

Methods of Research

Social science is concerned with the understanding and explanation of human behaviour. Data plays an important role in explanation of human behaviour. Social scientists have developed methods for systematic collection of data. The historical, comparative and functional methods generate data, which can be interpreted in more than one ways. What facts do people seek to compare? What histories do they seek to recount? How do we analyse social relations? These are the vital questions relevant for present discussion on historical, comparative and functional methods of research.

Historical Method

It is not unusual to find inquiries of different sorts in social sciences. Inquiries in social sciences can be classified in two categories, the *nomothetic* and the *ideographic*. According to this classification, the ideographic sciences are those which study unique and unrepeatable events, while the nomothetic sciences attempt to make generalisations. We can, thus, call sociology as a nomothetic science and history as an ideographic science.

Historians try to increase our accurate knowledge of unique phenomena of the past, whereas sociologists try to seek information about certain uniformities in social behaviour under specific conditions. This, in principle, is the difference between the two modes of inquiry. However, the data of history are also

widely used now by sociologists. On the other hand, historians have also started using data generated by sociologists for their own writings.

Historical method has also been employed by Karl Marx in conjunction with *dialectical materialism* in understanding the human societies. He believed that the materialistic structure of societies accounts for their development and thus, he took this philosophical device and applied it to the materialistic view of society. The other form of historical approach is a characteristic of the work of Max Weber, and later sociologists. Max Weber's own historical approach is exemplified, especially, in his studies of the origins of capitalism, the development of modern bureaucracy, and the economic influence on the world religions. A very convincing illustration of this approach of Weber is to be found in his treatment of the growth of capitalism in Europe. As he brings out in his book, *Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*.

The main methodological features of these studies are the particular historical changes of social structures and types of society that are investigated, and are compared in certain respects with changes in other societies. In this manner, both casual explanation and historical interpretations find a place in the social explanation.

Sources of Historical Data

In her book *Scientific Social Surveys and Research*, P.V. Young describes sources of historical data highlighting both the adequacy and limitations of historical data.

The social scientists generally confine themselves to three major sources of historical information, (a) documents and various historical sources to which historians themselves have access, (b) materials of cultural history and of analytical history, (c) personal sources of authentic observers and witnesses. How arid and under what circumstances these sources are to be used depends upon the discretion of the researcher's interest, the scope of the study and the availability of the sources.

Historical data have some limitations, which arise mainly because historians cannot describe all the happenings in time and space available at the time of writing history. Personal biases and private interpretations, often, enter unconsciously, even when, honest attempts are made to select and interpret pertinent facts. This can be illustrated by reference to the current controversy that is raging on the writing of Medieval Indian history.

Comparative Method

The analyses of social change in history are carried out with the help of several methods. One of the most favoured methods is the comparative method used in sociology. This entails the study of different groups and institutions in order to examine similarities and differences.

All sociological research involves the comparison of cases or variables, which are similar in some respects and dissimilar in others. A major methodological issue is whether or not the units of comparison (whole societies, major institutions, religions, groups, and so on) and the indicators chosen to compare differences or similarities are genuinely comparable and can legitimately be used outside their specific cultural settings. The features under examination may occur within the same society, for example rates of mobility between different castes and classes belonging to the same society may be mutually compared, or, the same variables may appear in different societies like the rates of social mobility among the same strata but in different societies.

The comparative method is amply used in anthropological and ethnological research. George P. Murdock, realising the necessity for storing the information, which was continuously building up and the importance of having it at the disposal of social scientists everywhere, opened a *Cross Cultural Survey* at Yale University. Today, the Human Relations Area File has been developed on the basis of Murdock's idea and material, and is one of the principal 'data banks' which social scientists possess.

Incidentally, in the Victorian age, Herbert Spencer had already begun an important systematic inventory of information about social institutions in a great number of countries. Today, all sorts of data banks are developing in various places, making important factual information, readily and widely available.

In Britain its most forceful exponent was A.R. Radcliffe-Brown who dominated anthropology in the late thirties and forties, and used social anthropology as synonym for 'comparative sociology'. The systematic use of comparison and contrast as method of enquiry became widely accepted among sociologists and social anthropologists in the first half of the twentieth century. Radcliffe-Brown sought to extend Durkheim's sociological theory of totemism by comparing and contrasting the relationship between social structure and religious practices among the Australian aborigines—who had totemism—and the Andaman Islanders—who did not have it. He also proposed that a relationship could be established through a systematic comparative study between ancestor worship and lineage structure.

Herbert Spencer's work is a lucid example of the comparative method where he has compared military and industrial types of societies. Radcliffe-Brown observed that the comparative method alone gives you nothing. Nothing will grow out of the ground unless you put seeds into it. The comparative method is one way of testing hypotheses. The difficulties while using the comparative method seem to be due in part to the absence of hypotheses, or due to not clearly formulated hypotheses, at the outset, and in part to the problem of defining the unit of comparison. Thus, for example, Comte's use of the comparative method to establish his 'law of three stages' is based, not upon a scientific hypothesis but upon a philosophical view of the development of humanity as a whole.

Durkheim regarded the comparative method as the counterpart in the social sciences of the experimental method pursued in the other sciences. He recognised that social facts

could only be observed, not artificially produced under experimental conditions. Therefore Durkheim favoured the comparative-historical approach because sociologists could not carry out experiments and had to rely on the method of indirect experiment—the comparison of similar cases in a systematic way. Thompson comments that this was for Durkheim, ‘the core of sociological methodology’. In his book on Emile Durkheim, Thompson says that Durkheim drew up classification of behaviour (for example, suicide rates) to make it possible to test hypotheses about the relationship between social phenomena. The typology could be used when making comparisons. This is the nearest thing to an experimental method in sociology’.