Unit 9
Comparative Method

Contents

Learning Objectives

It is expected that after reading Unit 9 you will be able to

❖ Locate the significance of the comparative approach in the context of the core issues of the objective versus subjective, macro versus micro and value neutrality versus partisanship

❖ Identify a few lessons for your own research on social issues.

9.1 Introduction

Navigating with the core issues of the objective versus subjective, macro versus micro and value neutrality versus partisanship, Unit 9 refers to the relationship of comparative method with common sense and interrogates its ideological location. Next, as comparative method has its own distinct historical legacy and trajectory, the author has provided a discussion of the historical context within which the method emerged. The trajectory of the method is relevant to the way it is operationalised during the course of empirical research. Further, there is a systematic delineation of key features of the method. Throughout the unit, there has been a focus on the linkages between the overall theoretical assumptions, research methods and field techniques. There is also substantial reference to social science research carried out in India on comparative method and this will provide you with a solid base in applying comparative method in your own research because, as said earlier, there can be no sociology without comparisons. This unit will provide you with some identifiable lessons for your own research on social concerns.

9.2 Relationship with Common Sense; Interrogating Ideological Location

Students of sociology are well aware about both the distinction between common sense and sociology as well as the danger of collapsing sociological knowledge to common sense understanding (Beteille 2002). It is in the context of a discussion on the comparative approach that this allusion to common sense again becomes important. You are well aware that we use comparison and contrast in everyday life and it is no wonder that

application of 'compare and contrast' in the study of human society and culture is also equally common. If you think about your day-to-day understanding of the social world around you, you would realise that you are involved in comparing and contrasting processes. In addition, all of us keep evaluating things, people, foods, cultures etc, in terms of their inherent qualities being superior or inferior. It is quite commonplace to hear comments that "our food is tastier than theirs" or that "they have a more developed culture than ours". In the latter statement one detects an evolutionary assumption, meaning that there are stages of development and each successive stage is superior to the preceding one. For long in sociology it seemed perfectly in order to compare the "barbaric" to the "civilised", or the "primitive" to the "modern". Sociologists now more self-consciously use "simple" and "complex" societies to avoid the embedded value judgment that rests on an evolutionary comparative approach. Interestingly however, there is also awareness even at the everyday level that comparisons are not nice and we ought to value each person, object or idea for itself.

You would notice that some themes of the comparative approach also make their presence within everyday notions. Indeed the connection and spilling over of the two levels make it doubly difficult to distinguish the sociological approach to comparison and our own lay approach. Beteille (2004: 112) makes a careful and important distinction between the lay comparative and sociological comparative approaches.

> While the extensive, not to say automatic, use of comparison may be natural to the process of human thought, the same cannot be said about *the conscious search for a comparative method with definite or at least defined rules of procedure.* Here one will find characteristic differences among the various disciplines that together make up the social sciences. Some disciplines, such as economics and psychology, have focussed largely on universal structures and processes common to all human beings everywhere, and paid little attention to characteristic and persistent differences between societies. Others, such as history in particular, have dwelt much more on the specific features of given societies without venturing too far across their chosen boundaries in space and time. *The comparative method as a tool of investigation, designed consciously to discover the general features of all societies (or cultures) without losing sight of the distinctive features of each, has been a particular obsession of sociology and social anthropology....* (Emphasis mine)

In his L. T. Hobhouse Memorial Trust Lecture, 33, Evans-Pritchard (1963: 3) stressed the necessity of comparison and commented that 'in the widest sense there is no other method. Comparison is, of course, one of the essential procedures of all science and one of the elementary processes of human thought'. Evans-Pritchard was echoing what Durkheim (1964: 139) wrote, 'Comparative sociology is not a particular branch of sociology; it is sociology itself, in so far as it ceases to be purely descriptive and aspires to account for facts'.

Macfarlane (2004:95) wrote that 'a number of observers have noted

that in order to understand one phenomenon, one must place it in perspective or comparison to others' and quoted Lowie (1950: 9) who put it,thus: 'At the same time a phenomenon is understood only in relation to others: "He little knows of England who only England knows." Hence it is well to look at western culture in perspective'.

Most social scientists are generally aware that they are involved in comparison all the time. As Macfarlane (2004: 94) has put it, "In the case of history, the comparisons are usually in time, in that of other social sciences, predominantly in space. The most familiar method of the historians is to take their own societies as the norm and then to see how far the past is similar or different from them. This is also what an anthropologist, sociologist, or economist tends to do, in the dimension of space rather than time." Further Macfarlane has quoted Pocock (1961: 90), who commented, "Informally, comparison is built into the method of the subject, for even in his first piece of field-work the anthropologist is comparing the categories of his own society with those of the society he studies...".

R Lowie
(1883-1957)

Macfarlane has further quoted de Tocqueville's (1861, i: 359) work, which illustrates such a method of comparison, revealed in his memoirs.

In my work on America...though I seldom mentioned France, I did not write a page without thinking of her, and placing her as it were before me. And what I especially tried to draw out, and to explain in the United States, was not the whole condition of that foreign society, but the points in which it differs from our own, or resembles us. It is always by noticing likenesses or contrasts that I succeeded in giving an interesting and accurate description...

As would be obvious to you by now, sociologists at different times have been aware about the problem of comparison and value judgements. How did the classical sociological thinkers and advocates of the comparative approach like Durkheim and Weber negotiate this? How did they manage to resolve the conflict between their commitment to a value neutral sociology and a commitment to comparison in terms of an evolutionary progression that tacitly accepted that western societies had reached the highest stage of evolution? We discuss this in the next section, which is on the historical context of the comparative method in sociology.

Before turning to the next section, it is good to keep in mind that not only had classical sociologists succumbed to the appeal of comparative method, but such thinkers as Herodotus, Aristotle, Polybius, Plutarch among the ancient scholars and Bodin and Machiavelli from the Renaissance had also used it. You can also draw a long list of scholars who derived inspiration from classical sociologists' application of comparative approach and gained a rich understanding of different societies and cultures. Macfarlane (2004: 108) has included in such a list

the names of Perry Anderson, Fernand Braudel, Louis Dumont, Ernest Gellner, Jack Goody, E. L. Jones, David Landes and William McNeill. Contemporary sociologists, for example Andre Beteille, would make a case for continuing the application of the comparative method, though with due care to avoid the mistakes made by its earlier practitioners. This point of view has a lesson for you — to look at the method with considerable caution and possibilities of entering into debates about various ways of using the method.

9.3 The Historical Context

Although ancient and medieval scholars made use of comparisons in their writings, the comparative method as a designated method of social research was a product of nineteenth-century sociology and social anthropology. In the nineteenth century, the principal attraction of the comparative method came from the belief that it could be used for discovering scientific laws about human society and culture. The strong advocates of the comparative method believed in the possibility of a natural science of society that would establish regularities of coexistence and succession among the forms of social life by means of systematic comparisons. It must not be forgotten that in the nineteenth-century sociology and anthropology the study of social and cultural phenomena was typically combined with the study of the physical or biological aspects of human life.

The early sociologists, namely, Emile Durkheim in France, Herbert Spencer in England and Max Weber in Germany, considered comparison to be one of the basic processes of the way human beings think. Both Spencer (see chapter II of the first volume of *Principles of Sociology*, published between 1876 and 1896) and Durkheim (see chapters V and VI of *The Rules of Sociological Method*, published in 1895) were greatly influenced by the organic analogy. Durkheim, in particular, developed a methodological use of the organic analogy in formulating a comparative approach to understanding the social world. Durkheim's systematic use of the comparative method gave an impetus to its wide application in sociology and social anthropology during the first half of the twentieth century. You can mention the name of Radcliffe-Brown and all his associates as followers of this valuable method in their researches in different parts of the world (see Box 9.1 for a critical look at comparative method).

