

## Unit 1: Social Research

### 1. Definition, Purpose, and Importance of Social Research

#### Definition of Social Research:

Social research is a systematic process through which scholars and practitioners explore, analyse, and interpret the structures, behaviors, and phenomena of human societies. It involves the use of scientific methods to collect and examine data about social life to gain a deeper understanding of how societies operate, how individuals interact, and how various social forces influence human behaviour.

The goal of social research is not only to observe but to systematically uncover patterns and relationships within social systems, as well as the broader structural dynamics that shape these systems. It involves both qualitative methods (e.g., interviews, ethnography) and quantitative methods (e.g., surveys, statistical analysis) to generate comprehensive knowledge.

**Lundberg-** "Social research is a scientific undertaking which, through logical and systematized techniques, aims to discover new facts or verify and test old facts, analyze their sequences, interrelationships, and causal explanations."

**Goode and Hatt-** "The aim of social research is to discover new facts or verify and test old facts, analyze their sequences, inter-relationships, and causal explanations which were derived within an appropriate theoretical framework."

**P.V. Young-** "Social research is a systematic method of discovering new facts or verifying old facts, their sequences, interrelationships, causal explanations, and the natural laws which govern them."

#### Some thinkers whose work has significantly contributed to the development of social research include:

- **Auguste Comte (1798–1857):** Often considered the *father of sociology*, Comte was the first to coin the term "sociology" and advocated for the use of scientific methods to study society. His theory of *positivism* emphasized empirical observation and the application of the scientific method to social phenomena.
- **Emile Durkheim (1858–1917):** A foundational figure in sociology, Durkheim is known for his focus on *social facts*, which are external forces that influence individual behaviour. He used empirical data to study social phenomena like suicide, religion, and education, helping establish social research as a scientific discipline.
- **Max Weber (1864–1920):** Weber is known for his theory of *Verstehen* (interpretive understanding) in social research. He argued that to truly understand human behaviour, researchers must interpret the meanings individuals attach to their actions, focusing on the subjective aspects of social life.
- **Karl Marx (1818–1883):** Although his work was more focused on political theory, Marx's materialist conception of history and his analysis of class struggles laid the

groundwork for critical social research. He emphasized the role of economic structures and class conflict in shaping social life.

### **Purpose of Social Research:**

The main purpose of social research is to gain a deeper understanding of the intricate patterns and dynamics within human societies. It aims to explain and predict social phenomena through the application of scientific methodologies.

Social research serves several key purposes:

- **Understanding and Explaining Social Behaviour:** Social research seeks to uncover the reasons behind human behaviour, revealing patterns in actions, interactions, and beliefs across various social contexts. It answers questions such as: Why do people behave the way they do in different social settings? What are the social norms that govern human actions?
- **Identifying and Analysing Relationships Among Social Variables:** Social research investigates how different social variables, such as income, education, gender, and race, are interconnected. Researchers might explore, for example, how socioeconomic status affects access to healthcare, or how education impacts employment opportunities.
- **Developing Theories and Models:** Social research helps develop theoretical frameworks and models that explain how societies function. These theories can be tested and refined through empirical research, and serve as a basis for further study. For instance, Durkheim's theory of social solidarity and Weber's concept of bureaucracy are foundational theories in sociology.
- **Solving Social Problems and Making Recommendations for Change:** Social research plays a critical role in addressing real-world problems. It can identify social issues, such as inequality, poverty, or crime, and offer evidence-based recommendations for policies or interventions that can improve society. For example, research on crime patterns has informed police practices and criminal justice reforms.

### **Importance of Social Research:**

Social research is vital for a variety of reasons, especially in modern society. It plays a crucial role in informing both theory and practice, bridging the gap between academic knowledge and real-world applications. The importance of social research can be broken down as follows:

- **Providing Empirical Evidence for Decision-Making:** Social research supplies empirical evidence that guides social planning and policy-making. Policymakers rely on data-driven findings to craft interventions and allocate resources effectively. For example, census data and poverty studies help governments design welfare programs or decide on educational reforms.
- **Enhancing Our Understanding of Social Issues:** Social research deepens our understanding of contemporary social challenges like poverty, inequality, crime, health

disparities, and environmental justice. It offers a comprehensive view of these issues and helps identify their root causes. For instance, research on educational disparities has highlighted the impact of socioeconomic status on student achievement, leading to policy changes in educational equity.

