theoretical formulations and methodological rigor in empirical research go hand in hand and do not in any way pose any problem of ascendance of one over the other. Your logic of theory building is your asset to carry out a useful empirical investigation and vice versa, a methodologically sound social research leads to growth of verifiable and valid outcomes in terms of their theoretical significance.

In the light of the above clarification, it makes more sense to read Unit

3, which elaborates the process of theory building, that is, deals with hypothesis, description and experimentation. In addition, it discusses the use and scope of social theory and the issue of social scientists' values affecting theory building. As in Units 1 and 2, discussions in Unit 3 also follow the pattern of informal and narrative style with examples from sociological writings.

3.2 Concern with Theory in Sociology

Theory refers to knowledge arranged so that the facts are subsumed under general principles. The difference between commonsensical knowledge and scientific knowledge is that the latter is systematised and classified. But only classification does not make any knowledge scientific, what really makes it scientific is that while commonsensical knowledge is satisfied most often with the desired effects, science looks into the causes of a phenomenon. It is the task of theory to organise such causal relationships into observable repetitive or classifiable regularities so that one can make general observations that encompass diverse but related phenomena and explain them by not individual and specific relationships only but by a higher and abstracted general relationship.

To look for causes underlying any observable phenomenon is the first task of science for otherwise as often happens with respect to commonsense, people expect or demand contradictory goals without realising that they are doing so. Establishing the correct causal relationship between facts is followed by bringing together diverse facts within a single frame of causality; the process by which this is done is called theory building for the resulting relationship is often called a theory.

In other words, you can say that there are three constituents or properties of theory, namely, i) explanation, ii) prediction and iii) verification. The systematically interrelated sociological propositions, which hold in different contexts, comprise theories. You can put to test each of these propositions as to how well it conforms to data and how well in relation to each other the propositions account for the outcomes in a given setting. If such a prediction is possible, you can say that the result has been explained in terms of known propositions. While verifying the sociological propositions, one needs to look for a logical relationship as well as empirical relationship. As you can make out, explanation, predictability and verification in sociological theory building are closely interrelated elements. We shall now discuss them in detail.

Before we go on to the discussion, it may be a good idea to carry out one Reflection and Action exercise right in the beginning of the unit in order to fully appreciate what is meant when we suggest that to look for causes underlying any observable phenomenon is the first task of a social scientist.

Reflection and Action 3.1

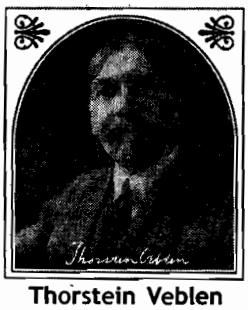
We have given below an example of the underlying cause of overcrowding in cities in relation to a commonly held perception of city dwellers. You need to write on a seperate sheet of paper another similar example based on your own experience.

The Example

One example is that of city dwellers, living in cities and often complaining of overflowing slums containing migrants from rural areas. They also complain of inadequate electricity but do not realise that it is largely to fulfill the exorbitant requirements for power of big cities that mega hydroelectric projects are built and these projects often displace large volumes of populations that have no recourse but to throng the slums in the cities, thereby increasing the burden further on the resources of the cities.

As said earlier, we look at theory as 'an account of the world which goes beyond what we can see and measure. It embraces a set of interrelated definitions and relationships that organises our concepts of and understanding of the empirical world in a systematic way' (Oxford Dictionary of Sociology 1998: 666). In this sense, we can agree with Waters (1994: 3), who says that social theory needs to be abstract and separable from the social practices that the theory has addressed. Such a theory needs to also focus on a specific thematic argument that runs through the set of propositions providing them coherence and force. Next, the theory has to be logically consistent and explanatory, that is, it needs to have a thesis about social phenomena to account for their form or existence. Further the theory is to be general enough to account for all instances of the phenomena it proposes to explain. Also the theory cannot be reduced to the explanations informants or participants themselves provide to explain their behavior. Finally, the theory needs to be substantively valid, that is, it is to be consistent with what is already known about the social world by its participants and by the social scientists, including other sociologists. This means that it should be possible to link the theory to other bodies of knowledge.

The best way to test the validity or truth of a theory is to test its predictability. For example, Thorstein Veblen (1857-1929) had collected together some properties of the elite in society, designated by him as the theory of the leisure class (see Veblen 1899). The validity of this theory lies in how often and how predictably will the persons belonging to the elite class exhibit the properties so designated.



Thorstein Veblen
(1857-1929)

The sciences by definition need to be predictive on the basis of their theories. In the natural or so-called 'pure' sciences, there is a set limit on the probable range of failure of predictability of a theory before it is rejected. In the social sciences, theories rarely have that capacity for predictability yet some degree of ascertaining the truth of a situation has to be assigned to any

statement for it to take on the mantle of a theory.

It is now time to complete Reflection and Action 3.2 for looking into the predictability capacity of theories in sociology.

Reflection and Action 3.2

We are giving below an example of theory that owing to other variables has the limited capacity for predictability. Identify similar examples from the theories you have learnt in MSO 001. Compare your examples with those of other students of M A Sociology at your Study Center and select five best examples of such theories and discuss them in terms of their capacity for predictability and presence of other variables that inhibit large-scale prediction. Select a panel of four to five learners to present and discuss their examples to show the difference between commonly held views and scientifically analysed reasons behind a phenomenon.

The Example

One example is that of exchange theory, which states that the principle of exchange or equivalence of transaction of 'give and take' underlies much of human behavior, including marriage and nurturance of children. However other variables such as power and altruism intervene to explain situations that recurrently digress from the principle of equivalence. Moreover it is also recognised that human relationships operate on the basis of non-material considerations such as prestige and honor in determining dimensions of exchange; like the flow of goods from persons of lower to higher status. In the social sciences we find that because of the complexity of human life and behavior, the situations of predictability are intervened by a large number of factors. A one-to-one causality is rare in the social sciences though it is possible in mathematical sciences and natural sciences.

***The Academic Counselor of MA Sociology programme is requested to organise a recording of the panel discussion among the learners, in collaboration with the IGNOU Regional Center in your region.**

After completing the section on concern of theory in sociology, let us look at building blocks or basic elements of theories.

3.3 Concepts: Basic Elements of Theories

Whenever we are talking in terms of theory there is a necessity to use a kind of vocabulary that is often specific to a particular discipline and contains terms that we call concepts. These concepts are nothing but short hand versions of a large range of phenomena that may be brought under one heading to describe something. Concepts are basic elements of theories and we develop them through a process of definition. Theories basically connect concepts to one another in a logical manner. Let us take for example the concept of culture. When a social scientist uses the term 'culture' in any written or oral discourse, the meaning of the term is roughly comprehensible to anyone who has knowledge of the discipline. Each concept is usually accompanied by a standardised description called its definition.

In the natural sciences such definitions are very precise but in the social sciences they may not be so. Anyone who has struggled with the definition of culture in the first year of joining sociology will know how difficult it is to find a one-line definition of culture. Even today, most persons may not agree on any definition whatsoever. Yet most social scientists would have a fairly good idea of what is meant when the term culture is used. Thus all scientific disciplines have their own terminology of concepts popularly known as the scientific jargon.

The concepts are abstractions that are not made randomly but by a recording of structural properties rigorously selected from the visible traits exhibited by the phenomenon under study. Although such selection can be made on the basis of statistics, the ultimate construct is made intuitively or deductively. As far as possible it is ensured that the properties selected are of universal occurrence.

Let us once again take the example of the concept of culture. It is universally recognised that although the capacity for culture building may be a genetic mechanism, culture by itself is a learnt behavior as proven by the example of children who have been deprived of being nurtured by human adults. This learnt behavior is transmitted over generations but is also capable of being transferred to other groups and transformed over a period of time. The traits, which often go into the definition of the concept of culture, have been abstracted from actual observations and recording of human groups and their behavior. Also, it is quite likely that certain properties considered to be true at one point of time may be given up or modified when fresh evidence comes up. For example, the proposition that only humans are capable of culture is being modified by fresh research on non-human species.

Propositions in all sciences are always open to scrutiny and continued research in a scientific manner means that we keep testing earlier statements for their validity. This is why science is recognised as a never-ending process and that is why in the social sciences few concepts achieve the status of universal and timeless truths as in mathematics. Statement of absolute validity, like two plus two is equal to four, is rarely possible in the social sciences. There is always recognised a difference between "theories" based on constructs and "experimental laws" based on facts. In this sense, the social sciences are by and large theoretical and not experimental. All the same we build theories in the social sciences. The question arises, why do we need theories? Let us try to answer the question.