Box 9.1 A Critical Look at Comparative Method

Undoubtedly, sociologists and anthropologists were able to reap a rich harvest of scholarly monographs, comparing and contrasting the relationship between structure and social practices. Most of such social research had a particular conception of society. This view held that society is a reality *sui generis* and one could observe it from outside and describe the same objectively. Ingold (1990: 6) has questioned the utility of this concept of society and held its uncritical use responsible for the failure of the comparative method to achieve the expectations raise I by its extensive application.

Max Weber's approach to the comparative method took a different route because he was not at all sympathetic to viewing sociological inquiry ending with the explorations of causes and functions of social phenomena. Weber was more concerned with their meanings. To quote Weber (1949: 15), "We can accomplish something which is never attainable in the natural sciences, namely the subjective understanding of the component individuals." Not only was the early use of the comparative method tied to the idea of a natural science of society, it was, more specifically, tied to the theory of evolution. A large part of the nineteenth-century anthropology was concerned with the origins of social phenomena and the reconstruction of the stages through which they had evolved from their most simple to their most complex forms.
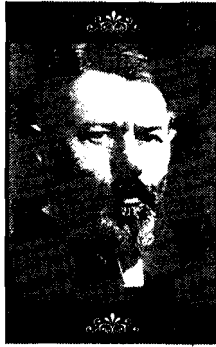
Max Weber
(1864-1920)

Beteille (2004: 114), commenting on the tension between a value neutral and objective approach and the influence of an evolutionary approach on early sociologists such as Herbert Spencer, Emile Durkheim and Max Weber, remarks,

> They believed that society, culture, religion, family, marriage, and so on gave shape to human life everywhere, and called for serious intellectual attention not only at home but also abroad. In this sense, comparative method required in its practitioners a certain detachment from their own society and culture that was not required of the practitioners of the historical method. Many of the latter had been ardent nationalists. Since the comparative method does not admit, at least in principle, of privileged exceptions, it cannot as easily or as openly accommodate the spirit of nationalism. The pioneers of the comparative method in sociology and social anthropology were all influenced to a greater or lesser extent by the theory of evolution. Indeed, it was the search for the stages of evolution that largely shaped the comparative method of Spencer and Morgan. This imposed certain limits on the extent to which they did in fact assign equal value to all societies and culture. It was tacitly accepted that western societies had reached the highest stage of evolution and that all other societies stood at graduated distances below them.

There were hardly any voices outside the West to challenge these settled opinions. A gulf existed from the very beginning between the aspirations of the comparative method and its achievements. As you will find in Units 10 and 11, both the feminist and participatory approaches in a very fundamental manner unsettle the assumption of value neutrality and argue instead that the perceptions of the dominant section are passed off as the universal and neutral view. For instance the perception of the privileged white male scholars of the nineteenth century could unquestioningly pass off as universal knowledge (see Unit 4). In that sense the genesis of the comparative approach is very different from the feminist and participatory approaches whose influences in social science research are more recent and whose position vis-à-vis the idea

of value neutrality are also very different. Not surprisingly the questions that have been raised by the feminist and participatory approaches have influenced in a much deeper way the disciplines of sociology and social anthropology, the main practitioners of the comparative method.

To come back to what Beteille (2004: 127) remarked about Weber and Durkheim,

> They were aware that viewpoints might vary according to class or political affiliation, but they did not take much account of variations due to differences of national tradition. They took ideas and values in no-western societies into account, but only as objects of investigation and not as elements in the construction of method. This has become a source of some anxiety to scholars from Asian and African countries.

The important question that Beteille (2004: 127) then raises is whether this limitation can be remedied by 'recommending different methods for observation, description, and comparison to persons rooted in different geographical locations'. The answer probably is 'no'. However the sociologists, by explicitly stating their locations (national, ethnic, gender, even theoretical predilections[©]) at the start of the respective studies, would only promote methodological rigor. For the reader would be in a position to critically examine the internal coherence of the sociologists' studies as well as the dominant assumptions upon which they rest.

At another level, that is the level of the number and nature of the comparisons, it has been suggested that we avoid binary[©] thinking and do not employ a dyadic mode of analysis. Comparing a pair, for example England and India or the West and the rest, may inevitably imply one of the pair to be better/ superior/ higher than the other. Macfarlane (2004: 103) refers to Burke's (1972) comments on feudalism[©] as an ideal type that 'there is a tendency to see French feudalism as the 'proper' form and all other forms of 'feudalism' as deviations'. Burke has questioned this assumption and observed that this is the case because the western scholars had articulated most concepts in sociology on the basis of reflections of their own societies. Macfarlane has made a case for a three-way comparison (see Box 9.2).

Box 9.2 Macfarlane's Suggestion of a Three-way Comparison

Macfarlane (2004) has recommended 'an explicit three-way comparison of actual, concrete, historical cases, but they are set against a backcloth of the Weberian ideal types, which alone make the comparisons possible. ... By extending the triadic method of two cases and an ideal type to the more complex one of at least three cases and an ideal type, we move a long way from those problems of relativism and essentialism, which have plagued much social science for more than one hundred and fifty years. We can move towards a position where we simultaneously stress the similarities of peoples and rejoice in their uniqueness and differences'.

Let us, at this stage in our discussions of comparative approach, complete Reflection and Action 9.1 in order to fully grasp the issues involved in understanding the significance and at the same time problem of applying comparative approach to our study of the social world.

Reflection and Action 9.1

Consider the following examples and answer the questions related to them.

Examples

Sir Henry Maine contrasted India and Europe.

Marx made comparisons among the various modes of production.

Max Weber compared Protestants with Catholics within Europe and also contrasted Europe with religions like Islam, Hinduism and Confucianism.

Questions

❖ What is the single element that stands out as foremost in the above contrasts and comparisons?

❖ Are the above instances primarily of contrast or comparison?

❖ Are such contrasts examples of binary oppositions?

❖ In order to avoid comparing societies with huge gaps, as for example Europe and India, is it better to compare England and Japan? Identify the points of similarities and differences between England and Japan.

9.4 Elements of the Comparative Approach

Notwithstanding the critical remarks in the previous section on the problems of negotiating between comparison and the rule of no value judgment, the comparative method has been used in sociology as a matter of its natural practice. To state some of the features in a schematic fashion, we find the following characteristics in the comparative method.

❖ Belief in the possibility of a natural science of society

❖ The goal of detachment and an uneasy link with the theory of evolution

❖ Influence of organic analogy

❖ The intent to have systematic comparisons

Though sociologists have argued over the first three characteristics, they have remained by and large faithful to the intent of having systematic comparisons.

For this reason, it is necessary to look at the following elements of the method, namely,

❖ Methods of comparison

❖ The units of comparison

❖ The purpose of the comparative approach

Let us discuss each of the three elements at length so that we are able to derive some useful tips for the application of the method in our own researches.

i) Methods of comparison

As Macfarlane (2004: 99) noted, "Comparison can be undertaken in numerous ways, each appropriate to its task, and one cannot lay down in advance which will be the best. All one can do is to raise some of the alternatives". You may note the three types of approach distinguished by Durkheim (1964).

❖ We could consider a single society at a given time and analyse the broad variations in particular modes of action or relationships occurring in that society.

❖ We could consider several societies of a generally similar nature which differ in certain modes of action or relationships; more precisely, we could here compare either different and perhaps contemporaneous societies, or the same society at different periods, if these exhibit some limited cultural change.

❖ We could compare several, perhaps numerous, societies of widely different nature yet sharing some identical feature; or different periods, showing radical change, in the life of the same society.

ii) The units of comparison

Again, we refer you to Macfarlane (2004: 100), who noted, "The success of the comparative method will, of course, depend on the comparison of things that can be compared. This consists of several features. One is that the units compared are roughly of the same order of magnitude; for instance, it would not be particularly fruitful to compare the handshake in England with the family system in China".