- **Advancing Academic Knowledge:** Social research contributes to the ongoing development of sociological and social science theories. It tests existing theories and generates new ones. For example, the Chicago School of Sociology, particularly scholars like Robert Park and Ernest Burgess, developed theories on urban sociology by studying social interactions in cities. The ongoing work of sociologists like Anthony Giddens and Pierre Bourdieu continues to shape the study of social structures, power, and inequality.
- **Evaluating the Effectiveness of Programs and Policies:** Social research is also essential for assessing whether policies or social programs are achieving their intended outcomes. For instance, research on public health campaigns, such as anti-smoking efforts, can evaluate whether they are effective in reducing smoking rates, leading to policy adjustments.
- **Informing Public Opinion and Social Change:** Social research can influence public perceptions and contribute to social movements. C. Wright Mills's concept of the *sociological imagination* encourages people to understand personal issues in terms of larger social structures, fostering greater awareness of social inequalities

## 2. Types of Social Research: Basic, Applied, and Action Research

Social research is a broad field that can be categorized into three main types: **Basic (or Pure) Research**, **Applied Research**, and **Action Research**. Each of these types serves a distinct purpose, yet they often overlap in practice, contributing to both theory-building and solving real-world problems. Here's an elaboration on each type, along with relevant examples and key scholars associated with each area.

### a) Basic (or Pure) Research:

#### **Definition:**

Basic research, also known as **pure research**, is primarily aimed at enhancing our theoretical understanding of social phenomena. It is not intended for immediate practical application but seeks to build and expand upon existing knowledge by developing concepts, frameworks, and theoretical models.

This type of research focuses on **theory-building** rather than practical solutions. It attempts to answer fundamental questions about how society works, the nature of human behavior, and the relationships between social variables.

#### **Characteristics:**

- It is driven by curiosity and the desire to understand the “why” behind social phenomena.

- Findings are often abstract, theoretical, and not immediately applicable to solving practical problems.
- Basic research lays the foundation for applied research by offering explanations and models that can later be tested or utilized for practical purposes.

**Example:**

- **Studying the concept of "social capital"** in communities: Researchers might explore how social networks, trust, and cooperation contribute to community resilience or economic prosperity. This type of research could explore whether higher levels of social capital led to more successful community development efforts, without necessarily solving any immediate community issue.

**Notable Thinkers in Basic Research:**

- **Max Weber:** His theory of *Verstehen* (interpretive understanding) is a foundational concept in basic social research. Weber's work on the nature of social actions and institutions laid the groundwork for much of contemporary sociological theory.
- **Emile Durkheim:** His study of social facts, collective consciousness, and suicide were classic examples of basic research that sought to develop theoretical models of social life.
- **Pierre Bourdieu:** Bourdieu's concepts like *habitus* and *social fields* are theoretical tools developed through basic research, contributing significantly to understanding social behaviour and structures.

**b) Applied Research:**

**Definition:**

Applied research is designed to solve specific, practical problems in society. Unlike basic research, which is more theoretical, applied research focuses on producing solutions that can be implemented in real-world settings. It is typically commissioned by organizations, policymakers, or governmental and non-governmental agencies looking for evidence-based solutions to social problems.

**Characteristics:**

- It is practical and action-oriented, aimed at solving immediate issues.
- It uses established theoretical models or concepts from basic research to find solutions to concrete problems.
- Applied research often addresses issues like policy development, program effectiveness, and community or organizational challenges.

**Example:**

- **Researching the causes of dropout rates in government schools** to design strategies for improving retention. For instance, applied researchers might investigate factors such

as school climate, socioeconomic status, and student engagement to create a targeted intervention plan to reduce dropout rates.

### **Notable Thinkers and Scholars in Applied Research:**

- **Robert K. Merton:** Known for his work on social structures and functions, Merton contributed to the development of applied sociology. His concept of “**middle-range theories**” bridges basic research and practical application by addressing specific problems within society.
- **Paul Lazarsfeld:** A pioneer in survey research and mass communication studies, Lazarsfeld's applied research focused on understanding the effects of media on public opinion and behavior.
- **Herbert A. Simon:** His contributions to decision-making theory and organizational behaviour were highly applied and have been influential in the fields of public administration, management, and policy-making.

Applied research is particularly valuable for addressing contemporary issues such as poverty, unemployment, health disparities, and educational inequalities. It often leads to the development of programs, policies, or interventions that directly benefit society.

### **c) Action Research:**

#### **Definition:**

Action research is a **participatory** and **reflective** approach aimed at bringing about change or improvement in a particular social setting. Unlike traditional research, action research is inherently collaborative; it involves both **researchers and participants** working together to diagnose problems, develop plans of action, implement interventions, and assess the results.

This type of research is highly **context-specific** and is often employed in fields like education, healthcare, and community development, where ongoing feedback and adaptation are crucial to the success of the intervention.

#### **Characteristics:**

- **Collaboration:** Researchers and participants are equal partners in the process.
- **Reflection:** The process is cyclical, with researchers and participants reflecting on the results and adjusting their approach as needed.
- **Change-Oriented:** The primary goal is not just to understand the problem but to actively improve the situation, often through direct interventions.