3.4 Why Do We Need Theory?

The need for theory lies first of all in that theories help us to put order in a bewildering range of phenomena that might seem unrelated. But with the help of theory, we may summarise in terms of a few principles the

nature of the relationship between them. The more abstract a theory, meaning the more generalised a theory, the wider is its application but the further away it is from actual situations. You may say there are two types of theory, namely i) formal, and ii) substantive.

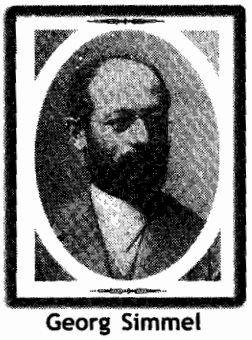
Formal theory is most inclusive and basic in the sense that it aims to isolate a single set of principles, which are the foundation for social life. Through these principles you can explain every social phenomenon. Its paradigms give birth to grand theories. Evolutionary theory is an example of a grand theory, which makes some broad generalisations regarding the nature of society and the nature of transformations that one expects to see, but it would not be very predictive when applied to everyday realities of life except in a very broad sense. The last significant attempt to write grand theory was made by Sorokin (1962). His theory on social and cultural change attempts to establish two basic law-like generalisations (for details of Sorokin's grand theory see Zetterberg 1965: 15-16).

Pitrim Sorokin
(1910-2003)

As a reaction to writing grand theory, Pitrim Sorokin's student, Robert K. Merton (1957: 5-10), formulated theories of middle range. You can say that these are miniature theories or partial theories. Such theories endeavor to explain specific but generally branching out events or specified types of the social process. When we designate a theory partial or middle range or miniature, we mean that this theory does not contradict other accepted theories. Examples of such middle range theories are Pareto's theory of elites (see Finer 1966), Murdock's (1975) theory of kinship structures, Homan's (1950) theory of elementary social behavior.

Robert K. Merton
(1910-2003)

But whether grand or middle range, a theory is a necessity for it simplifies the tak of dealing with reality. A theory provides a means for dealing with reality in terms of providing neat and compact explanations that can be set into a known explanatory framework. In this context you may like to quote Simmel (1898: 829-836)), who said that "...we shall discover the laws of social forms only by collecting such societary phenomena of the most diverse contents, and by ascertaining what is common to them in spite of their diversity". Simmel's (1858-1918) assumption is that sociology can discover a small number of propositions, which would be verifiable in diverse contexts. In this sense, you may say that the task of the sociological theorist is to discover general propositions. Such an effort generates



Georg Simmel
(1858-1918)

systematically interrelated propositions. Only after generating such propositions can we test a theory. To test a theory, we need to check how well each proposition of the theory conforms to data (see below the discussion on hypothesis, description and experimentation). Interestingly, often the situation is the other way round and most of those engaged in social research collect data and look for theories to make sense of their data.

In fact the task of collecting empirical data often culminates in the scholar trying to make sense of the data in terms of available theories. If such a task is successfully accomplished,then the data stand explained. However, if the data refute or contradict the theory then they provide a basis for reformulation of the existing theory or a new theory altogether. For example neo-evolutionary theories such as that of Leslie White (1945, 1947 and 1959) were modifications on the evolutionary theory. The replacement of the evolutionary theory by the functional theory was a refutation of the earlier theory and its replacement by another.

Leslie White
(1900-1975)

The second task of theory, apart from the first one of explaining reality, is to generate a hypothesis that can be tested. We shall now discuss this process in detail as this helps all young researchers to initiate their research projects.

3.5 Hypothesis, Description and Experimentation

A theory by itself is an abstract proposition that cannot be tested. It is also true that a process of deduction can only construct a theory, even when it is based on inductive empirical data. What a theory does is to generate a hypothesis that can be tested. The reliability of a theory lies in the testability of its hypotheses. Skepticism regarding the evolutionary theory began when it was realised that the hypothesis generated by it, such as for example whether or not patriarchy precedes matriarchy, could not be proved empirically. Moreover the methodology used for proving these hypotheses were suspect. The closer the hypothesis generated by a theory comes to the reality, the better is the theory.

Not all research is directed towards hypothesis testing, as in the social sciences in particular there can be a descriptive research that seeks to explore hitherto unknown territories.

A hypothesis only posits a logical relationship between phenomena to be understood and is in itself not a description of reality, and may not correspond to every actual case on hand. For example, the hypothesis that urbanisation leads to disintegration of the joint family is only a logical relationship between a particular form of family and urbanisation

that seeks to state that whatever urbanisation stands for in terms of its very definition is antithetical to what the joint family stands for, so it is logical to presume that with greater urbanisation the joint families are likely to break up. But this is not a deterministic statement about all joint families actually breaking up. It merely wishes to state the reality that whatever values or states of mind that urbanisation fosters like individualism and competitiveness are at variance with the sentiments that bind families together.

The hypothesis is, in this sense, a deductive statement that needs to be proved inductively.

The various ways in which theories can be constructed depends on the type of questions asked and the basic assumptions or premises that are accepted as given truths in any situation. There are also no fixed rules or methods by which one enters into a scientific investigation and often methods have to be devised according to one's requirements. For example, the scholars who developed the Culture and Personality approach had to develop their own techniques such as collection of children's drawings, recording of dreams, administration of Rorschach ink-blot tests[◎] and so on, methods that had not before been used in any sociological or anthropological fieldwork.

The two broad divisions of the logic of theory building in the social sciences is between those who consider the natural sciences as a model for building theory in the social sciences as well, that is to look for universal laws and invariant truths regarding society and human behavior. The other point of view denies the possibility of ever establishing such "truth" because of the creative and diverse nature of human beings. The latter point of view supports the idea that all observations regarding society and human behavior are contextualised in historically situated human groups and can never be universalised. However a modification of the first point of view is that the social sciences are as precise or non-precise as the natural sciences because even the propositions made by the latter often have limited application and are subject to modifications from time to time. In other words there is an attempt to review the definition of science itself.

A number of problems may be listed to provide an answer as to why the social sciences are not capable of furnishing universal laws of the experimental type. One of them is the difficulty faced by sociologists in carrying out a controlled experiment. Let us discuss this problem.

3.6 Controlled Experiment

The first of this is the lack of the possibility of setting up of controlled experiments to test a hypothesis. A real controlled situation is one in which the scholar can manipulate the variables at will. For the social scientists ethical and moral constraints put a restriction on such

manipulations, but sometimes an attempt has been made to take ready-made situations that exhibit properties of controlled comparisons (see Reflection and Action 3.3).

Reflection and Action 3.3

An example of a controlled comparison is the study by Epstein (1979) of two villages in South India. The following paragraph describes how Epstein used the methodology of comparing identical situations in every respect except for one variable.

Description of the Controlled Comparison

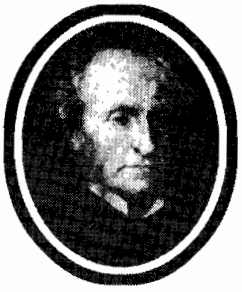
These two villages Wangala and Dalena were identical in terms of culture, social norms and structure of social relationships. Epstein's hypothesis was based upon the then popular structural-functional model that assumed interdependence between the various parts of the social structure. It was hypothesised that the introduction of outside technology would affect the economic dimension and thus upset the earlier harmonic interdependence between the various parts of the society. The two villages selected had different technological bases, one was a dry village depending solely upon rainfall for irrigation and the other had permanent sources of water from tanks and wells. With the introduction of water from the Krishnaraj Sagar Dam built in 1931, both villages underwent changes. The wet village, Wangala, strengthened its earlier forms of social structure, by the increased cash input from better irrigation facilities and the switch over to cash cropping. The increased economic input led to a continuation of earlier structural elements like caste, performance of elaborate rituals and reinforcing of the role of caste and village panchayats. But nothing new, not even electricity, was introduced into the village. The dry village, Dalena, underwent more radical transformations in its economic roles and relationships. While it could not switch to cash cropping, people underwent transformations to non- agricultural activities. People started going to the nearby town for jobs and education and the village became structurally different from what it was before. What Epstein is able to show in her research is that the same economic change, namely irrigation from a dam, can bring about drastically different results in two villages otherwise identical but having different resource bases. The two villages are comparable because they belong to the same region, same culture and had the same type of social structure to begin with. The outside source of change is also identical, the only variable that differed was technology.

What are you expected to do?

Read the example carefully and identify one more such controlled comparison in the social sciences. Write, on a separate sheet of paper, its description, similar to the above example, in order to highlight the hypothesis and the theoretical context employed to provide explanation(s) of the social phenomena under study. Try to look for a possible example(s) from the articles in the special issues of *Economic and Political Weekly* (15 June 1996) and *The Eastern Anthropologist* 53 (1-2) 2000.