Next, Macfarlane said, "Second, in order for comparison to be effective things must be of the same class or order in some way. Thus to compare, say marriage in America with tea drinking in China would probably be fruitless. The selection of the comparisons is all-important. Yet even by choosing something that looks similar, one can be deceived. Words like 'city', 'marriage', 'family, 'law' are notoriously loaded with ethnographic assumptions. Even such apparently obvious terms as 'house', 'meal', 'body' carry complex set of assumptions within each culture".

iii) The purpose of the comparative approach

Social scientists consider the comparative method as just one of the many tools in their kit. It is essential for the user to consider why one is using a particular tool, what is the purpose, and how best to use it. In this regard, Macfarlane suggests that 'it helps to a) distance the over-familiar, ii) familiarise the distant, and iii) make absences visible. Let us elaborate this point a little more.

❖ Distancing the over-familiar

'Distancing the (over) familiar', or turning the obvious into the unobvious means to create a gap between oneself and the familiar things so that one can see them in a different light. Most researchers face the problem of not seeing what is familiar or similar to one's own and hence self-

evidently 'normal'. Not touching the rim of a glass that has water meant for drinking may not appear strange to us in India. You will notice again the concerted attempt even within theoretical realms of sociology to question the common sense, the taken for granted aspect of reality.

❖ Familiarising the distant

Many of the things we encounter in our work are so unfamiliar and distant that we cannot get inside their logic or 'understand' them. This is equally problematic. The usual temptation is either to avoid the subject altogether or to dismiss it as irrational nonsense. Now the solution may be 'known' in a sort of way through the studies of others in other societies. Examples would be the insights which anthropological studies of curious phenomena like the blood feud or witchcraft gave to historians studying the same phenomena in the West.

❖ Making absences visible

The comparative method helps us to reveal absences. Always, you will find that many interesting things are the absences, and it is not easy to be aware of these. Macfarlane (2004: 97) has given the example of Robert Smith (1983: 152), who recounts how a Japanese scholar replied when he was asked why ancestor worship persists in modern Japan: 'That is not an interesting question. The real question is why it died out in the West?' Of course, both are interesting questions, but the absence is certainly just as curious.

At the end of this interesting section, let us complete Reflection and Action 9.2.

> **Reflection and Action 9.2**
>
> **A)**
> Dumont (1986: 243) said, "A solid and thorough comparison of values is possible only between two systems as wholes". Basing yourself on this view of comparative method, give at least five systems of social relations for carrying out a successful exercise of comparison.
>
> **B)**
> How does the comparative approach help in familiarising the distant? Burgess (1982: 217) quoted the mathematician G. Polya , who suggested that we 'ransack our memory for any similar problem of which the solution is known' and try to solve the problem. Give examples of studies of curious phenomena, which have helped the researchers to understand problems in their own fields. You may give examples from your everyday experiences of a similar type.
>
> **C)**
> What is the difference between contrast and comparision? Obviously these are two different processes. Identify the differences with examples.

9.5 Conclusion

Dealing with the complex issues involved in the operations of contrasting and comparing, we have taken an overview of the history of the application

of the comparative method. In addition, we have also looked at the comparative method as one of the tools that social scientists use to give body to their explanations of social reality.

Further Reading

Beteille, Andre 2002. *Sociology: Essays on Approach and Method*. Oxford University Press: New Delhi (for its essays on the nature of the discipline of sociology and the methods sociologists use to study the social world)

Beteille, Andre 2004. The Comparative Method and the Standpoint of the Investigator. IN Vinay Kumar Srivastava (ed.) Methodology and Fieldwork. Oxford University Press: New Delhi. Pp. 112-131

Evans-Pritchard, E. E. 1963. The Comparative Method in Social Anthropology. *L.T. Hobhouse Memorial Trust Lecture, 33*

Unit 10
Feminist Approach

Contents

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Learning Objectives

it is expected that after reading Unit 10 you will be able to

❖ Critically present a conceptual frame for analyses of the ways in which social institutions, practices and discourses define women and men and their statuses in society in general and in India in particular

❖ Unpack the taken-for-granted assumptions about gender that are common to sociological inquiry

❖ Show how central assumptions about gender relations continue to shape the organisation of the social world regardless of their empirical reality

❖ Discuss some of the contributions the feminist approach has made to the sociology of gender in particular and to sociology in general.

10.1 Introduction

After discussing in Unit 9 the significance of the comparative method in social research, we now turn in Unit 10 to the equally significant application of the feminist method in contemporary social research. You can say that feminist method helps us to look at the social world through the prism of gender. It intersects with other hierarchies and social forms. It is true that the classical sociologists generally excluded consideration of actions of women. Consequently, discipline of sociology had little to say about women. Marx, Durkheim and Weber made stray comments on women and family. This is the reason why the emergence of feminist sociology has brought much excitement and optimism among the new generation of sociologists.

After mapping its ideological location, Unit 10 covers the historical context of the feminist method. Next, the author identifies three stages in the growth of the feminist approach since the 1970s and then delineates key features that mark the feminist method. A reference has been made to Maria Mies' methodological guidelines for feminist research.

10.2 Relationship with Common Sense; Interrogating Ideological Location

It is critical to make explicit the domain assumptions that underlie all theories and methods. The sociology of knowledge presumes that knowledge, much like social institutions and beliefs, is socially constructed and therefore has a necessary symbiotic relationship with social classes, castes, groups and communities. However while it is easy to discern the domain assumptions that characterise those systems of knowledge, which are marginal and seen as overtly political, the same is not true of established dominant approaches. Hence it is only with the surge of post-colonial writings that it now may appear that Orientalism or a west centricity marked the classical comparative approaches. Unlike this apparent neutrality that shrouded the comparative method, the feminist method is seen as overtly political. Indeed a false but persistent dichotomy is created between the academic and political approaches. The same would be true of a Marxist or Dalit or Black perspective. In the case of the feminist method, however the hostility often is intense and responses range from a tendency to trivialise to a tendency to demonise. Such responses can be understood in the context of the far-reaching and fundamental challenges that the feminist method poses to conventional knowledge systems.

These challenges are contrary to the extant common sense of any existing society. And here I would like to stress that this is contrary not only to traditional and modern patriarchal common sense but also to modern but dominant theoretical approaches (see Box 10.1).

Box 10.1 Examples of Traditional and Modern Patriarchal Common Sense

Illustrative of the traditional patriarchal common sense would be the belief that women are mean minded and petty. A fitting reply that Tagore (in "Ghare Baire") had for that was 'indeed they are, much as the Chinese women's bound feet were... bent and deformed'.

Illustrative of a modern patriarchal common sense would be that women ought to be educated but for the sake of being better home makers. You would know that matrimonial columns in India are replete with demands for modern but traditional brides. In other words selective virtues of modern and traditional women would be combined for customised services to run a system that is essentially patriarchal.

The question that you may legitimately ask at this point is how do the examples in Box 10.1 help us understand the feminist method. I would try to answer this at this level by asking a question I often ask in class. The discussion runs like this.

'The rate of divorces is rising because of the increase in the number of educated women.'

The responses to the above statement vary. Some students in the class

agree in an unqualified manner believing indeed that educated women are responsible for breaking homes. Others are uncomfortable with the covert suggestion that therefore women ought not to be educated. And some others make a methodological point suggesting a reformulation of the variables in the stated hypothesis. In other words could we not alternatively formulate the statement as follows?

'The rate of divorces is rising because of the unwillingness of educated men to treat their wives as equals.'

Or you could say that

'The rate of divorces is rising because more women are willing to break out of bad marriages rather than suffer a life in silence.'

The purpose of providing these illustrations was to make explicit the connection between everyday common sense and the ease with which it converges with sociological formulations. It is not surprising that Talcott Parsons' model of the family assumed women to perform expressive roles and men instrumental ones. The point in contention is not that it does not conform to the empirical reality but that it takes the extant as given, and not problematic. The traditional and modern patriarchal norms are thus embedded in the dominant theoretical formulations (see Johnson 1991). The dominance of the established methods was such that it appeared to be naturalised (see Harding 1987: 2-14). For what can be more obvious and natural than the fact that men and women are different? It made sense to claim that 'anatomy is destiny' and to argue that the division of labour was and is biological in origin (see Box 10.2).

