

## 1. Details of Module and its structure

Module Detail	
Subject Name	Sociology
Course Name	Sociology 01 (Class XI, Semester - 1)
Module Name/Title	Doing Sociology: Research Methods – Part 1
Module Id	kesy_10501
Pre-requisites	Concept of Sociology
Objectives	After going through this lesson, the learners will be able to understand the following: <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Need for social science research</li><li>• Concept of objectivity</li><li>• Evolution of human thought</li><li>• The contributions of various thinkers regarding methods to be used in Social Science Research</li></ul>
Keywords	Research, Objectivity, August Comte, Aristotle, Plato, Socrates, Reason, Inquiry, Scientific

## 2. Development Team

Role	Name	Affiliation
National MOOC Coordinator (NMC)	Prof. Amarendra P. Behera	CIET, NCERT, New Delhi
Program Coordinator	Dr. Mohd. Mamur Ali	CIET, NCERT, New Delhi
Course Coordinator (CC) / PI	Dr. Sheetal Sharma	Jawaharlal Nehru University, New Delhi
Subject Matter Expert (SME)	Ms. Mamta Saha	Sanskriti School, Chanakyapuri, New Delhi
Review Team	Ms. Abha Seth	DAV Public School, Sec B-1, Vasant Kunj, New Delhi

---

**Sociology** is a unique discipline. All of us live in society, and we already know a lot about the subject matter of sociology — social groups, institutions, norms, relationships and so on— through our own experience. It seems fair, then, to ask what makes the sociologist different from other members of society. Why should s/he be called a social scientist?

As with all scientific disciplines, the crucial element here is method, or the procedures through which knowledge is gathered. For in the final analysis, sociologists can claim to be different from lay persons not because of how much they know or what they know, but because of how they acquire their knowledge. This is the one reason for the special importance of method in sociology.

### **SOCIAL SCIENCE RESEARCH**

Social science research can be understood against the context of the history of evolution of human thought. We can trace this history back to **Aristotle** who was the first logician to lay emphasis on the reasoning faculty of human mind over and above what was handed down by tradition and custom. He talked about a major premise, a minor premise and a conclusion. If the first two were based on facts or were correct, the conclusion would be correct too. This method was called the deductive method of scientific inquiry.

However, the followers of logic had to fight the supremacy of religion to establish the supremacy of human reason and mind. It was with Renaissance that began in the 14<sup>th</sup> century Italy, which was a period of vigorous intellectual and artistic activity, that it was established that society is not a creation of God that was governed by a divine will but creation of human beings and which has an objective existence that can be studied from outside.

**Montesquieu, Hume** and **Voltaire** believed in the progressive evolution of societies and stated that societies evolve to better stages. According to them the idea of progress is to move towards betterment and that the ultimate goal of human kind is the triumph of reason.

**August Comte's** work reflected his engagement with the methodology of scientific thought. He stated that just like scientists in natural sciences have discovered laws to understand the behaviour of matter in the natural world, social scientists can discover laws to understand the behaviour of people in the social world. This can be done through the development of a **positive philosophy of human social development**. Thus, in other words, he states that

---

social scientists can use methods of natural sciences for the development of social physics or sociology. He gave the idea of **Positivism**. For Comte, social world was as regular and objective as the natural world and the methods of the natural sciences were ideal to discover laws regulating the social world and hence develop a positive outlook based on methodology of natural sciences. Gathering of factual knowledge is done through observation, experimentation, comparison and prediction. The data hence gathered would be free of any contamination of personal opinions and judgments.

Comte's positivism states that the task of sociology was to discover the general laws of social development and he divided these laws into two categories i.e.-

1. **Laws of social static or laws of co-existence**- This includes laws that given the inter-relationship between different parts of society and determined the function and inter-relationship between different parts.
2. **Laws of succession or social dynamics**-These laws governed social change and required an exploration of the way the nature and function of social institutions changed over time.

**Plato** argued powerfully in favor of the objectivity of values such as truth, good and beauty. Objective values are those that lie outside of the individual and are not dependent on individual perceptions.

**Socrates** believed that there were objective moral standards; that they could be **discovered**; that there were right and wrong answers to moral questions that went beyond mere opinion and popular sentiment.

**Durkheim** in the **Rules of the Sociological Method** stated that social facts must be treated as things and all preconceived notions about social facts must be abandoned. Even **Max Weber** emphasized the need of objectivity when he said that sociology must be value free. According to **Radcliff Brown** the social scientist must abandon or transcend his ethnocentric and egocentric biases while carrying out researches. Similarly Malinowski advocated cultural relativism while anthropological field work in order to ensure objectivity.

Keeping these thinkers in context we come to a very important concept of sociological research i.e. **Objectivity**.