This kind of methodology with ready-made situations of comparability, where two field-situations could be identified that were identical in every respect except for one variable was popular for a while. They followed what John Stuart Mill (1806-1873) had called the Method of Agreement or the Method of Differences, in which two situations were either unlike in all respects except one or were alike in all respects

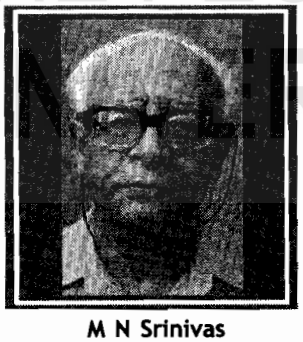
except one. According to Mill (1930) such situations could never occur naturally or under unmonitored conditions and since they were a necessary condition for the stipulation of general laws, the social sciences could never aspire to do so. The criticism of Mill is that even under the most stringent experimental conditions such ideal conditions may not be achieved or cannot be achieved as some variables may be related in such a manner that one will automatically change if the other is varied.



John Stuart Mill
(1806-1873)

3.7 Designing an Experiment

The other kind of theory building process was the use of actual experimentation in the laboratory. Such methods are often commonly used in the fields of Psychology and even culture personality and socialisation and child rearing studies. Experiments entail comparision of what happens in the situation of the control group with what happens in the experimenal group. "Control" in this context means holding one factor constant while others vary. However the obvious drawback is that not very many social situations can be reproduced under laboratory conditions. Sometimes the changes that occur in natural conditions are of far greater magnitude than those which can be produced artificially or the emotional content is far more intense in real life than under experimental conditions. The element of play-acting may also creep into such situations. In addition, it is possible to set up field laboratories where in real-life situations one can examine the variables, like in a classroom or factory.



M N Srinivas
(1916-2000)

But more often theory in the social sciences is directed towards viewing the effects of a certain phenomenon upon another or on society in general. Like a particular variable may be chosen, like dowry or building of a factory or the introduction of television into an area. Then the effects of the introduction of this variable upon the rest of society are studied. Other kind of studies may be directed towards the cause of a certain phenomenon rather than its effects. Like trying to ascertain the causes of female infanticide. The help of a hypothesis can set up such studies in two ways, either, where a certain relationship between the phenomenon to be studied and some other variable deemed to be causative is put forward. Or otherwise it may be a purely exploratory study where the field is being approached for the first time. The latter are often in the nature of pilot studies done prior to the setting up of a hypothesis. But they can also be full-length research of the exploratory descriptive type, for example, the *Remembered Village* by M.N. Srinivas (1976).

3.8 How to Test a Hypothesis

For setting up hypothesis testing research we must first have a theory, because the nature of the proposed relationships is ultimately derived from theory. A theory provides the basic logic of the relationship between different phenomena. The hypotheses are generated to test the truth of these relationships and therefore the correctness of the logical process, namely, the theory that has generated them.

Every hypothesis contains a statement about the relationship between at least two phenomena; one of them is the phenomenon such as female infanticide that the researcher is trying to account for. The other is one that is thought to affect or bring about the phenomenon that one is trying to account for. The first one is called the dependent variable and the second one is called an independent variable.

For example if we put forward the hypothesis that illiteracy of mothers leads to female infanticide, then female infanticide is the dependent variable and the literacy level of mothers is the independent variable. To test the hypothesis one has to expose it to a situation that can show it to be false. If the hypothesis survives the effort to falsify, it then it is proved true. In the above example we can study the rate of female infanticide among a population of well-educated women. If the sample shows a significant rate of female infanticide that compares favorably with a corresponding sample of illiterate women, then the hypothesis is false. In other words the literacy of women is not a significant variable as far as female infanticide is concerned. If, on the other hand, the sample of educated women shows a significant drop in the incidence of female infanticide, then the hypothesis is tentatively proven.

In the above example one could rely on statistics to provide most of the base data. But not all social science variables are measured statistically, for that one has to measure by deductive processes and set up some criteria oneself or rely upon criteria provided by other studies.

Let us now do the exercise of Reflection and Action 3.4 to work out the links between the variables and theories. After the exercise, we will discuss the common methods of testing a hypothesis.

Reflection and Action 3.4

Take the example of the variable of Status of Women. There is a numerical measure for such a variable but one can measure by relying on the theoretical statements made by others and the observations one makes in the field or by eliciting responses to a set of questions, or more realistically by combining a number of techniques. For example, what determines the status of women would depend on what theory we are subscribing to.

What are you expected to do?

Work on the match in the following exercise to find out who (the follower of which theory) would emphasise which variables to determine the status of women.

Theory	Emphasis on
I) Marxist Feminist Theory	A) Sexuality, personal liberties, rights of choice, freedom of expression etc.
II) Radical Feminist Theory	B) The symbolic and ritual expressions.
III) Interpretative Theory	C) The economic variables such as income, inheritance of property, ownership patterns, etc.

3.9 Common Methods of Testing a Hypothesis

Here we discuss the following three common methods of testing the hypothesis.

i) Pre-testing of the post-testing paradigm

One common method of testing a hypothesis is by pre-testing of the post testing paradigm[@]. You may ask, what is a paradigm? For answer of the question, see Box 3.1.

Box 3.1 What is a Paradigm?

The dictionary meaning of paradigm is 'example', or 'pattern'. In social sciences we use the word, as explained by Ritzer (1983: 432), who said, "A paradigm is a fundamental image of the subject matter within a science. It serves to define what should be studied, what questions should be asked, how they should be asked, and what rules should be followed in interpreting the answers obtained. The paradigm is the broadest unit of consensus within a science and serves to differentiate one scientific community from another. It subsumes, defines and interrelates the exemplars, theories, and methods and instruments that exist within it."

To continue with our discussion of pre-testing, one simply studies the field prior to the introduction of a variable and after its introduction, let us say the study of a village after the building of a road or after an event like an election or epidemic. However the dangers of such a paradigm is that one is not sure about the variable under consideration being responsible for the transformations and there is always the problem of extraneous factors. For examples of this kind of 'before-and-after' studies, see Box 3.2.

Box 3.2 Examples Of 'Before-And-After' Studies as given in Srivastava (2004: 10-11)

The so-called 'before-and-after' studies are regarded as an alternative to the classical experimental design. In them, a phenomenon is studied before and after the introduction of the independent variable. A comparison of the two states will tell us about the change. F. Stuart Chapin's study (1963) of public housing in Minnepolis coined the term 'ex-post facto research' for such studies. ... ... .In the Indian context, many researchers working on communities that have been displaced because of development projects (such as the construction of a dar , m ning, industry) have adopted this approach (see The Eastern Anthropologist 53 (1-2) 2000).

ii) Static group comparison paradigm

In the static group comparison paradigm, instead of studying the same field situation before and after, one compares two similar field situations, one with and the other without the introduction of the independent variable. For example one may have two identical neighboring villages, but one gets access to television and the other does not. So one may study the effects of television viewing by comparing the villages. Does this example remind you of Scarlett Epstein's work cited earlier?

iii) Nonequivalent control group paradigm

In the nonequivalent control group paradigm, one compares one field situation before and after the introduction of an independent variable but also compares it with a field in which the variable has not been introduced but which iş similar in all other respects. This would be the case say for example when one had two identical villages that were both studied and then one of them received a significant input, like a school. Then both schools were again studied to see what effect the school had, but now we can compare it by measuring against the village that did not receive the school.

The most common source of error here would be that some sort of selection process has already taken place for the introduction of the external variable. For example a particular population size or caste composition may be responsible for the fact that one village received a school and the other did not. To remove the possibility of such an error a fourth paradigm may be taken recourse to and this is called the Nonequivalent Control Group Paradigm.

Here everything is like the third paradigm situation except that the field situations are chosen at random and not selectively. However this also depends on the possibility of having such random selection that is if there are enough field situations of the similar type and whether the researcher has access to selection of any such field situation. One can have such a paradigm when the number of situations is many and equally available, say if one were to study the effects of introduction of computers in secondary schools in Delhi. The most obvious disadvantage of random sampling[◎] is that one may not get the desired result. In fact such methods are more useful for quantitative research, like the school example cited.

3.10 Sensitivity to Alternative Explanations

One fact that must be kept in mind while doing research and using the various paradigms discussed is that as social scientists one must be sensitive to the existence of alternative explanations even if one has proven the hypothesis. Rigidity is not a virtue because social science research of real life situations is complex and multifaceted.

