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).

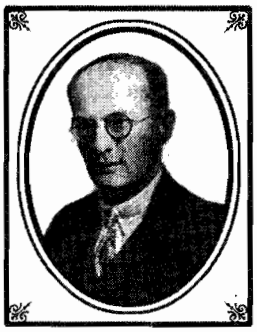
The lengthy section on managing diversities in social research takes us to the subject of understanding the basic goal of one's research. Let us discuss this issue in the next section.

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)