Box 10.2 Examples of Anatomy is Destiny

As recently as the early 1980s the British Secretary for State for Social Service, Patrick Jenkin in a television interview on working mothers stated: 'Quite frankly I don't think mothers have the same right to work as fathers. If the Lord had intended us to have equal rights, he wouldn't have created men and women. These are biological facts; young children do depend on their mothers' (cited in Rose 1994: 19).

In classical as well as neoclassical economic thought, we find that there is quite early in history the discussion of women's wages and conditions of their employment. For example, Smith (1776) noted that women work for wages but at the same time he thought that a man should have enough wages to bring up his family. He considered women's reproductive roles as essential for society. Adam Smith held that women did not have the capacity to take rational decisions in economic matters.

Here is another common example to show the how the feminist approach interrogates and challenges very sensitive and deep-rooted structures, leading to considerable hostility and at the least discomfort. Often people say that women are making a fuss over a minor thing when they do not wish to change their surname after marriage. However if the question is posed that if it is so minor then why the fuss when she wishes not to

change. Or it could be asked that if it is so trivial then why do not men change their surname on marriage. The issue of course is not of scoring debating points. The issue is that ordinary customs do often rest on a deep-rooted patriarchal structure. Change of surname implies change of lineage, family, belonging, and identity and is seen as demonstrative of effectual loyalty. You will clearly note how the comparative approach would not evoke sharp criticism or passionate reaction unlike the feminist.

Let us complete Reflection and Action 10.1 in order to explore our own responses to the issue raised above.

Reflection and Action 10.1

Organise a debate at your Study Center on 'No harm if a woman does not change her surname after marriage'. Listen carefully to all the points of view in favor or against the topic and then write a note of about one thousand words, incorporating all the social reasons given by the speakers for and against the theme. At the end of the note, you may also give your own viewpoint. Fifteen days after the debate and writing of the note, reflect once again on your views. Do you still hold the same views as you did earlier?

10.3 The Historical Context

We noted the nineteenth century academic context within which the comparative method arose. More recent anthropologists would point to the fact that colonialism and the access to the study of 'other' cultures was a political context that cannot be wished away. This political context was, in a manner, camouflaged, owing to the unquestioned dominance of western power and western scholarship. The natives have just begun talking back. The political context also went unnoticed because the method explicitly advocated value neutrality and indeed took pains to delineate guidelines to avoid obvious pitfalls of bias. In sharp contrast the feminist approach has an overt political context. And also overtly states its value preferences. A commitment to gender equity is embedded within the approach.

While the first phase of the women's movement dates back to the suffragette movement of the west (see Box10.3) and the national movement in the colonised countries like ours, it is only with the second phase of the women's movement in the 1970s that a systematic interrogation of the social sciences from a feminist approach took place. Unlike the lineage of the comparative method, as shown by Chaudhuri (2004), the feminist method has an inextricable link with the feminist movement. The issue here is not whether each practitioner of feminist scholarship is an activist or not. The issue is that the basis of feminist knowledge emerged from a radical movement that questioned the given social order as both natural and divinely destined. We discussed the far-reaching impact of changing or not changing surnames above (see Box 10.3 about lesser known facts about feminist movement).

Box 10.3 Did You Know?

Did you know that the suffragette movement of the West was a long-drawn out struggle. Despite various feminist movements, formal equality for women took long to come. Women in late nineteenth century England were not recognised as individuals in either the legal or liberal theoretical sense. Men still had formal power over the rest of the family, and women were mostly excluded from the public sphere. Mill and Taylor, along with some early United States feminists such as Elizabeth Cady Stanton and Susan B. Anthony, argued that the equality of women required full citizenship for women. This would include giving women enfranchisement. After 1865, when Mill was in the English parliament, he fought for women's suffrage. He also fought "to amend the laws that gave husbands control over their wives' money and property" (Eisenstein 1979: 128).

Source: http://uregina.ca/~gingrich/o28f99.htm

Furthermore by the 1980s, it was becoming clear that the feminist scientific revolution, like those that Kuhn (1970) had studied, would not take place without resistance (see also Unit 6). As Kuhn (1970) has noted, scientific disciplines are aptly named; they discipline thought by making some ideas seem natural and others almost unthinkable. The practice of science involves commitments to such disciplines. The commitments of the scholarly community to certain ideas and ways of thinking seem to stand in the way of new theories, however useful they might prove to be in the long run, as we will shortly discuss in the next section on features of the feminist approach to sociology. While calling for a critical appraisal of research in women's studies Krishnaraj (2005: 3008-3017) said, "Feminist research is expected to use theory not so much to test hypotheses but develop a better understanding through grounded concepts."

Let us now turn to the stages in the growth of a feminist approach and then to key features of the feminist method. But before proceeding to this important section of the unit, as you need to complete the Reflection and Action 10.2 exercise for fully understanding the thinking involved in pursuing the feminist method.

Reflection and Action 10.2

Read once again sections 10.1 and 10.2 of the unit and write the answers to the following questions on a separate sheet of paper.

What are the implications of a woman retaining her maiden surname?

Is it correct for a boy or a girl to put the mother's name as guardian in the school admission form?

Is it natural for the male to dominate in the family?

Is it possible to write gender-sensitive language?

Is it at all necessary to write gender-sensitive language? If yes, why and if no, why not?

*The Academic Counsellor may please organise a discussion on 'Critically looking at the Given Social Order' and encourage the learners to write short essays for publication in the local newspapers.

10.4 Features of the Feminist Method

Much as in the case of the comparative method (while there are certainly some common features within the vast body of studies that warrant them being called comparative or feminist), it is important to assert that important differences also characterise what can be broadly termed the feminist method. For purposes of elucidation, I will first begin with the stages in the development of a feminist approach to sociology and then see what could be seen methodologically as some common features.

A) Stages in the development of a feminist approach to sociology

A useful way to mark the growth of a feminist approach to sociology is to identify three stages in the study of gender related issues since 1970.

❖ Initially, the emphasis was on sex differences and the extent to which such differences might be based in biological properties of individuals.

❖ In the second stage, the focus shifted to individual-level sex roles and socialisation, exposing gender as the product of specific social arrangements, although still conceptualising it as an individual trait.

❖ The hallmark of the third stage is the recognition of the centrality of gender as an organising principle in all social systems, including work, politics, everyday interaction, families, economic development, law, education, and a host of other social domains. As our understanding of gender has become more social, so has our awareness that gender is experienced and organised in race- and class-specific ways.

We can now usefully discuss some key features of the feminist method in the light of the above three stages.

B) Some Key Features

It has already been emphasised that important differences exist between different feminist approaches. Along with noting down the direct and indirect links with different political and theoretical approaches, we are here making a case for delineating what a feminist method in sociology entails. To start with, we can clearly distinguish between the traditional sociological approach to gender and the feminist approach. Most introductory sociology textbooks still treat gender as an individual attribute and gender inequality as an outcome of childhood socialisation. In contrast, current feminist

Maria Mies
(1931-)

thinking stresses the far greater input of the division of labour, power, social control, violence, and ideology as structural and interactional bases of inequality, not only between women and men, but among women and men of diverse social classes and racial ethnic groups. Gorelick (1991: 461) referred to Maria Mies, who had in the nineteen seventies provided

methodological guidelines for feminist research. She stressed the need for replacing the practice of value-free research with a conscious bias towards women's struggles for social change. Secondly, she made a case for conscientisation of the researcher as well as the researched. Let us now outline the following key features that mark the feminist method.