3.11 Rival Hypothesis Construction

The process of rival hypothesis construction is a standard procedure to test the efficacy of research. The four factors that form the basis of the four major rival hypotheses are

i) The effects of selection

ii) Reactive measurement effects

iii) The effects of uncontrolled extraneous variables

iv) Interaction effects involving selection.

Let us discuss each of the four factors.

i) The effects of selection

A selection effect occurs whenever the treatment group or the group we are studying for the introduction of the variable is different from the comparison group because of the way in which they were selected or rejected for introduction of the particular variable, like for example school. The advantages that may be perceived as emanating from the school may be because the number of persons of a dominant caste/class is more in the particular village and the school may have been introduced because of the greater clout of the dominant caste members. So it is class advantage that may have already been there and not merely the introduction of the school that may be perceived in the study as better hygiene consciousness or better use of medical facilities, etc.

ii) Reactive measurement effects

The second rival hypothesis situation may occur when the measurement process itself may introduce transformations in the field. Like for example as it often happens when students from Delhi go to carry out field-based social research in villages, the perception of the villagers of the urban elite/ middle class to which the students may belong often affects the responses and sometimes even the behavior pattern. The villagers might for example wear more urban clothes while the researchers are around or profess greater faith in modern medicine.

iii) The effects of uncontrolled extraneous variables

The third type of error is due to the introduction of uncontrolled extraneous variables, that is, those variables that were overlooked or that entered while the research was in progress.

iv) Interaction effects involving selection

The fourth type of error occurs when the selection process and extraneous variables both occur in conjunction.

Our discussion of hypothesis testing is a process that takes the researcher a step forward in the investigation. It is an example of the organised skepticism of science. In other words, you may say that this reflects the rejection of any statement without empirical verification. A number of works have been based on the processes of hypothesis testing and several

middle range theories have emerged as a result of such inductive analysis; one good example is the work of Robert. K Merton (1950) on the *American Soldier*, in which he had developed the theory of latent and manifest functions.

The efforts to produce a rigorous theoretical analysis in the social sciences is however always met with skepticism as the results rarely are able to attain the status of laws but middle range theories like that of Merton, cited above, can be quite effective in explaining if not predicting social behavior.

3.12 The Use and Scope of Social Science Theory

A very significant aspect of social science research is that this research itself is often instrumental in changing human behavior. If human beings are made aware of destructive or potentially disruptive behavior then they can and do make conscious efforts to change it (Refer to the rationale and purpose of MSO 002 as discussed in the Course Introduction). In this way, the subjects and objects of study in the social sciences have a dynamic interactive relationship. For example, if certain kinds of child rearing practices are shown to be harmful for the normal development of the child, then they may be arguably modified or abandoned. Any predictions made by the study on the ill effects of a particular practice may be reversed during the course of research itself.

Moreover a lot of research in sociology and anthropology has been directed towards revealing what has been variously called latent functions or unintended consequences of human actions. However, once made public these do not remain latent or unintended and may in fact replace the earlier ways of thinking by the actors themselves. For example, in urban India marriage is by and large not considered a religious or sacred ceremony to the extent that it was believed to be a generation back. More people would point to it as an occasion to bring the family together or to cement social relationships or to increase social solidarity, a function of marriage that in the earlier times was perhaps more visible to the social analysts than to the actors themselves.

Many scholars now consider it possible that subjective dimension of human behavior, like moods, dispositions, emotions and values are open to sensory perception and therefore form part of externally observable data. The conclusions that we reach regarding such subjects are based either on the information given to us by the actors or by a process of empathetic understanding where the scholar tries to get into the place of the actor. Rosaldo (1984), in his article "The Rage of the Head Hunter" puts himself in the place of the headhunter to analyse the anguish that is felt at the death of a loved one, at the loss of his wife Michelle Rosaldo. Thus the social scientist interprets the actions in terms of the subjective experiences as a human being and being subject to the same emotions

and motivations as any other.

On the other hand it is also realised that one need not step mentally into the shoes of the actors to understand a phenomenon. For example one need not be suicidal at any point of time to do a sociological analysis of suicide. But there is certainly a qualitative difference between the kind of analysis that looks at the phenomenon from the outside and the more reflexive kind of descriptive work.

Not all types of human behavior are subjective and there are many concrete and visible outcomes of behaviour that can be measured and studied. An alternate manner of constructing theory came from the 'behaviourists', who rejected the vagueness implied in 'subjective' understanding. An extreme behaviorist position may deny all subjective and internal mental conditions but most prefer a modified version. Here the introspective data from subjects is treated as data and then subjected to analysis. This is similar to the approach where contradictory inputs by various actors in the field are analysed as data that represent the conditions of the field, like different power positions occupied by the actors or conflicting identities.

At this point in our discussion, we need to also look at the question, how do values held by researchers affect theory building?

3.13 Theory Building and Researcher's Values

The last point on which we will concentrate in this unit would be the extent to which the values held by a social scientist enter into the process of theory formation or in other words what is known as the value oriented bias of social science inquiry. The four points at which values can enter is at the level of

i) Selection of problems
ii) The determination of the contents of conclusions
iii) The identification of facts
iv) The assessment of evidence.

We shall now discuss each of the entry points for values of researchers to creep into the social research.

i) Selection of problems

A social scientist is guided by several considerations in the choice of subject matter of which her/his value orientation is one, that is a feminist would be interested to research women's problems, or a Marxist to work on subjects like agrarian relations or the exploitation of labor in factories. Moreover the manner in which a concept is constructed such as say the concept of culture or what goes into determining the status of women, is also conditioned by the subjective orientation of the researcher.

ii) The determination of the contents of conclusions

The determination of contents of conclusion is something on which the

criticism of almost all theories is based. It is felt that most social scientists have a fairly well formed idea of what is the nature of the reality that they are trying to prove and most research is aimed at proving or disproving what is already intuitively known to the scholar. Moreover larger interests about the society at large or moral and ethical viewpoints often creep into whatever a theory is trying to prove or disprove. During the colonial regimes most anthropologists took equilibrium as the natural state of societies and their theories were directed towards demonstrating how such equilibrium states are maintained. Any disruption of the equilibrium was seen as abnormal or pathological (or a condition of anomie). The value orientation of the sociologists and anthropologists colluded with that of the administrators and often both were one and the same person. Or otherwise the anthropologist was on the pay-roll of the administrator. The goal of the administrators was to establish equilibrium in their colonies therefore equilibrium was also the desired state and viewed as such by the scholars too.

iii) The identification of facts

It is not impossible to distinguish between facts and values and contributions to theoretical understanding may be achieved even if the values of the social scientist are at variance. For example the contribution made by avowed ideologically oriented social scientists such as Marxists is still considered of considerable theoretical significance especially if they had been able to contain their value orientations within the limits of reason.

Another remedy often resorted to in contemporary theory is to make the value orientation of any work quite clear so that the reader is not misled and is able to contextualise the theory to its orientation. This could also take care, for example, of the difficulties faced in the social sciences because of the evaluative character of the terms and concepts used. It is not always very clear as to what exactly is the distinction between facts and values. For example in the nineteen seventies a certain kind of ecological approach concentrated quite a bit on the study of resource utilisation as a way of looking at a community's relationship with its habitat, often looking towards the goal of maximising such utilisation. But another school of environmentalists would vehemently be opposed to the term "resource" being used for the habitat as this term in itself is reflective of an exploitative attitude towards the environment. Such persons may not think of the environment as a resource for use by human communities but as something that has a right to existence by itself. The second point of view may look upon maximisation of resource utilisation as a negative rather than a positive goal. Moreover while writing ethnography one may be tempted to use words like kind or cruel, both of which cannot be understood without reference to a value framework. Contemporary ethnographies normally tend to consciously avoid using such terms preferring instead to give a detailed description of the actions leaving it to the readers to form their own judgments or

using such terms by which the actors themselves designate the acts.

iv) The assessment of evidence

There is always the apprehension that only conclusions but even the process of evaluation of data is often value loaded. Some kind of data may be totally overlooked or ignored by a social scientist simply because of innate value orientations. For example, the feminist scholars had alleged that male scholars ignored women's activities and role in society simply because of their patriarchal bias. Does this discussion remind you of the example of Weiner's (1976 and 1977) study of Trobriand Islanders, mentioned earlier in Unit 2? Similarly Dalit scholars have often made allegations that upper caste scholars have often presented a biased Brahmanical view of society in India, selectively using data to do so.

Even in statistical analyses, value commitments are not ruled out. But value commitments are also of two kinds, covert and overt. For example Malinowski's oversight may have been unintentional but sometimes researchers allegedly manipulate data towards a particular end.