---

Sociology is deeply interested in the lived experience of people. For example, when studying social phenomena like friendship or religion or bargaining in markets, the sociologist wants to know not only what is observable by the bystander, but also the opinions and feelings of the people involved. Sociologists try to adopt the point of view of people they study, to see the world through their eyes. The need to understand both the outsider's and the insider's points of view is another reason why method is particularly important in sociology.

There are two ways in which we can understand whether sociology is a scientific discipline as the natural sciences. They are-

- Comparison with methods of natural science
- Studying the various methods used by social science researchers.

We attach special importance to the notion of scientific knowledge as it is not subjective i.e. it is not based on personal biases. In everyday language, the word 'objective' means unbiased, neutral, or based on facts alone. In order to be objective about something, we must ignore our own feelings or attitudes about that thing. On the other hand, the word 'subjective' means something that is based on individual values and preferences. Every science is expected to be 'objective', to produce unbiased knowledge based solely on facts. It is based on facts rather than superstition and hence gives us an authentic picture of the social world.

Scientific objectivity is a characteristic of scientific claims, methods and results. **It expresses the idea that the claims, methods and results of science are not, or should not be influenced by particular perspectives, value commitments, community bias or personal interests, to name a few relevant factors.** Objectivity is often considered as an ideal for scientific inquiry, as a good reason for valuing scientific knowledge, and as the basis of the authority of science in society.

Scientific results should certainly not depend on researchers' personal preferences or idiosyncratic experiences. Paradigmatic ways to achieve objectivity in this sense are measurement and quantification. What has been measured and quantified has been verified relative to a standard. The truth, say, that the Eiffel Tower is 324 meters tall is relative to a standard unit and conventions about how to use certain instruments, so it is neither a perspective nor free from assumptions, but it is independent of the person making the measurement.

---

## How do we attain objectivity?

One method is to rigorously and continuously examine one's own ideas and feelings about the subject of research. More generally, the sociologist tries to take an outsider's perspective on her/his own work — she/he tries to look at herself/himself and her/his research through the eyes of others. This technique is called '**self-reflexivity**', or sometimes just 'reflexivity'. The sociologist constantly subjects her own attitudes and opinions to self examination. S/he tries to consciously adopt the point of view of others, especially those who are the subjects of her research.

Reflexivity in ethnographic research involves two things. First, it requires that researchers **reflect upon the research process in order to assess the effect of their presence and their research techniques on the nature and extent of the data collected**. Crudely put, researchers must consider to what extent respondents were telling them what they wanted to hear; did the researcher(s) inhibit respondents; did the format of the data collection restrict the kind of data being collected, and so on.

One of the practical aspects of reflexivity is the importance of **carefully documenting whatever one is doing**. Part of the claim to superiority of research method lie in the documentation of all procedures and in the formal citing of all sources of evidence. This ensures that others can retrace the steps we have taken to arrive at a particular conclusion, and see for themselves if we are right. It also helps us to check and re-check our own thinking or line of argument.

But however, self-reflexive the sociologist tries to be, there is always the possibility of unconscious bias. To deal with this possibility, sociologists explicitly mention those features of their own social background that might be relevant as a possible source of bias on the topic being researched. This alerts readers to the possibility of bias and allows them to mentally 'compensate' for it when reading the research study.

However objectivity continues to be an elusive goal at the practical level. In fact one school of thought represented by **Gunnar Myrdal** states that total objectivity is an illusion which can never be achieved. Because all research is guided by certain viewpoints and viewpoints involve subjectivity. Myrdal suggested that the basic viewpoints should be made clear. Further he felt that subjectivity creeps in at various stages in the course of sociological

---

research. Merton believes that the very choice of topic is influenced by personal preferences and ideological biases of the researcher.

Another problem with objectivity in sociology is the fact that, generally, there are many versions of the 'truth' in the social world. Things look different from different vantage points, and so the social world typically involves many competing versions or interpretations of reality. For example, a shopkeeper and a customer may have very different ideas about what is a 'good' price, a young person and an aged person may have very different notions of 'good food', and so on. There is no simple way of judging which particular interpretation is true or more correct, and often it is unhelpful to think in these terms. In fact, sociology tries not to judge in this way because it is really interested in what people think, and why they think what they think. A further complication arises from the presence of multiple points of view in the social sciences themselves. Like its sister social sciences, sociology too is a 'multi-paradigmatic' science. This means that competing and mutually incompatible schools of thought coexist within the discipline.

**The opposite of objectivity is subjectivity.**

Subjectivity refers to how someone's judgment is shaped by personal opinions and feelings instead of outside influences. *Subjectivity* is partially responsible for why one person loves an abstract painting while another person hates it. Since a subject is a person, subjectivity refers to how a person's own uniqueness influences their perceptions. For example, if you have six sisters, that might influence how you view women or families — it's part of your subjectivity. Subjectivity is a form of bias and also individuality. Subjectivity is the opposite of objectivity, which is based purely on the facts and isn't personal. We expect judges to put aside their subjectivity and make decisions based on objectivity.