❖ **Feminist sociology argues that research designs were based on men's experiences.**

Feminist social scientists demanded a fundamental transformation in how questions are asked and what criteria are employed to define an answer as acceptable (see Box 10.4 and Unit 4). Illustrative of this is the long practice of assuming that the head of the household is the eldest male member. It has been increasingly shown that the number of female-headed households in the rural areas of India is very high. But the very concept of a head of household was based on the urban middle class men's experience that women are 'housewives'. Another very common example is the manner that the category 'work' assumed that it meant regular work outside the home for which wages were given. However it has been increasingly realised that women for the most part work in the informal sector, in what are termed as household production units. Instances in the city of Delhi would be bangle and toy making, *zardozi*, assembling of electronic parts that are subcontracted to poor women in the slums, domestic workers etc. Indeed concerted efforts were made in the 1991 census to educate both census personnel and ordinary citizens that breaking stones or carrying bricks is also work. Apart from this informal work, which is growing with globalisation, the idea that housework is also 'work' is still considered alien (see Box 10.4 about ignoring women).

Box 10.4 Women Ignored from Social Research

One general line of criticism of feminists is that women are absent from the social analyses and social world of classical sociology. The language and analysis of classical sociology is that of men, male activities and experiences, and the parts of society dominated by males. Marx, Weber and Durkheim were typical of nineteenth century European writers who assumed that the social world was primarily that of male activities.

Source: http://uregina.ca/~gingrich/o28f99.htm

❖ **Feminist sociology is against a separation and reification of a division between the public and private.**

In sociology, when gender was seen primarily as an organising principle of the family, the other areas of social life were falsely conceptualised as "ungendered". The division between an ungendered "public" sphere and a gendered "private" sphere is both ideological and misleading (see Box 10.5). Illustrative of this would be the fact that male professionals would be preferred in the corporate sector and the argument given would be that men are more committed to work while women would be distracted; they get married and pregnant. The significant point is that men too

get married and become fathers but the dominant assumption is that the private sphere comprises the cleaning, cooking, shopping, child care, attending parent-teachers meet, looking after the sick, would be the women's work. The public sphere of work for women cannot therefore be reorganised until the private sphere is. In developing countries and increasingly in the developed ones too there are part-time or full-time female domestic workers. Sri Lankan, Philippino and Bangladeshi women among others are migrating across national borders to run middle class homes. This leads us to the third point (elaborated below) about the intersection of gender with other categories like class or ethnicity.

Box 10.5 Division between Public and Private Domains

One aspect of the long history of modern, urban, industrial society was the development of a separation between the public and private spheres. These had not always been separated in traditional societies, although there was often a sex-based division of labour and male dominance. But there is no doubt that with the development of capitalism, cities and industry, a public sphere dominated by men and male activities developed. Women generally became restricted to the private sphere of household and family, and had limited involvement in political, economic, or even social public life. While women were involved in more public activities, there were movements to restrict the participation of women in public life, for example, factory legislation and the family wage.

Source: http://uregina.ca/~gingrich/o28f99.htm

❖ **Feminist sociology recognises the diversity of gender statuses in the social order.**

Commenting on refining methods of study, Krishnaraj (2005:3012) wrote, "...,a positive feature of feminist method is the attention it pays to contexts rather than predefined, operationalised hypotheses." Feminist sociology focuses on statuses that intersect with social class, caste, race, ethnicity and international division of labour. Gender is therefore imbued with enormous differences in economic opportunity and political power (see Box 10.6).

Gender categories are not homogeneous. As mentioned above the domestic worker functions as "the bridge" between the public and private domains for she facilitates her employer's move into the public domain by taking over the latter's socially reproductive work, filling the gap as it were between the two domains. Although domestic service is low in the hierarchy of occupations, its easy availability throughout the world has caused economically vulnerable women with or without particular skills, training or education to migrate to distant places both nationally and internationally. Feminist research endeavours to emphasise diversified experiences and practices of women in terms of their race, age, ethnic, historical, backgrounds (see Stacey and Thorne 1998: 219-240). It makes a concious effort to include more than to exclude. Sociological concepts such as class, status, honour help in examining women place in society.

> **Box 10.6 Male/ Female Inequalities**
>
> Classical sociologists generally focused on differences and inequality. Marx was most explicit in this, but Durkheim and Weber developed various ways of examining difference and inequality. Issues such as the division of labour, exploitation and power, domination, and authority emphasise difference and inequality. Yet male/ female inequalities, or racial and ethnic inequalities, form little part of classical sociology. Feminists have identified patriarchy as a social system of inequality, but classical sociology had only a limited analysis of this. Marx and Engels did have a model of male/ female inequality, but it derived from property and economic considerations. Weber analysed patriarchy, but male/ female inequalities were not his primary concern in such analysis.
>
> Source: http://uregina.ca/~gingrich/o28f99.htm

Indeed the belief that women move only on marriage or with families rested on a set of patriarchal assumptions such as that women are primarily and solely homemakers, that they are not independent workers, and that therefore migration for them can be only be as accompanying members of the migrant again believed to be the adult male breadwinner. Facts suggest otherwise. In terms of the scale of migration, women and children outnumber adult men. Of 150 million migrants worldwide, it is estimated by the International Labour Organisation (ILO) that 36-42 million are migrant workers and 44-55 million are members of their families. Furthermore female-headed migrant households are less likely to have adult male family members accompanying than male-headed household. According to the United Nations High Commission for Refugees, (UNHCR), women constitute 51 per cent of the 6.1 million refugees for whom information by gender is available (Bhabha 2003).

10.5 Feminist Methods adopt the Reflexive Stance

The transformations we seek in the disciplines are also transformations of our own ways of thinking. It is useful and reassuring then to share with others that the 'actual expertise and language of women is the central agenda for feminist social science and scholarship' (Du Bois 1983: 108). Feminist researchers have over the last decade been increasingly emphasising the need to hear the voices of women. Malavika Karlekar (2004: 387) writes,

> My confidence also grew in large part because of the ease with which women are today willing to share, to speak, and to rethink their lives again. Before I ventured back to the field again, I had many encounters of mutual sharing and trust which assured me that a context is not impossible to create and even recreate anew. For a fieldworker has to tell the story of many lives, one of which is surely her own, and when those voices she wishes to hear speak to her with a poignancy and an almost crystal-clear honesty, she works hard to suppress too many questions on her role and the problems of interpretation, understanding and so on. Twenty years ago I felt threatened, pained, inadequate, by that honesty and the reaching

out for answers. Today, I find it easier to cope with the expectations of respondents not only within myself but also because the scope of childcare, employment, domestic conflict resolution mechanisms, and so on, have increased and been legitimised. I can at least try and work towards some solutions to the age-old problem of wife abuse with a battered woman: with the balmikis I did not even have the courage to ask the question not only because I felt that it would be an invasion of privacy but also because I did not know how to approach it.

Engendering sociology means interrogating the processes by which sociological discourse was gendered by putting forth feminist reflexive understanding of sociology as emancipatory. Hence, for those of us committed to reflexive modernity, the task of engendering is one of underlining the ways in which sociological discourse is patriarchal, middle class, Hindu and Brahmanical. As Rege (2003: 41) said, "The uphill task is of reconceptualising basic categories of analysis, once the experiences of the marginalised have been brought to center".

Now at the end of the unit, let us complete the Reflection and Action 10.2 exercise in order to generate more debate on the theme of feminist approach to sociology.

Reflection and Action 10.3

After once again reading the entire text of Unit 10, discuss some of the following questions with at least five adults around you. Then write the answers to the questions on a separate sheet of paper. Based on your answers, write an essay on 'My Vision of Sociology'.

Questions

Like the classical sociologists, do you also consider that there are natural differences between women and men?

Do you reckon the female to be associated with the world of nature while men are associated with culture?

Do you regard women to be emotional and men to be rational in their thought and activities?

Do you agree with the observation that classical definitions of the social world do not include all parts of human action and interaction?

Would you like to see a sociology that includes social spaces occupied by women and children and social domains where women's experiences have been centred?