One kind of bias that is almost inevitable is the one connected with the historical and situational impact upon a student of society of the place and time to which she/he belongs. As we shall discuss in greater detail in the next unit, the evolution of scientific thought is also a product of the history of human society. World events and transformations of intellectual climate are determining factors that can rarely be avoided in the manner in which theory is formed.

3.14 Conclusion

Human history and human knowledge are inextricably interlinked. This is how we come to have a sociology of knowledge and that is why the history of a discipline is always an integral part of its curriculum.

However if we accept the subjective nature of sociological knowledge, is it that only the followers of the school of thought that produced it can understand a theory? The problem has been partially solved by the concept of relational objectivity or relationalism. In this the social scientist makes clear at the outset, the perspective that is being followed in the analysis so that readers can subsequently put in the context the findings and draw their own conclusions. The point is to make clear the basic assumptions on which the theory is formulated and it is for other scholars to accept or reject the theory on the basis of whether the basic premises are acceptable or not. For example the entire debate on whether matriarchy or patriarchy was the initial stage of human society is meaningful only when one accepts the basic premise of the stage-by-stage evolution of human societies. If one does not accept the basic premise itself, then the entire debate becomes meaningless.

If we do not accept the above path, the only generalisations that can

have universal validity in the social sciences are the statistical generalisations, like say for example the fact that female infanticide rates have increased from 1950 to 2004. But such generalisations are not theory. They only form the basis for theory and when a theory is formulated out of statistical generalisations there is still plenty of scope for varied interpretations.

In Unit 4, we shall look into a broad overview of the way in which theoretical analysis has proceeded in sociology and how the major premises have transformed themselves historically.

Further Reading

Kaplan, Abraham 1964. *The Conduct of Inquiry*. Chandler: London (For a detailed study of the logic of inquiry into social phenomena)

Unit 4

Theoretical Analysis

Contents

Learning Objectives 

It is expected that after reading Unit 4 you will be able to learn and discuss the following themes.

- Theoretical analysis of data collected in terms of evolutionary and functionalist premises and their critiques
- In the nineteen eighties and nineties abandoning of the empirical approach in favour of subjectivity and reflexivity
- Emergence of post-modernism and yet, in most regions including India, adherence to older methodology of fact-finding.

4.1 Introduction

In Unit 3 we discussed that theories differ according to the basic or major premises on which they are based. The premises are the given conditions or universal truths that we take for granted when we formulate a research problem or look for some explanations of a social phenomenon. Continuing with our general discussion of the approaches to understanding social reality, in Unit 4 we are going to wind up our narrative by talking about the growth of theoretical analysis in the social sciences in general and in sociology in particular.

We will begin the story with the evolutionary theory and move on to functional and structure-functional approaches. After a short critique of evolutionary and functional theories, we will discuss the phase of post-modernism with regard to the 'crisis of representation' in the disciplines of sociology and anthropology. During the nervous eighties and nineties of the twentieth century, American and continental social sciences included intensive reflection on the link between authorship and authority and focused on subjectivity and reflexivity while abandoning the empirical approach.

Almost in a racing style, the narrative in Unit 4 gives you an opportunity to become fleetingly familiar with the names of post-modern scholars

and their ideas. At the end, we will briefly note the current status of methodological engagements of sociology in India.

4.2 Premises of Evolutionary and Functional Theories

In the nineteenth century, with the acceptance of the fact that the human is a unified species, the problem of variation of human social institutions and cultures was explained by converting a spatial difference into a temporal one. In other words, different societies were different because they were seen to be in different stages in the ladder of evolution. This was the evolutionary theory based upon the basic assumption of progress and a stage-by-stage evolution of human society, where society was seen as one unified reality of human existence. Culture was spelt with a capital C and was common to all humanity and not cultures that vary across time and space. From this point of view all societies are the same, the difference that we observe is only a chance factor of some societies being arrested in development and others more progressive. Some societies are past of the others and some are the future of all. Because of this in-built idea of progress, the term 'primitive society' came into being. Those termed primitive were literally considered to be the past of those termed modern. The study of other cultures was thus the study of looking into one's past.

The evolutionary theory was built upon the premise that we can explain the occurrence of some social phenomenon by reference to the past of human societies. The assumption was that this past can be discovered in societies physically in the present but culturally arrested at some previous time period; the term 'our primitive contemporaries' was used for the purpose of describing culturally arrested types.

This trend was followed by the functional theory that was derived from the eighteenth century positivism and organic analogy©. The basic premises of this theory were not in the transformation and understanding of human society and culture as unified but were rooted in relativism and interdependence. It was believed that cultures are multiple and each is unique unto itself. The questions that were asked were not about origin and progress but about the contribution and function of each trait to the functioning of the whole. The whole here was a living society and culture to be studied only in the present with no allusion to the past or future.

In the functional approach, to understand social reality we have a static theory. A static explanation is one where a social variable is explained only in terms of variables belonging to the same time period. This kind of theory is not based on a premise that the phenomenon in question is actually ahistorical but on the assumption that a sufficient understanding of it is possible by recourse to data that are situational. The type of questions that the functional theory would address would be different

from those addressed by evolutionists, who professed a theory of human society progressing from stage A to stage B in a scale of evolution. Usually functionalists have explained what function is being performed by a particular trait in a particular culture at a particular period of time. In the evolutionary theory, on the other hand, at least some of the variables used in the explanation belonged to a time period prior to the time than the variables to be explained. In this sense the evolutionary theory was used to explain origins and development, or transformations and social change.

From Durkheim to Talcott Parsons, functionalism with its roots in early French philosophers like Comte had a long grip over sociological theory. It served the needs of the hour and was compatible with the organic analogy that was often drawn for society and culture by social philosophers, sociologists and anthropologists.

4.3 Critique of Evolutionary and Functional Theories

Quite often as an adjunct of historical conditions, the accepted premises of a discipline have been challenged time and again with changes in the philosophies of the times. For instance, the concept of the 'primitive' was challenged and replaced by the concept of 'cultural relativism'. Admirable as the concept of cultural relativism was in according validity and status to all cultures, many scholars attacked the implicit assumption, underlying this concept, that one should maintain *the status quo* in the name of relativism. If every culture is demonstrated to be a functioning whole then the implication is that all cultures should be left alone. Many scholars criticised this point of view on the grounds that such a policy would perpetuate inequalities and differential power equations that exist in the world. Every group of people has a right to change and improve its living conditions and harbour aspirations for a better life. This is especially true in situations of traditional inequalities and marginalisation. For example would one make a case to preserve the institution of untouchability on the ground that it leads to a stable and functioning system? The entire concept of functionality and harmony were questioned on methodological grounds of teleology (for the meaning of this term see Box 4.1) and on ethical ground of social injustice. You can also clearly make out that functionality does not guarantee justice. For example, even slavery may have been a functional system in that it was productive and it worked, but to call it just would be stretching things too far.

Box 4.1 Teleology

Teleology refers to justifying the existence of a phenomenon by the function it performs. Teleology implies that one is trying to explain the effect as the cause of a phenomenon. This is precisely what functionalists did by way of offering explanations of social phenomena.

It became quite obvious that to assume a static view of society, like the functional theorists did, had far-reaching implications in terms of social policy. The debate ensued as to what approach the administration should take with respect to the so-called marginal people under its jurisdiction. Many were opposed to the 'preservation' approach and many others to the 'assimilation' approach. The question was also raised as to whether the concept of cultural relativism was a descriptive hypothesis or a value theory. As a hypothesis it states that no value judgments are objectively justifiable independent of specific cultures but this does not rule out the possibility that some values may be common to all cultures. In this sense, it makes social scientists to state facts and not to make value judgments about cultures. Most sociologists and anthropologists are careful in stating their data in terms of facts, 'what is' and not in terms of 'what ought to be'. This practice often raises the moral question whether a scholar remains just a scholar when she/he comes across practices that are heinous, like female infanticide? Some may advocate a separation of roles as scientist and as scholar and others may incorporate the role of activism within that of the scientist. Such questions continue to always haunt the scholar in the field.

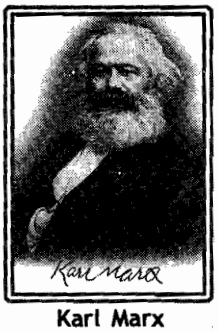
As human beings study human societies, the gap between theory and practice is quite often fraught with tension. In the late twentieth century critical theory largely replaced value neutral theories as more and more scholars engaged in issues like human rights and social justice. This is not to say that such were not also the concerns of earlier social thinkers. For example, the social bases of theory in the thoughts of Marx and others included concerns of social justice (you will read more on this in Unit 6).