#### **Example:**

- **Community Development Projects:** In a community suffering from high unemployment, action research might involve researchers working with community members to identify local resources, design job training programs, and assess the effectiveness of the intervention over time.

### **Notable Thinkers and Scholars in Action Research:**

- **Kurt Lewin:** The founder of action research, Lewin introduced the concept of “*action research*” as a way of solving social problems through participatory methods. His work emphasized the importance of changing social conditions through a cyclical process of planning, action, and reflection.
- **John Collier:** Known for his work in applied anthropology, Collier's use of action research in community development focused on solving local issues through collaborative, participatory research methods.
- **Paulo Freire:** A major figure in education, Freire’s work on *critical pedagogy* emphasizes the importance of involving students as active participants in their own learning, which is a key aspect of action research in educational settings.

Action research is unique because it emphasizes **change** within the very context being studied, making it a dynamic, evolving form of research that empowers communities and participants to take charge of solving their own problems.

### **Intersections and Overlaps Between the Three Types:**

In practice, these three types of social research often overlap. A basic research study may identify a key social issue, which is then explored further through applied research to develop solutions. Subsequently, action research may be employed to implement and test these solutions in real-world settings, with feedback loops that inform future research and interventions.

For example, a **basic research** study might explore how education influences social mobility, which is then followed by **applied research** focused on understanding how to reduce dropout rates in schools. Finally, **action research** might involve collaborating with teachers, students, and parents to design and implement an intervention strategy to improve retention in a specific community.

### **Summary:**

Understanding the different types of social research—basic, applied, and action research—is essential for us as it helps them grasp the multifaceted nature of social science.

- **Basic research** helps expand theoretical knowledge and lays the groundwork for future studies.
- **Applied research** addresses immediate practical problems, offering tangible solutions to societal issues.
- **Action research** empowers communities and stakeholders to take active roles in solving their own problems through participatory methods.

By understanding the distinctions and interconnections between these types, students will be better equipped to choose the appropriate research approach for different social challenges and contribute meaningfully to the development of social policies, programs, and interventions.

### 3. The Researcher's Role and Responsibilities

The researcher plays a critical and multifaceted role in social research. Their responsibilities are wide-ranging and extend beyond just collecting and analysing data; they must also ensure that the research process is ethical, objective, and methodologically sound. Below, we break down the researcher's role and key responsibilities in more detail:

#### Role of the Researcher:

The researcher acts as an **objective investigator**, working to understand, explain, and interpret social phenomena with the goal of contributing new knowledge to the field. The role involves several key aspects:

- **Objective Investigator:**

A core aspect of the researcher's role is to remain impartial and unbiased. Researchers must investigate social phenomena without personal agendas or preconceived notions. Their goal is not to confirm what they already believe but to uncover the truth based on evidence.

- **Participant, Observer, or Both:**

Depending on the research design, the researcher may adopt different roles:

- **Participant Researcher:** In **participant observation**, researchers immerse themselves in the community or setting they are studying. For example, a researcher studying a youth subculture might join the group, taking part in their activities while observing them.
- **Observer Researcher:** In **non-participant observation**, the researcher remains detached, observing the behaviour of individuals or groups without directly interacting with them.
- **Both Roles:** Sometimes, a researcher may switch between participant and observer roles, depending on the needs of the study. For example, **ethnographic studies** often require the researcher to take an active part in a community while observing and recording experiences.

- **Choosing Appropriate Methods and Tools:**

The researcher is responsible for selecting the **research design, methods, and tools** that are best suited to the research problem. The methods could be qualitative (e.g., interviews, ethnography) or quantitative (e.g., surveys, statistical analysis), and the choice of these methods will determine the types of data collected and how they are analysed. **John W. Creswell**, for example, has written extensively on choosing the right research design and methods in the field of qualitative and mixed methods research.

- **Ethical Procedures:**

The researcher must also ensure that their approach to data collection and analysis aligns with ethical standards. This includes protecting the rights and dignity of participants, obtaining informed consent, and maintaining confidentiality throughout the study. For example, the **Belmont Report (1979)**, which set ethical guidelines for

research, established principles like respect for persons, beneficence, and justice in social research.

## **Key Responsibilities of the Researcher:**

### **1. Ethical Conduct:**

- **Informed Consent:** Researchers must obtain informed consent from participants, ensuring they fully understand the nature, purpose, and potential risks of the study. Participants must be free to withdraw at any point without facing negative consequences.
- **Confidentiality:** The researcher must protect the privacy of participants by keeping personal data confidential. This is especially important in sensitive research areas, such as studies on mental health, criminal behavior, or marginalized communities.
- **Dignity and Respect:** Researchers are responsible for treating participants with dignity and respect, ensuring that their involvement in the study is voluntary and that their rights are safeguarded throughout the research process.