10.6 Feminist Discourse in India

The feminist discourse in India has organised itself around its critique of marriage and family. In this context, you may say that the feminists in India have articulated the debate in the last three decades of the twentieth century by theorising not only around deconstruction of oppression of women but also its negotiation and transformation in real life situations. Focussing on the economic class aspects of women's oppression, socialist feminism[@] has engaged in discussing the relationship between sexual, economic class and racial oppression. Scholars, like Hensman (2005: 70), have provided a socialist feminist critique of marriage, family and

community as they feel that 'the original left critique is inadequate'. Similarly, John (2005: 712) has studied family and marriage in a historical perspective and shown how the social reform movement "during the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries engaged with the domestic domain via a critique of 'tradition', as embodied by specific subjects such as widows, child brides and others". Not just confined to the upper and middle class social reality, the feminists in India have drawn our attention to emerging critiques by Dalit and lower caste women. Formation of an all India group by the name of National Federation of Dalit Women symbolised another arena of debate around caste-based inequalities and Indian feminists faced the challenges that this critique brought out into the open about the invisibility of Dalit women's perception of exclusion from the mainstream the feminist movement (see Rao 2005). Violence against women and legal inequalities were of course the key themes discussed extensively by feminists in India but now they are entering the domain of marriage and family in the light of now fairly common occurrences, clashes of perceptions about sexuality and gender relationships (for an account of women's studies and sociology see John 2003).

10.7 Conclusion

We may conclude with a quotation from Ferree, Marx, Lorber and Heiser (1999: xii) that the feminist approach works to

> make gender visible in social phenomena, asking if, how, and why social processes, standards, and opportunities differ systematically for women and men. ...[This approach also recognises] that gender inequality is inextricably entwined with other systems of inequality. Looking at the world through a gender lens thus implies two seemingly contradictory tasks. First it means unpacking the taken for granted assumptions about gender that pervade sociological research, and social life more generally. At the same time, looking through a gender lens means showing just how central assumptions about gender continue to be the organisation of the social world regardless of their empirical reality.

The tasks mentioned in the quotation are in line with the current practices of sociology. Almost all over the world, there is a conscious effort in higher education institutions to integrate theory and research on gender in the curricula as a whole. This indicates the currents of transformation in the discipline of sociology.

Instead of arguing for a separate feminist methodology in which only women can carry out feminist research, you can make a case for locating feminist research within the theoretical and methodological discourse in mainstream social sciences. The study of gender occupies now a significant space in sociological research. The contribution of the feminist approach to sociology is not confined to providing narratives of women's experiences and to highlight the signs of sexism in conventional sociology. The feminist approach has contributed the inclusion of new themes and concepts. You may wonder

if the feminist approach is the harbinger of a paradigm shift in sociology. In the works, like *Feminist Foundation: Toward Transforming Sociology*, edited by K. A. Myres et al (1998) you may find claims to this effect. We may agree or disagree with such a reading of the impact of the feminist method on sociology, you have the right to argue that feminist research has now grown quite sensitive to its critics and as a result it tends today to be more inclusive. It is inclusive in the sense of focusing on more diverse experiences and perspectives of women of different races, ages, colours, cultures and histories. This trend has meant useful analyses of gender relations, which are increasingly correlated with the issues of racism, ethnocentrism and socio-economic formations (for example see Jain 1988). Feminism is no more a fad and the feminist approach is reflective of larger transformations in the perceptions and constructions of social reality.

Further Reading

Sydie, R. A. 1987. *Natural Women Cultured Men: A Feminist Perspective on Sociological Theory*. Methuen: Toronto (for a systematic analysis of classical sociologists, Marx, Durkheim and Weber, from a feminist viewpoint)

Tong, Rosemarie 1989. *Feminist Thought: A Comparative Introduction*. Westview Press" Boulder (for a discussion of patriarchy as a system characterised by power, domination, hierarchy and competition)

John, Mary E. and Janaki Nair (eds.) 1998. *A Question of Silence? The Sexual Economies of Modern India*. Kali for Women: New Delhi

Chaudhuri, Maitrayee 2004. *Feminism in India*. Women Unlimited/ Kali: New Delhi

Du Bois 1983. Passionate Scholarship: Notes on values, Knowing and Method in Feminist Social Science. IN G. Bowles and R. Duelli-Klein (ed), *Theories of Women's Studies*. Routledge and Kegan Paul: London.
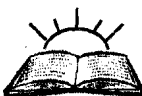
Unit 11
Participatory Method

Contents
11.1   Introduction
11.2   Relationship with Common Sense; Interrogating Ideological Location
11.3   The Historical Context
11.4   Delineation of Key Features
11.5   Conclusion

Learning Objectives
It is expected that after reading Unit 11 you will be able to

❖ Locate the participatory approach to social research within the theoretical and methodological debates in main stream social sciences
❖ Provide the historical background of the emergence of the participatory approach
❖ Discuss the bases of participatory research methodology
❖ Compare conventional research methodology with the participatory approach to research
❖ Describe the operational dimension of the participatory approach and the uses of participatory rural appraisal.

11.1 Introduction

Unit 11 brings you to the end of our multi-dimensional discussion on research methodologies. In some ways we have undertaken a long route to reach this point where research becomes an all-pervasive activity to include you and me in the process of understanding the social reality. You may not fully agree with the approach and general tenor of Book 1. All the same you would find that you got a chance to be familiar with the main currents of methodological debates in the social sciences. While reading Book 2 and Book 3 you may like to refer back to some of the units in Book 1. Unit 11 will also be one of those units you would like to come back to. Mainly because the participatory approach has put forward a critique of value-neutral research and has argued for the inclusion of the researched in the process of inquiry into the social world, it is easier for you to relate to the approach. Let us see what is participatory approach.

11.2 Relationship with Common Sense; Interrogating Ideological Location

We have already seen in our discussion on the comparative approach why and how it is important to make a distinction between common sense

and sociological approach. Indeed a fundamental point that marked the beginnings of a social science of society was a self-conscious break with the common sense perception of reality. The taken for granted reality was not considered a valid starting point. To use an analogy[©] from natural science it meant that even if people perceived that the sun did set in the west and rose in the east, science could ably demonstrate that the sun did not move and the earth did. This is so despite the solid fixity of the lived experience of being in the earth. To recapitulate Emile Durkheim's *The Rules of Sociological Method* that social facts must be treated as things is a blunt affirmation that social phenomena belong to the realm of nature. Empirical science has to come to conquer prejudice and illusion in human beings' ideas about nature before social conduct can be examined scientifically. The latter is an especially difficult accomplishment, for prejudice and illusion are actually part of our social life. To regard social facts as things is to perform the act of detachment necessary to recognise that society has an objective existence, independent of any particular one of us; hence it can be studied by methods of objective observation.

For long the idea that it was actually possible to observe and study reality from the outside and from a location that was nowhere and everywhere, persisted. Even though the Marxist approach at one end and the phenomenological view at another challenged such an idea of neutrality, the feminist approach made a more recent serious theoretical challenge to this idea. From another position, the participatory approach has also raised this issue.

Before we move on to detailing both the historical context of the participatory approach and its main features, I would like to draw attention to another similarity between the implications of a feminist and a participatory approach. This is the entire issue of disciplinary boundaries and their sanctity. It is widely recognised today that a relationship exists between disciplining knowledge and the rise of academic disciplines, as we know it today. We also know that a particularly theoretical approach believes that we can draw clear domains of research, thereby break social reality into different parts like the economic, the political, the sociological, to be studied by different disciplines. Such a compartmentalised approach assumes that the theoretical tools developed by the disciplines are neutral and scientific. Using them, or doing normal science in such a case is adequate, without questioning the paradigms provided for. Both the feminist and the participatory approaches have questioned this. It is not just that there are suggestions for applying new techniques of research but the very epistemological basis of research has been opened up to reformulation.

It may be a useful exercise at this point to dwell on how the feminist and participatory approaches move on similar paths.

They both question the notion that traditional social research was indeed

value-free, universal and objective. They believe that the term universal standpoint in a caste, class, race, gender divided world cannot be universal. In other words the dominant view of society is represented as the universal viewpoint.