Theory in the social sciences has continuously reflected changing social conditions. In the early twentieth century the concept of change became a major theoretical and ethical issue as it was realised that change was an essential dimension of our lives. The two World Wars, the independence of the colonies, rapid industrialisation and capitalist expansion, all had immense effects on sociological theory. Not only change but also conflict became a central concept in the social sciences and it became increasingly debated as to what was a more natural human condition, harmony or conflict? Critics like David Lockwood (1992) complained that it gave a fictionalised view of the world.

Another kind of criticism emerging was about the nature of science and reality itself. It claimed that any claim to scientific objectivity is itself a constructed phenomenon and such constructs invariably serve the power interests of some. The works of Foucault (1926-1984) and Gramsci (1891-1937) were much influential in these lines. Both Foucault and Gramsci elaborated on themes of one's own domination by more powerful others.

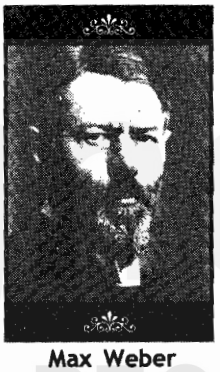
4.4 Turning away from Functionalism

It was Karl Marx (1818-1883) whose influence led to the initial turn away from the functional theory. His basic assumptions regarding the nature of society itself as a product of historical materialism was in contradiction to the view of society as a harmonic system that could be subjected to static analysis. Methodologically history and a dynamic perspective were now seen as essential to a sociological analysis. The works of Marx (1844, 1857-8, 1859, 1861-79) were the prime stimulant to the development of a critical approach to social reality.



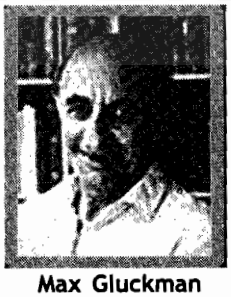
Karl Marx
(1818-1883)

Those forming social science theory in the mid-twentieth century drew inspiration from the ideas of George Simmel (1858-1918) and Max Weber (1864-1920). You will find that Weber also provided a counter to the essential positivism of the Marxian theory that was to have been a true scientific study of history.


Max Weber
(1864-1920)

The contribution of Marx was to take away the mechanistic character attributed to the actions of human beings, showing them to be active agents in shaping their destinies but only as products of their own histories. He firmly emphasised the human existence in the material world as contributory to social action rather than mere ideas shaping history.

Marx's assumptions regarding society were criticised on the basis of their overt generalisations regarding the importance of economic organisations and property relations in shaping society and the bipolarisation of social conflict. It was also recognised that property is not the only basis of power in society. For example, take the thesis of Dumont who held that in the context of the caste system in India the sacred power of the priest was considered superior to the temporal power of the king. Moreover it was also debatable whether conflict always causes social change. You can give the example of Gluckman (1965), who had found that conflict could also function as the basis of the maintenance of the social order. Notwithstanding these arguments against Marx's ideas, his key propositions regarding the nature of society had a lasting influence on social thought (see also Unit 7).

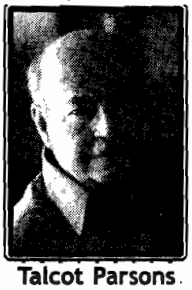

Max Gluckman
(1911-1975)

You can say that sociology as a discipline remained until the ninety-sixties largely in the realm of functionalism and developed two types of theories, namely grand theories and middle range theories. Grand theories make sweeping generalisations about the nature of society and history and middle-range theories are more inductive in nature and are built up

around a limited set of observed facts. Marx's theory was an example of the first kind, one that made predictions about the state of the world. Another grand theory that dominated sociological thinking in the mid-twentieth century was functionalism of Talcott Parsons (1902-1979). His work, *The Structure of Social Action* (1937) is one of the most influential theoretical works of the twentieth century (see Box 4.2 and 4.3).

Box 4.2 Talcott Parsons' Main Argument

Talcott Parsons (1937) held that theory in sociology must be built up around a limited number of important concepts that are adequate to grasp the objective and external social reality. These concepts are analytical constructs abstracted from empirical reality. Thus Parsons tried to develop a naturalistic/ positivistic conceptual schema. Underlying Parsons' method of building theoretical analysis was the assumption that the social reality does have systematic regularities that can be analytically grasped. At the same time Parsons advocated the existence of the complex symbolic functioning of the human mind.



Talcot Parsons (1902-1979)

Parsons' action theory (see Box 4.3 and also Block 7 of ESO 13 of IGNOU's B A Programme) is integrative in nature and his concepts of functional prerequisites are independent of time or place. They are general and ahistorical, that is, they are found in all societies at any point of time.

Box 4.3 Talcott Parsons' Theory of Action

At the core of his voluntaristic theory of action is the thinking and individual actor, who is goal seeking. This goal seeking behavior is faced with alternative means and situated in varying life conditions that act as constraints on the goal seeking behavior. The actors are also governed by values, norms and ideas that influence choice of goals as well as the appropriate means to achieve them. Finally action involves actors making subjective decisions to choose the means to achieve the goals under the given conditions of constraint. Applications of this theory were many like in health seeking behavior.

Critiquing Parsons' approach, Giddens (1979: 112) has commented, "In both Althusserian Marxism and Parsonian sociology the reproduction of society occurs 'behind the backs' of the agents whose conduct constitutes that society. The involvement of actors' own purposive conduct with the rationalisation of action is lacking in each case: in Parson's sociology as a result of the value-consensus-norm-internalised need-disposition theorem, and in Althusser's writings as a consequence of his deterministic account of agency; hence the teleology of the system either governs (in the first) or supplants (in the second) that of actors themselves".

The functional theories (see Blocks 6 and 7 of ESO 13 of IGNOU's B A Programme) of Radcliffe-Brown (1952) and Malinowski (1944) were

criticised as not really reflecting social reality. Increasingly by the nineteen sixties a criticism of functional approach was emerging that considered the homeostatic (the state of remaining at a constant level) system forming the basis of the functional theory as utopian. Some criticisms like those of Merton and Firth and Leach came out from within the limits of functionality. These critical views reinterpreted the concepts to introduce more flexibility. For example, Merton (1968) introduced the concepts of functional alternative, and functional substitutability. Similarly, Raymond Firth (1901-2002) gave the concept of social organisation and Edmund Leach(1910-1989) discussed the concept of dynamic equilibrium (see Leach 1961). The emphasis in all these was on a middle range of generalisation. The next phase in theory was the return to evolution or to a dynamic conceptualisation of society. The static was seen as totally inadequate to explain social reality that was visibly transforming. This view became entrenched in the era of rapid global change.

Raymond Firth (1901-2002)

Edmund Leach (1910-1989)

In the social sciences there was a revival of evolution in the form of neo-evolutionary theories and in sociology the work of Niklas Luhmann (1927-1998) emphasised the role of the environment in the study of social systems. In all such theories we see an attempt to get away from too much generalisation to come back to more concrete and material conditions but at the same time not to forget the symbolic dimensions of human society. Both cultural ecology and Luhmann's (1998) general system's approach included environment as a variable for understanding social reality. Adaptation to environment became a key concept and mal-adaptation was introduced into analysis.

Another major transformation in theoretical analysis was in thinking that the social sciences could never be truly positivistic. One of the prominent followers of this mode of reasoning was Max Weber (see also Unit 7). In spite of his efforts to rise above positivism, Weber included generalisations in his analysis that indicate his belief in the regularities of social life. Such regularities are clearly present in his discussions of leadership and the evolution of leadership from the traditional to the rational-legal. One major contribution of Weber was his critical insights into the process of evolution towards modern society. His view of evolution was not a utopian one of unilateral progress. He did not see the destruction of tradition as uniformly

Niklas Luhmann (1927-1998)

beneficial to human life. There is a useful comparison between the approaches of Weber on the one hand and of Durkheim and Radcliffe-Brown on the other in Beteille (2004). Weber (1978: 15) said, " We can accomplish something which is never attainable in the natural sciences, namely the subjective understanding of the component individuals". Beteille (2004: 121-122) has commented,

> But his approach to the comparative study of society was different from the approach of Durkheim and Radcliffe-Brown because he had a different conception of society and a different assessment of the limits and possibilities of sociological inquiry. Sociological inquiry in his view was concerned with causes and functions, but it was also concerned with meaning, and there the organic analogy was more a hindrance than a help.

We may now turn to what replaced the functionalist approach.

