

Chapter 1: Human Enquiry and Social Science Research

Introduction

Human enquiry has been the foundation of intellectual pursuits since antiquity, driving humans to explore, question, and understand their surroundings. In the realm of social science, enquiry is not just an instinct but a structured methodological process aimed at comprehending human behavior, social structures, and interactions (Giddens, 1991). The study of human enquiry in social sciences seeks to answer fundamental questions about society, governance, economics, and human psychology using both empirical and theoretical approaches. This chapter explores the scientific method in social sciences, different types of research methodologies, epistemological debates, challenges, and the broader applications of social science research in contemporary society.

The Scientific Method in Social Science Research

The scientific method is the cornerstone of systematic knowledge production in both natural and social sciences. It involves a sequence of steps: observation, question formulation, hypothesis development, data collection, analysis, and conclusion (Babbie, 2020). Unlike the natural sciences, where experimental control is often possible, social science research deals with human behavior, which is inherently unpredictable and influenced by cultural, historical, and situational contexts.

Durkheim's (1897) seminal study on suicide serves as an early example of applying the scientific method to social phenomena. He established a relationship between social integration and suicide rates using quantitative methods, demonstrating how social science research can uncover patterns and relationships in human behavior. However, unlike the rigid structures of physics or chemistry, social sciences rely on interpretive frameworks, often employing qualitative methodologies alongside quantitative approaches (Bryman, 2016).

The Debate on Scientism in Social Science

The debate on whether social sciences should follow the methods of natural sciences has been central to epistemological discussions in the field. Scientism—the belief that social sciences should adopt the same methods and principles as natural sciences—has been championed by positivists such as Auguste Comte and later by behaviorists who emphasized empirical objectivity. L. N. Sharma (1979) critiques this stance, arguing that while scientific enquiry has its merits, an over-reliance on positivist methods limits the ability of social sciences to fully grasp the complexity of human interactions.

Sharma highlights that the behavioral movement, deeply influenced by logical positivism, attempted to restructure social sciences by prioritizing empiricism, quantification, and objectivity. This led to methodological advancements but also resulted in epistemological

concerns, particularly regarding the exclusion of values, subjective experiences, and historical contexts. The critique of scientism suggests that while empirical rigor is necessary, the unique nature of human experiences demands a more flexible and interpretive approach in social sciences.

Qualitative, Quantitative, and Mixed-Methods Research

Social science research employs diverse methodologies to examine human behavior and societal dynamics.

Qualitative Research

Qualitative research focuses on the lived experiences, meanings, and social contexts that shape human interactions (Denzin & Lincoln, 2018). Methods such as ethnography, in-depth interviews, and case studies allow researchers to explore complex social realities. For example, Clifford Geertz's (1973) ethnographic work on Balinese cockfighting provided deep insights into the cultural significance of rituals and collective identities.

Despite its depth, qualitative research faces challenges of subjectivity and replicability. Unlike quantitative research, which seeks statistical generalization, qualitative methods prioritize depth over breadth, making their findings context-dependent and interpretive.

Quantitative Research

Quantitative research, in contrast, seeks to measure social phenomena using statistical tools, surveys, and experimental designs (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). It allows researchers to identify patterns, correlations, and causations. Political scientists frequently use survey data to analyze voting behaviors, such as the American National Election Studies (ANES), which track public opinion trends over time (Campbell et al., 1960).

Quantitative research provides replicability and generalizability but often struggles with capturing the nuanced experiences that qualitative methods excel at. Moreover, the reliance on numerical data may lead to an oversimplified understanding of human behavior (Adcock & Collier, 2001).

Mixed-Methods Approach

Mixed-methods research integrates both qualitative and quantitative approaches to provide a more comprehensive understanding of social phenomena (Tashakkori & Teddlie, 2010). For instance, a study on crime rates might use police reports for statistical analysis (quantitative) and interviews with law enforcement officers for contextual understanding (qualitative). This approach mitigates the weaknesses of singular methodologies and enhances the validity of findings.

Challenges in Social Science Research

Despite its contributions, social science research faces numerous challenges. One of the primary concerns is subjectivity vs. objectivity. Social researchers must navigate their own biases and the interpretive nature of human behavior. Even in quantitative research, choices related to measurement and data interpretation can introduce researcher bias (Flyvbjerg, 2001).

Another critical issue is ethical considerations. Unlike natural sciences, social research often deals with human participants, necessitating informed consent, confidentiality, and ethical integrity (Beauchamp & Childress, 2019). Historical examples such as the Stanford Prison Experiment (Zimbardo, 1971) highlight the ethical dilemmas inherent in studying human behavior.

Furthermore, the complexity of human behavior presents methodological challenges. Unlike controlled laboratory experiments, social phenomena are influenced by numerous external factors, making it difficult to establish definitive causal relationships (Popper, 1959). This complexity demands robust methodological frameworks and interdisciplinary approaches.

Applications of Social Science Research

Social science research plays a critical role in shaping contemporary society by informing policies, governance, and human development initiatives.

Policy and Governance

Governments and policymakers rely on social science research to develop effective policies. The United Nations' Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) incorporate findings from social science studies to address poverty, education, and gender equality (United Nations, 2015). Research on poverty alleviation programs, such as India's Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MGNREGA), has provided valuable insights into economic security and rural employment (Dreze & Khera, 2017).

Public Health and Social Behavior

Public health initiatives benefit immensely from social science research. During the COVID-19 pandemic, behavioral studies guided public health campaigns on mask-wearing and social distancing (Van Bavel et al., 2020). Psychological research on misinformation helped authorities counter pandemic-related conspiracy theories (Lewandowsky et al., 2021).

Media and Communication Studies

With the rise of digital media, social scientists analyze how information spreads, its influence on public opinion, and the ethical implications of technology (Castells, 2009). Studies on misinformation and political polarization highlight the dangers of echo chambers and algorithm-driven content consumption (Sunstein, 2017).

Thus, human enquiry, as manifested in social science research, remains crucial for understanding and improving society. Through rigorous methodologies—qualitative, quantitative, and mixed-methods—social scientists contribute to knowledge that informs governance, economic policies, public health, and social justice. However, the challenges of bias, ethics, and the unpredictability of human behavior necessitate continuous refinement of research approaches. As technology advances, integrating big data analytics, artificial intelligence, and interdisciplinary collaborations will shape the future of social science research (Mayer-Schönberger & Cukier, 2013).