They question the objective approach advocated by mainstream[◎] scholarship.

They pose a challenge to the conventional disciplinary boundaries and advocate an interdisciplinary approach to conventional academic scholarship.

They promote the idea of an active engagement with a cause in society. For instance the feminist approach broadly would seek to incorporate gender analysis pursuant to the finding that much of what was practiced as value-neutral and objective knowledge was actually male-centred. Similarly the participatory approach too would agree that the voices and views of the marginal groups, whether based on class or caste or gender, were not adequately taken note of. Hence an active attempt methodologically has to be undertaken to redress this.

From the above description of similarities between the feminist and participatory approaches, you can easily make out that while applying the approaches we can gainfully use academic research for social change. You can see this expressed in an avowed close link between the feminist theory and the feminist movement, or, in professing a self-conscious commitment to gender equity when researching.

They believe in recognising diversity not just in society but also in the construction of social knowledge.

Having looked at the similarities between the feminist and participatory approaches to social research, let us now turn to the historical context within which the participatory method emerged.

Before discussing the historical context, let us complete Reflection and Action 11.1.

Reflection and Action 11.1
Participatory research assumes that its method makes the research a tool for development, because the dialogue between researcher and researched in a common process of learning gives an impetus to a process of education and awareness of those involved in it. Imagine yourself to be a part of such a research process. How would you reflect the participatory approach in the very organisation of research?
While identifying the needs of the target group, whose view would you seek and why?
Local opinion leaders
The people themselves
A government agency
A centrally sponsored scheme

11.3 The Historical Context

The effort in this unit is to communicate that approaches to study social institutions arise in the context of a society's concerns of the times. In Unit 9 you would have noticed the academic western context within which the comparative approach arose. You would have also noticed in Unit 10 how the feminist approach is inextricably linked to the growth of the women's movement. In this sense, as we have just noted, there is more in common between the feminist and participatory approaches.

To trace the history of the emergence of the participatory approach, we refer you to such educators of adult learners as Ivan Illich and Paulo Freire from the countries of the South. They opposed the idea of schooling and put forward a pattern of alternative pedagogy. This process later crystallised as the concept of participatory research. They facilitated a parallel discourse between the teacher and the taught. This was, as Tandon (1996: 20) said, to 'establish the control of the learner over his learning process'. This was the basic frame of participatory research. In 1974-75, a group of educators of adult learners coined the term 'participatory research' and the International Council for Adult Education gave it a concrete shape by adopting it. In all areas, including the non-governmental organisations, where research concerns the problems of social change and development, the term has gained currency. While commenting on the methodology and applications of participatory rural appraisal[@], Mukherjee (1997: 27) wrote,

> A central concern for many of these agencies has been rural development. We thus had the development of the Rapid Rural Appraisal or RRA developed as a methodology in the 1970s, influenced by Farming Systems Research (FSR) and other methods. Some of the early path breakers of such methodology were Robert Chambers, Peter Hilderbrand, Robert Rhaodes and Michael Collinson who along with others met in Conferences at the Institute of Development Studies in October 1978 and December 1979. It soon spread to different parts of the world and in the mid-eighties there was a wide array of experience from the applications of RRA in different field situations.

In his Introduction to his book on Methodology in Social Research, Mukherji (2000: 46-49) has traced 'major influences and inspirations that fed into its evolution as a concept and practice of research'. One can do no better than reproduce in Box 11.1 his concise account of the influences and inspirations.

Box 11.1 Major Influences and Inspirations in the Evolution of Participatory Research

i)   The *sociology of knowledge*, which relates ideas and ideologies espoused by social groups to the positions they occupy in the social structure. Therefore, alternative histories can be written of those struggles and voices that have not been recorded, and they can create histories (ideologies). The knowledge that may be generated by these marginalised (subaltern) groups can become the condition of change and transformation in their own lives through the process of knowing, learning and education.

ii) *Action research*[◎], which was 'recaptured in Latin America and subsequently became the basis for participatory action research', emphasising 'the notion of action as a legitimate mode of knowing, thereby taking the realm of knowledge into the field of practice' (Tandon 1996: 21).

iii) *Phenomenological thinking* which 'legitimated experience as a basis of knowing' thereby expanding 'the basis of knowing beyond mere intellectual cognition' (p.21).

iv) The *debate on development* paradigm which was critical of top-down, expert-designed development projects and programmes, and brought in the issue of "people's participation, community participation, participation of those whose development is being attempted as central actors in their own development" (pp.21-22).

v) The emergence of *a new structure of civil society* through the institution of non-governmental organisations.

Let us now turn to appreciating the key features of participatory research methodology that has currently found many followers in different disciplines of the social sciences.

11.4 Delineation of Key Features

In sharp contrast to the idea of *detachment and value-neutrality* propagated by the early comparative approach, the participatory approach is open and emphatic about *attachment and partisanship* with the marginal groups whose perceptions, they argue, have been marginalised in social science knowledge. According to Partha Nath Mukherji (2000: 46), participatory research methodology is based on three important conditions, which we reproduce here in his words in Box 11.2.

Box 11.2 Bases of Participatory Research Methodology

i) There is a target community/group, which is in felt-need of changing its underdog (oppressed, marginalised, exploited) situation to a more favourable one.

ii) This target group in cooperation and conjunction with an acceptable, external interventionist-oriented researcher, formulates research goals, participates in data collection and, as far as possible, also in analysis and drawing of conclusions, which directly feed into decision-making relating to community action for change/development

iii) The ultimate aim of the external researcher is to attempt to ensure complete 'ownership of knowledge' (e.g., of the health system, technology, management techniques) by the target community. Participatory research is thus a process, specifically directed towards ameliorative or transformative change/development in the conditions of life and living of the group/ population, who themselves are participants in the research process.

Before we go into comparison of participatory research methodology

with the so-called traditional or conventional research methodology, let us also gain an idea of what the concept of participation entails. The term has of course received different interpretations and meanings in different contexts. Let us confine ourselves to the context of social research and in this context, you can say that participation has at least three dimensions.

❖   Participation entails the involvement of all those concerned with decision-making about what and how something has to be done.

❖   Participation involves mass contribution to the efforts for development. This implies the involvement of all those affected in the implementation of the decisions.

❖   All those involved in i) and ii) share in the outputs of the efforts planned and implemented for development.

These ideas about participation refer to the entire socio-economic processes of a society and therefore concern the researchers of social processes of change and development. There is no doubt that there exists a wide gap between the macro-level goals of a society and what generally happens in the name of participation. Often, the participation of the people in the actual work implementing a plan or programme is projected as community participation. In our opinion, unless the community shares in decision-making about planning and implementation of the plan or programme, we cannot name it as participation. Mere acceptance or occurrence of unpaid labour in the name of participation is the worse form of actual exploitation of labour. In this sense, you may argue for making a distinction between the participation of just a few local individuals and the organised involvement of the community as such. We need to also be cautious about going overboard and expecting the full autonomy of the community in controlling all activities of a plan. In real life situations such a notion of participation may not be feasible from any angle. All the same the idea of participation or of community participation, as we have developed in this paragraph, is only a logical progression of the ideas put forward by the educators of adult learners. In this sense, participation has an intrinsic value for participants and the researcher is also one among the participants. Most importantly, community participation ensures incorporation of indigenous knowledge and expertise into implementation of development plans. This leads to freedom from dependence on so-called professionals. Participatory research is a process, aiming to bring about improvement in the conditions of living of the people, who themselves participate in the research. Its by-product is the ownership of knowledge in the hands of the people, making for sustainability of improved conditions of living.

Mukherji (2000: **47-48)** has presented 'some of the basic tenets of so-called academic/ traditional1 conventional research (CR) methodology as perceived by action researchers/social activists who advance the

argument for participatory research (PR) methodology. This is because the latter is generally counterposed against the former' (see Box 11.3).