4.5 What after Functionalism

As already mentioned, a major turn away from functionalism was towards recognising conflict as a central dimension of society. Increasingly we find that the concept of society becomes defined in terms of conflict and competition rather than harmony and function. Power and individual and group interests overshadow co-operation and altruism as leading forces of society.

The oppressive events of the twentieth century, the World Wars, the holocaust, the marginalisation and genocide of colonial rule, Vietnam and Korea, all combined to produce a critical approach to society where utopia was nowhere to be seen. Such theories like that of George Lukacs (1923) and Jugen Habermas (1985) were highly contemplative and emphasised processes such as intersubjectivity. They were deeply concerned with the dehumanising processes taking place in the world and also the role of theory in obliterating the human dimension. Oppression and human struggles in various parts of the world often became central themes of analysis (see Box 4.5 for the quotation from Giddens (1987) about Lukacs ideas).

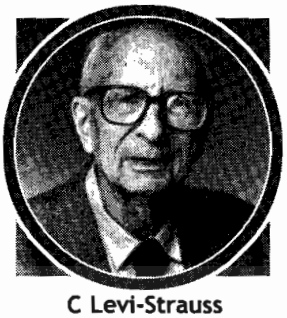
Box 4.5 Lukacs' Ideas as mentioned in Giddens (1987: 235)

In between Weber and Parsons come Lukacs (1885-1971) and the Frankfurt school; and Habermas approaches his analysis of Parsonian thought via a 'critique of functionalist reason'. The connections between Weber's interpretation of rationalisation, Lukacs's discussion of reification, and the critique of instrumental reason formulated by Horkheimer and Adorno, are clear. They all agree that an expanding rationalisation underlies the overall trend of development of western society. In spite of placing different emphases upon the character of rationalisation, these writers hold, like Weber, that the primacy accorded to purposive-rational action in modern culture produces both a loss of moral meaning in day-to-day life, and a diminution of freedom.

George Lukacs (1885-1971)

Habermas' (1975) contribution can be summed up in his denial of science being the only form of knowledge available to humans. According to him there are three types of knowledge, namely, i) empirical analytic knowledge, ii) hermeneutic historical knowledge and iii) critical knowledge. The first is the type posited in the natural sciences and in traditional sociology. The second is the kind where we try to interpret the meaning systems through the analysis of historical texts and the third, that is, critical knowledge emerges out of our attempts to understand conditions of oppression.

Positivism persisted in theory in the period of what can be designated as 'high modernism' and is evident in the French structuralism. Of the French structuralism, the works of Levi-Strauss (1908-) had a lasting impact on the social sciences. Levi-Strauss (1949) extended the connection between structures of thought and the internal structure of the human brain borrowing from the theoretical principles of structural linguistics. The French version of structural Marxism became popular through the scholarly efforts of Meillasoux (1981), Terray (1972), Godelier (1977 and 1986) and others.



C Levi-Strauss
(1908-)

In fact structuralism emerged as an intellectual tradition in social theory. Like functionalism, it also derived its inspiration from Durkheim. While functionalism accepted the premises of biology, structuralism used linguistic models to explain social and cultural phenomena.

In the writings of Levi-Strauss, we find a kind of mixture of structuralism and functionalism. He wrote extensively on kinship systems, totemism and myth. His analysis of the logic of myth had a profound impact on the social sciences. In particular, his understanding of the notion of structure, conception of the unconscious and approach to history were taken as leading a new way of perceiving social reality. But Levi-Strauss (1969: 98) described his work as 'an initial statement' only.

In America the high tide of modernism was marked by a conceptualisation of culture as a publicly shared symbolic system, valid and internally coherent. Geertz's (1975) conceptualisation of cultural systems dominated the field of anthropology supported by his methodology of 'thick description'. His interpretative approach to the concept of culture, going into detailed observation and narrative descriptions, took anthropology deeper into the realm of the actors. Geertz clearly advocated a 'to and fro' journey between objectivism and reflexivity or a reflexive mode of understanding objective. The ethnographic experience of going deep into other people's experiences gave richness to his analysis that had a great impact.

C Geertz
(1926-)

.ren: s a mentioned above gave an impetus to further shifts in theoretical analyses of social reality. This time you can notice qualitative differences

in the ways of perceiving the social world by post-modernists. In the next section, we will briefly look at the main currents in post-modernism.

Before going on to the next section, let us complete the Reflection and Action 4.1.

Reflection and Action 4.1

Once again go through the three types of knowledge as given by Habermas (1985) and mentioned in Section 4.5 (What after Functionalism?) and provide at least two examples of each type from works of sociologists mentioned in the units already read by you. For titles of the various writings of these sociologists, you will need to look carefully at the list of references, given at the end of the book. Compare your examples with those of fellow learners at your Study Center and discuss them with your academic counselor for checking the accuracy of your selection of examples.

4.6 Post-modernism

A major change took place in theory across the world and across social science theory with the deconstruction of the scientist as "white and male" (already mentioned in the last section of Unit 2). In fact a total changeover in perspective occurred in the form of post modernism that subjected the textual matter to a reflexive critique that goes into the politics of the construction of a text. All that has been written down is now viewed, not as descriptions of the "truth" per se but as constructions based upon the history, politics and strategy of authorship. Every concept taken for granted in the modernist era is now subjected to scrutiny. Culture, for example, is no longer to be viewed as a fixed entity, the symbolic representation of the mind of an identifiable group of people, but a shifting and contested process by which new identities are constructed.

The recognition of the process of "construction" was contingent upon the process of deconstruction. In the post-nineteen-seventies era, the notions of deconstruction and destructuralisation spread across all fields of humanities, literature and art. The fixed faith in the definition of knowledge as that generated by western science was challenged, so was the so- called "progress" embodied in western civilisation. The entire notion that knowledge exists as "facts" that can be established with the help of western scientific methods, and even that there is a fixed "reality" out there, was criticised. The reason for this radical departure from modernism was the failure of western science and systems of knowledge to deliver the goods in a world threatened with environmental disasters, diseases such as AIDS, failure of civil society and deepening inequalities and injustice across the world. Another reason was the emergence of scholars from various race, class, ethnic, and gender categories. The central figure of the white and male scholar was displaced and taken over by a variety of others, who challenged the truth status of the findings. In the forefront were what are known as the colonial critique and the feminist critique.

A new generation of scholars confronted the political and economic realities of the 'colonial knowledge' by following the historical roots of the motivations and power equations involved in the production of such knowledge (See Box 4.6 for an example from India).

Box 4.6 Subaltern History

The chief product of radical departure in theoretical approach was a rewriting of history, of which the best examples in India are the series of books in *The New Cambridge History of India* and the series of books on subaltern history under the editorial leadership of Ranajit Guha (1982). Examples of what is known as the colonial critique and also a subaltern approach to history is reflected in the works of Partha Chattterjee (1993), Bernard Cohn (1996), Nicholas Dirks (1992) and others of the genre. The writings of Edward Said (1977) inspired many of the above-mentioned works.

The strongly critical point of view of feminism is reflected in Stanley and Wise's (1983) definition of feminism as directly confronting the idea that one person or set of people have the right to impose definitions of reality on others. This also makes it compatible with the post-modern concept of reality as situational.

Another stand taken by post-modernism was to resituate the researcher *vis-a vis* the researched more equally. The researched was no longer reduced to the status of a passive 'object of research' but became an equal partner in the production of knowledge. The sisterhood proclaimed by feminists was also related to an understanding of equality that could be achieved only if the producers of knowledge were from hitherto 'silenced' groups. The prominent feminist writer of color, Audre Lorde (1934-1992) is of the opinion that any discussion of feminist theory that ignores the perspectives of women of color, poor women and lesbians is suffering from academic arrogance (see Lorde 1989).

Post modernists, especially feminists, questioned the status of knowledge as value neutral, vertically arranged privileging the researcher and divorced from action. The activist scholar became an integral part of the late twentieth century academic world. Theory was finally liberated from its ivory tower and came down to the streets.

4.7 Trends other than Post-modernism

But post-modernism itself by its extreme reflexivity was unable to expose the real basis of human inequality. The problems of diversity and providing a critique of human situations of real inequality, human suffering and exploitation are still valid theoretically well into the twenty-first century. The nineteen-nineties witnessed a growing interest in the philosophies just before the emergence of post-modernism, namely phenomenology (see Unit 5), existentialism and hermeneutics (see Unit 8). Baudrillard (1968) turned Marxist theory over by according infrastructural status to

signifiers©. According to him, in the period of late capitalism there has been a fetishism of signifiers that is leading to creation of increased needs of consumption that in turn leads to increased production. The signs that earlier in Marxist perspective were seen as part of superstructure trigger the economic process. In the modern world advertisements are more important than class relations and consumption is related to abstract needs rather than real ones; the image assumes a higher grading than the material dimension of the article.