**Values, Value Neutrality, Value-laden**

**Social values** form an important part of the culture of the society. Values account for the stability of social order. They provide the general guidelines for social conduct. Values such as fundamental rights, patriotism, respect for human dignity, rationality, sacrifice, individuality, equality, democracy etc. guide our behaviour in many ways. Values are the

---

criteria people use in assessing their daily lives; arrange their priorities and choosing between alternative courses of action.

G.R. Leslie, R.F. Larson, H.L. Gorman say, “Values are group conceptions of the relative desirability of things”.

According to H.M. Johnson, “Values are general standards and may be regarded as higher order norms”.

Young and Mack write, “Values are assumption, largely unconscious, of what is right and important”.

Michael Haralambos says “A value is a belief that something is good and worthwhile. It defines what is worth having and worth striving”.

**Value neutrality** means that sociologists must strive to overcome personal biases, particularly subconscious biases, when analyzing data. It also means that sociologists must avoid skewing data in order to match a predetermined outcome that aligns with a particular agenda, such as a political or moral point of view. Although subjectivity is likely in almost any sociological study, with careful consideration, a good sociologist can limit its effect on any particular study.

**Value-laden** statements make reference to something being good or bad in some way, or are biased by someone's judgment of what is good or bad.

Objectivity is a very difficult and complicated thing in sociology. In fact, the old notion of objectivity is widely considered to be an outdated perspective. Social scientists no longer believe that the traditional notion of an ‘objective, disinterested’ social science is attainable; in fact such an ideal can actually be misleading. This does not mean that there is no useful knowledge to be obtained via sociology, or that objectivity is a useless concept. It means that objectivity has to be thought of as the goal of a continuous, ongoing process rather than an already achieved end result.

### **Multiple Methods and Choice of Methods**

Since there are multiple truths and multiple perspectives in sociology, it is hardly surprising that there are also multiple methods. There is no single unique road to sociological truth. Of course, different methods are more or less suited to tackle different types of research

---

questions. Moreover, every method has its own strengths and weaknesses. It is thus futile to argue about the superiority or inferiority of different methods. It is more important to ask if the method chosen is the appropriate one for answering the question that is being asked. For example, if one is interested in finding out whether most Indian families are still 'joint families', then a census or survey is the best method. However, if one wishes to compare the status of women in joint and nuclear families, then interviews, case studies or participant observation may all be appropriate methods. There are different ways of classifying or categorising various methods commonly used by sociologists. It is conventional, for example, to distinguish between **quantitative and qualitative methods**: the former deals in countable or measurable variables (proportions, averages, and the like) while the latter deals with more abstract and hard to measure phenomena like attitudes, emotions and so on. A related distinction is between **methods that study observable behaviour** and those that study non-observable meanings, values and other interpretational things. Another way of classifying methods is to distinguish the ones that **rely on 'secondary' or already existing data (in the form of documents or other records and artefacts) from those that are designed to produce fresh or 'primary' data**. Thus historical methods typically rely on secondary material found in archives, while interviews generate primary data, and so on. Yet another way of categorisation is to separate **'micro' from 'macro' methods**. The former are designed to work in small intimate settings usually with a single researcher; thus the interview and participant observation are thought of as micro methods. Macro methods are those that are able to tackle large scale research involving large numbers of respondents and investigators. Survey research is the most common example of a 'macro' method, although some historical methods can also tackle macro phenomena. Whatever the mode of classification, it is important to remember that it is a matter of convention. The dividing line between different kinds of methods need not be very sharp. It is often possible to convert one kind of method into another, or to supplement one with another. The choice of method is usually dictated by the nature of the research question being addressed by the preferences of the researcher, and by the constraints of time and/or resources. The recent trend in social science is to advocate the use of multiple methods to bear on the same research problem from different vantage points. This is sometimes referred to as 'triangulation', that is, a process of reiterating or pinpointing something from different directions. In this way, different methods can be used to complement each other to produce a much better result than what might have been possible with each method by itself.



---

Although it is often used simply as a substitute for (or synonym of) 'method', the word 'methodology' actually refers to the study of method. Methodological issues or questions are thus about the general problems of scientific knowledge-gathering that go beyond any one particular method, technique or procedure.

Thus, sociology is a science because it understands social reality using methods of natural science. The important characteristics of the nature of social science inquiry are that it based on the following-

- Objective collection of data
- Observation
- Experimentation
- Conclusions based on empirical evidence
- Verifiable

There are multiple methods used in Sociology. Each method supplements the other and tries to be as objective and impartial as possible.

Thus social science research is scientific research. It is important because it allows us to make sense of the society we reside in by enlightening us about all social phenomena and concepts that we are already familiar. But this is done in a way to which is based on reason and logic and not based on personal likes and dislikes.

In the following module we will look into the various methods that are used by sociologists and the pros and cons of these methods and the way they supplement each other.