Box 11.3 Counterpoising Conventional Research against Participatory Research (in the words of Mukherji 2000: 47-48)

i)   The interventionist role of the subject is a prime condition of PR — the scholar is committed to bringing about social change. The ideal position that an external subject-object distance should be maintained so that the situation being studied can remain unaffected by the subject (social scientist role) is considered untenable.

ii) It follows that in PR there is no scope for value-neutrality. It is applied towards desirable directed change and development.

iii)   The top-down approach of CR, in which the researcher and her/his institution decides 'upon the focus, methodology and outcome of the study', and regards the people who are studied 'as objects who are there for the convenience of the researcher' (Fernandes and Viegas 1985: 12), has to give way to research which is viewed as 'a process which the people go through...as a step in awareness building about the situation of the oppressed' (Fernandes and Viegas 1985: 16). Most CR methodologies, it is argued, originated in the West with an explicit objective to control its subject people (Fernandes and Viegas 1985: 4). In contrast, *empowerment* of the *marginalised* through the research process is the avowed goal of PR (Fernandes and Viegas 1985: 21).

iv)   CR focuses on scientific rigor in the explanation and/or understanding of phenomena, which is then disseminated to the scientific community through accredited journals. It Is assumed and expected that knowledge so generated sooner or Later, will contribute directly or indirectly to practical application through social policy, social work and action research PR, on the other hand, 'is viewed no more as a study of a people, but a process which the people go through and as a step in awareness building about the situation of the oppressed.' in which ideally, research 'is with and for the people and not on them' (Fernandes and Viegas 1985; 18).

Box 11.3 shows that participatory research criticises conventional research for its apparent insensitivity to the problems at the "grassroots". Conventional research on the other hand criticises participatory research for its lack of scientific rigor. But you would note that participatory research does not view itself as the "sole alternative" to conventional research. Fernandes recognises the value of so-called conventional research both in the mobilization of people and in projecting macro-realities essential for policy arguments. According to Mukherji (2000: 47-48), participatory research as discussed above by Fernandes and Viegas is a kind of tool-oriented method. We are here discussing methods or techniques of research. You may say that advocating an integration of the elements of both is an example of mixing methods that are suitable for inquiring into the practical objectives of a participatory plan. Mukherji (2000: 49) is also raising an interesting point about such macro theories as hermeneutics, post-structuralism, critical realism, which do not subscribe to positivism, but they are equally a part of the conventional research in the sense that they have little use for mobilising participatory

action research. Rather, Mukherji says, "The sweep and strength of the currents that such macro-theories generate in society often create the very conditions for grassroots actions to become significant and necessary".

The question comes up: how to design one's research to make it promote those social values which are implied in the search for increased participation? As a matter of fact, established research institutions fit into the prevailing class relations that ensure benefits to the upper and middle-strata researchers only. Participatory research on the other hand assumes that through its method, research can itself turn into a tool for participatory development. Both the national and local power structures are by and large not conducive to accept the force of conscientisation® once it comes into existence due to participatory research methods.

Practitioners of participatory movements would certainly welcome research if it would help them to understand their own social identity, to become cognisant of their relationship to other social relationships affecting them and the greater potential of shared resources at the larger-than-one's family level.

The inclusion of questions on participation into one's research requires selecting key issues for inquiry. The criteria for selecting the issues need in turn be participatory. Here, the most important point is to beware of the rhetoric of participation, which is almost universal in all spheres of current discourse. Here, one quick Reflection and Action exercise would be in order to drive the point home.

Reflection and Action 11.2

In an international seminar on participatory approach, a participant described in the following words his country's commitment to participation.
"After the detailed programmes have been well planned, we tell the people exactly what to do so they will understand their responsibility to participate."
Respond to this application of the notion of participation by writing answers to the following questions.
Do you perceive a sense of participation present in the above statement?
Who is planning and who is taking the responsibility to participate?
Should those planning and taking the responsibility to participate be two different sets of people?

In advocating participatory research in the social sciences, we need to accept the fact that building participatory practices and institutions is a dynamic and gradually evolving process in response to social needs and values and available skills and resources. Participatory approaches cannot be either legislated or adopted in a matter of days. They generally grow over time with experience, practice and analysis of what works and what does not.

To return to the beginning, one has stressed throughout the Unit 11 the importance of the linkages between the overall theoretical assumptions,

the approaches and finally the appropriate field techniques that follow. It is but natural that the concern with development, with wanting to represent and incorporate the views of different sections of society would lead to a shift in the actual mode of doing field work. Thus a participatory approach has been spelt out to imply a participatory field appraisal. I very briefly touch upon the more widely used forms of the Rapid Rural Appraisal (RRA) and Participatory Rural Appraisal (PRA).

Rapid Rural Appraisal or RRA is a way of organising people for collecting and analysing information within a short time span. It can be defined as any systematic process of investigation to acquire new information in order to draw and validate inferences, hypotheses, observations and conclusions in a limited period of time. It has flexibility to adjust to situations because it does not imply or recommend a standard set of methods to be applied in each case. The methods vary from situation to situation and are determined by local conditions, local problems and objectives at hand.

As a methodology for agricultural development RRA was developed for quick field-oriented results with objectives as follows:

❖ Appraising agricultural and other needs of the rural community;

● . Prioritising areas of research tailored to such needs;

❖ Assessing feasibility of developmental needs and action plans;

❖ Implementing action plans, monitoring and evaluating them.

Participatory Rural Appraisal (PRA) is a methodology for interacting with villagers, understanding them and learning from them. It involves a set of principles, a process of communication and a menu of methods for seeking villagers' participation in putting forward their point of view to make use of such learning. It initiates a participatory process and seeks to sustain it. PRA is sometimes known as Participatory Rapid Appraisal where the emphasis is on both 'participatory' and 'rapid'. The emphasis on rapid is more in terms of data collection, which is compared to conventional survey methods.

11.5. Conclusion

There are many valuable lessons to learn from the participatory approach. However it is extremely important not to expect a magic wand kind of effect from this participatory approach. There is a danger of participatory approach (if used indiscriminately and without adequate theoretical training and historical awareness) becoming a handy tool of doing micro level studies that do not connect with the macro world. This disengagement with the macro world was always important but never as much as now in a global milieu. It is more so in the case of participatory approach, which appears to be rapidly changing into a set of unquestioned techniques (PRA) and losing ground with the epistemological assumptions

upon which it rose. While its brazen critique of value-neutrality is important, it is also important to be careful of hasty research entirely attached to the agenda and needs of non-government organisations and donor agencies. The significance of academic research cannot be overstated. In western countries the recognition for pure research exists, an imperative need for the sustenance of any democratic society. Not only is the emergence of *a new structure of civil society* through the institution of non-governmental organisations that Participatory Approach advocates important, *so are older forms* of *civic society institutions like the social science departments in universities.* The reduction of social science research to tools of participatory development programmes would be disastrous both for democracy and development. In this respect, Mukherji (2000: 50) advises, "Participatory researchers need to draw their understanding of social reality from these (theoretical) perspectives to discern at what level of change and development their researches are pitched – problem-solving largely at the symptomatic level or also reaching out to the systemic level?"

In the end we can conclude that the crucial feature of participatory research concerns the attitudes of researchers. This in turn determines the conceptualisation and conduct of the research activity. In this sense participatory research raise both professional and personal challenges that go beyond the issues of authorship and production of knowledge.

Please do not forget Reflection and Action 11.3.

Reflection and Action 11.3

If the definition of participation is "the organised efforts to increase control over resources and regulative institutions in given social situations, on the part of groups and movements of those hitherto excluded from such control", how many dimensions of participation would you like to cover in your research in a participatory mode? One example of a dimension is participation as an encounter between social classes/ interest groups and confrontation between local and metropolitan interests. Try to find out other similar dimensions.

Further Reading 📚

Mukherji, Partha Nath 2000. *Methodology in Social Research: Dilemmas and Perspectives.* Sage Publications India Pvt Ltd: New Delhi (especially pp. 13-84)