A concept that has gained prominence in this era is that of hegemony put forward by Gramsci (1891-1937). In his political writings (1921-1926), Gramsci situated dominance in the cultural process rather than brute power; showing how people act away from their own collective interests, once they accept the ideological point of view of the dominant groups of society.

Antonio Gramsci
(1891-1937)

The later part of the twentieth century saw scholars going into the finer dimensions of domination and the works of Foucault (1961, 1973 and 1979) have been accepted widely as a critique of established knowledge, showing the link between knowledge and power and the persuasive force of hegemony. The power of the written word and the arts and that of public culture has been theoretically established as the field of Cultural Studies. Culture is now not viewed as a given condition, having an objective existence worthy of systematic description but a site for contested identities, a vehicle for domination and also resistance, it becomes an instrument rather than an end product or given condition and it manifests itself in people's aspirations (for articulation of the concept of culture as people's aspirations see Nathan 2005).

A trend in the social sciences is towards a more material view of the world, looking into the conditions of existence, following a more Marxist view than a rarified post-modern view. The criticism of deconstruction has been that extreme deconstruction would take away the meaning of existence to the extent that even the rationale for a social science would cease to exist. Such a divergence of views had existed earlier in the twentieth century between the Structuralists and the Marxists; while the former were in favor of semiotic structures or structures of the mind, the latter saw reality in terms of material structures and economic exploitation.

Pierre Bourdieu (1930-2004), perhaps one the best known thinkers of contemporary times, tried to resolve the intellectual debates of the clash of points of view of Levi Strauss' structuralism and Marxism. Bourdieu observed the divergence between the synchronic, static and invariant nature of reality conditioned by deep underlying and unconscious mental structures that were by their very nature not subject to the dynamism of human volition as put forward by Levi-Strauss, and the conscious human subject, a product of history as put forward by Marxism. In fact,

Bourdieu (1977) attempted to demonstrate the effect over action produced by ideological structures. Bourdieu's theory of practice (see Box 4.7) demonstrated how abstract norms are manifested in real practices and real time to create real inequalities among real people.

Box 4.7 Bourdieu's Theory of Practice

Bourdieu designated the unconscious dimension of naturalised ideologies as *doxa*. All that we take for granted and what never enters into any discourse, *doxa*[◎] include deep-rooted habits as also conceptualisations regarding the world. The *habitus*[◎] for Bourdieu is a kind of grounding for the individual actors, the unthinking playing out of internalised dispositions that are taken in as subjective states but externalised as objective actions that reproduce the conditions of their own existence. To him, all inequalities are cultural arbitrary in that they are produced and reproduced through internalised subjective states but have no objective rationality for their existence. However his theory is peculiarly lacking in accounting for human creativity and agency.

Pierre Bourdieu
(1930-2004)

In the present day context of globalisation, culture and society are becoming more and more amorphous as concepts. Identities are no longer seen as closed and definitive but contested, discordant and constitutive of disparate elements picked up both locally and globally. Traditions are no longer viewed as given but as reinvented every time.

Foucault's (1973) denunciation of western forms of knowledge as an instrument of domination rather than an instrument of truth has dealt a blow to all that was sanctified in the name of science. Now science is no longer an objective system of truth but a regional form of knowledge that had sought to supersede all other forms of knowledge by acts of force rather than reason. For social scientists it has meant that one takes a fresh look at the creation of the research subject, noting the positions of inequality between observer and observed, for the psychologists it meant that one reviews one's notion of normal and abnormal and think of them as cultural rather than absolute conditions. But this process of destructuring of truth has its biggest triumph in that subjects have the option of refashioning themselves and resist the imposition of anything in the name of normal or given. The acceptance of diversity and the rejection of inequality have been a major effort of contemporary theory, reflecting and striving for a better world. This is the point when the call for active participation in the process of understanding and subsequently fashioning the social reality all around us is gaining recognition at the beginning of the twenty-first century.

Michel Foucault
(1926-1984)

4.8 Conclusion

Coming to the end of our long journey into theoretical perspectives in the social sciences, let us look at the current state-of-the-art in the practice of sociology in India. Methodologically speaking, in the light of a plethora of emerging perspectives in European and American sociology, practitioners of sociology and anthropology in India have not been blown off their feet and the mainstream scholarship in the social sciences in India has continued to combine reflexivity with a sense of commitment to healthy fact-finding methodology that is the legacy of positivism. It is not out of place here to mention what Mahatma Gandhi once said about keeping all windows open to receive influences from all sides but remaining careful to keep one's feet firmly on the ground. Way back in 1938 Sarat Chandra Roy wrote in *Man*,

> The objective methods of investigation of cultural data have to be helped out, not only by historical imagination and a background of historical and geographical facts, but also by a subjective process of self-forgetting absorption or meditation (*dhyana*), and intuition born of sympathetic immersion in, and self-confidence with, the society under investigation.

Almost following Roy's approach, Madan (2004: 200-202) has made a case for "the middle position", which means describing and interpreting the "concrete" and the "particular" and providing "causal explanations when doing so seems appropriate and possible", with the help of "abstract" and "general" concepts.

There has been a concern with tradition asserting itself as a cognitive style in the methodology of social research in India and Singh (1979: 291) has observed, "Whether sociology is a science with an accompanying universalistic package of categories and techniques of research or whether it is a cognitive style marked by a mode of apperception or reflexivity in observation and comparison of structures, social relationships and ideas, are questions which have been debated right from the inception of sociology in India".

It is not that social science researchers in India have been cut off from the global currents of thought and not from time to time expressed their explicit choices. Partho Nath Mukherji (2000: 53-58) has provided a long account of polemical debates in India between i) those, like Radhakamal Mukerjee (1889-1968), who worked out a synthesis between the physical sciences (see Mukerjee 1960), philosophy and the social sciences and those, like Dhurjati Prasad Mukerji (1894-1962), who stressed holisim and contextualisation as the main principles of sociological method (see Mukerji 1958) and those, like A. K. Saran (1962), who rejected sociology/ social science that is based on western sociology and values and therefore not in line with the Indian ethos, ii) those recommending fieldwork method and those opting for survey research. Trend reports in sociology and social anthropology, published by the Indian Council of Social Science Research, provide detailed accounts of leanings

and preferences of scholars (see Madan, 1972, Damle 1986, Jain 1986, Bose 1995). Mukherji observed (1998:27-28), "At the level of research, rigorous painstaking, academically committed research is on the decline....sociology and the social sciences are lagging far behind in generating social 'scientific' knowledge about the processes of conflict, structure and change in South Asian societies. Half-baked knowledge, tempered with mismatched borrowed Eurocentric concepts is far from helping appraise our overly complex social realities."

While recommending "disciplined eclecticism" of Merton (1976: 51), Mukherji (2000: 59) prefers the approach that 'requires an openness of mind regarding the efficiency of parallel paradigms, none of which need be rejected a priori nor espoused as though in it lay the essence of wisdom from which all social science puzzles could be solved'. So be it Mahatma Gandhi's approach of holding on to one's own ground or Madan's middle position or Mukherji's acceptance of Merton's disciplined eclecticism, knowledge production by social scientists in India is awaiting deeper preoccupations with the questions of logic of inquiry.

It would be a relevant exercise for learners of MSO 002 to look at the special issues of the Delhi-based international journal, *Contributions to Indian Sociology*, on such themes as labor, migration, caste and class, tradition and modernity, etc, and examine the methodological approaches taken by the authors of the various articles in these issues. Similarly, one can scan articles published in the *Economic and Political Weekly* and *Sociological Bulletin* to identify the theoretical orientations of the authors. Recent studies in the areas of gender studies and Dalit movement may provide you examples of reflexive sociology, currently in use in India (see also unit 7). For Reflection and Action 4.2 you need to identify the methodology followed in only two articles, mentioned below.

Reflection and Action 4.2

Read the following two articles and identify the theoretical orientation of the author of each article.

- ***Fazalbhoy***, Nasreen 2000. Rituals of Protection in a Muslim Community. *Eastern Anthropologist* 53(4): 443-455
- ***Rege***, Sharmila 2000. Understanding Popular Culture: The Satyashodhak and Ganesh Mela in Maharashtra. *Sociological Bulletin* 49(2): 193-210

Further Reading

Bose, Pradip Kumar 1995. *Research Methodology*. Indian Council of Social Science Research: New Delhi (for an extensive survey of works on research methods and methodologies by sociologists in India)