### **Example:**

In a study of domestic violence, researchers must ensure that participants are not harmed or re-traumatized by the research process. Additionally, all data must be anonymized to protect the identities of survivors.

### **Eminent Scholars in Research Ethics:**

- **Beatrice Potter Webb:** A social researcher and reformer who highlighted the importance of ethical guidelines in research, especially in the context of social work and public policy.
- **David B. Resnik:** A scholar whose work on research ethics emphasizes the need for transparency, honesty, and respect for participants' rights.

### **2. Objectivity:**

- **Avoiding Bias:** Objectivity is one of the most important ethical considerations in social research. Researchers must strive to keep personal opinions, values, and expectations out of the research process. Bias can distort findings and lead to false conclusions.
- **Maintaining Neutrality:** In both data collection and analysis, researchers must remain neutral. For instance, if a researcher is studying the impact of poverty on education, they must not allow personal beliefs about the causes of poverty to influence their data interpretation.

**Example:**

A researcher conducting a study on political polarization must avoid making partisan statements and ensure that their analysis does not favour one side over the other.

**Eminent Scholars on Objectivity:**

- **Max Weber:** Advocated for the *value-neutrality* of social science, which means that researchers should keep their personal biases out of their work and remain impartial in their analysis and interpretation of social phenomena.

**3. Rigorous Methodology:**

- **Adherence to Scientific Procedures:** Researchers must follow established scientific methods to ensure the **validity** (accuracy) and **reliability** (consistency) of their research. This includes selecting the right research design, ensuring appropriate sampling, and analysing data using scientifically accepted techniques.
- **Sampling and Data Analysis:** Whether conducting qualitative interviews or quantitative surveys, the researcher must ensure that their sampling methods are representative and that their data analysis techniques are robust and suitable for the research question.

**Example:**

In a study investigating the effectiveness of a new educational intervention, the researcher must use proper experimental design, with control groups and random sampling, to ensure that the results are reliable and can be generalized to a broader population.

**Eminent Scholars on Methodology:**

- **John Stuart Mill:** His work on the **method of agreement** and the **method of difference** laid the groundwork for causal inference in social research.
- **Karl Popper:** Advocated for the **falsifiability** of scientific theories, emphasizing that hypotheses should be testable and capable of being disproven.

**4. Critical Analysis:**

- **Logical Interpretation:** Researchers must analyze their data logically and transparently, drawing conclusions based solely on the evidence presented by the data, rather than preconceived notions. **Critical thinking** is essential when interpreting complex data or when there are competing explanations for observed phenomena.
- **Transparent Reporting:** It is essential for researchers to present their findings **honestly and clearly**, including potential limitations of the study. This transparency ensures that others can critically assess the research and its conclusions.

**Example:**

A study examining the effects of a government policy might show mixed results—positive outcomes in some communities and negative outcomes in others. Researchers must report all findings, not just those that align with expectations or desired outcomes.

**Eminent Scholars on Critical Analysis:**

- **Thomas Kuhn:** His work on the **structure of scientific revolutions** demonstrated how new theories emerge and replace older ones when they offer better explanations of data, emphasizing the importance of critical reflection and openness to new ideas.
- **Harold Garfinkel:** Known for his work on **ethnomethodology**, Garfinkel's research stresses the importance of understanding the underlying social norms that shape human behaviour, urging researchers to critically analyse the taken-for-granted assumptions in everyday life.

**5. Reporting:**

- **Honest Presentation:** Researchers must present their findings without distortion, irrespective of whether the results align with their initial hypotheses, beliefs, or expectations. Research findings should be shared in ways that are accessible, accurate, and free from manipulation or bias.
- **Contribution to Knowledge and Practice:** Researchers have a responsibility to ensure that their work contributes constructively to both the academic field and society. Their findings should offer meaningful insights that can influence policies, practices, or future research directions.

**Example:**

In a study of the effectiveness of a mental health program for adolescents, the researcher must present both positive and negative outcomes, allowing for a balanced understanding of the program's overall impact.

**Eminent Scholars on Reporting:**

- **William Foote Whyte:** His work on **participant observation** and **action research** highlighted the importance of transparency and honesty in reporting the lived experiences of those involved in the research.
- **John W. Creswell:** A leading scholar in research design and methodology, Creswell advocates for clear, transparent reporting in mixed methods and qualitative research.

The researcher's role is to approach the social world with curiosity, rigor, and ethical responsibility. Researchers must be **objective**, use **rigorous methods**, and maintain **ethical conduct** throughout the research process. Their **critical analysis** and **honest reporting** are crucial to ensuring that the research is both credible and useful in advancing knowledge and

influencing social policy. By fulfilling these responsibilities, researchers contribute to both the scholarly community and the broader society in meaningful ways.