UNIT 2   QUALITATIVE DATA SOURCES

Structure

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2.1 INTRODUCTION

After reading about the concepts of qualitative research in Unit 1 of this Block, you will read about the sources that provide data for qualitative research. In the beginning of the unit, you will read what feminist qualitative research is and how it evolved with time. Next, you will read how feminist research questions the politics of the ‘other’. This section is followed by various other traditional data sources like ethnography, biography. The unit ends with discussion on contemporary and emerging sources of data in the field of qualitative research like grounded theory, participatory action research and visual sociology. Before, going ahead read the objective to know what you will learn by reading this unit.

2.2 OBJECTIVES

After going through this unit, you will be able to:

• Build understanding of feminist qualitative research;

• Familiarise yourself with different nature of data sources which are predominantly in use; and

• Discuss the nature of primary and second data sources with the help of some case analysis.
2.3 UNDERSTANDING FEMINIST QUALITATIVE RESEARCH

In the beginning of the unit, it is important to make you understand what is understood by feminist qualitative research.

Feminist qualitative research has remained pluralistic in nature; hence continuously challenged by approaches of positivist tradition. Researching on women, men and Lesbian/Gay/Bisexual/Transgender (LGBT) communities has set new ways of combining both experimental and theoretical methodologies with an aim to extend the scope of research towards critical subjects. Therefore, feminist qualitative research can never be described as homogenous and unified in nature.

Box No. 2.1

“It(Feminist Qualitative Research) refers to the examination of problematic to theoretical, policy or action frameworks to realise social justice from women (and men) in specific contexts” (Olesen, 2006, p. 236).

Unlike feminism, feminist qualitative research methodology has been drawn from different research methodological traditions ranging from literary discourse to phenomenological field of enquiry. Sandra Acker’s participant observation of classroom situation, Deborah Britzman’s post structuralist analysis of socialisation process between teachers and students, Susan Chase’s narrative analysis of women school superintendents’ struggle to cope with normative structures, Nancy Naples’s use of discourse analysis in understanding the role of state in restructuring the family and women’s role, and Patricia Hill Collins’s exploration of black feminist experiences from the position of situated knowledge are to cite some of the pioneering works of feminists’ reclamation of qualitative research. (Olesen, 2006)

This growing emphasis on feminist qualitative research can be traced from the work of Catherine MacKinnon’s idea of ‘consciousness raising’. Conscious raising was used as a basic tool to initiate feminist methodology to understand the social reality that women are located in a structurally different position compared to man in organisational and personal set ups; therefore, they would be differently contributing towards the production of knowledge.

Thus, feminist research eventually moved away from criticism towards questioning social institutions and practices and the disciplinary inability to capture women’s life situations and experiences. Olesen explains,
“Researchers became more sensitive to differences among women, even in the same group, and to concerns about the researcher's own characteristics” (Olesen, 2006 p. 241).

Further, feminist qualitative research methodology was successful in deconstructing the homogenous category of woman and aims at incorporating multiple identities and subjective experiences which may have been formed in a particular historical and socio-cultural context.

Gubrium and Holstein (1997, cited in Bryman, 2012, p. 367) have identified four traditions of qualitative research which are influencing feminism and qualitative research in different and multiple ways.

**Box No.2.2**

**Four Traditions of Qualitative Research**

- **Naturalism**: attempts to understand reality in its natural settings.
- **Ethnomethodology**: attempts to understand social order as a consequence of everyday interaction.
- **Emotionalism**: raises concern with subjectivity and deals with inner experiences of individuals.
- **Postmodernism**: emphasizes ‘method talk’ in which social reality is constructed.

There are several theoretical strands and different approaches which have been continuously contributing to sustaining complexities of feminist qualitative research domain. These include the work by women of specific groups (women of colour, queer/lesbians and disabled women) and approaches such as: post-colonial, globalisation, standpoint position, and postmodern theory. Let us look at these theoretical strands and approaches in brief before we move towards understanding various qualitative data sources.

**Writing by women of colour:**

The writing by women of colour has significantly contributed to forming the position of ‘othernesses’ as a silenced voice and marginalised position. The writings have actually countered the normative view about women of colour and revealed that to what extent factors like race, caste and ethnicity can lead to social discrimination and place women of colour at the margin of vulnerability against white women.

**Postcolonial feminist thought:**

Postcolonial feminist thought has played a leading role in reconstructing the category of ‘woman’ in feminist research and countered the existing definitions of feminism. It shows how Western feminist frameworks are not appropriate to deal with multiple subjectivities of third world women.
Postcolonial feminists have questioned the basic fundamentals of feminism, i.e., can subalterns speak under their representation by the elite? They ask the question whether third world women’s experiences can be conceptualised comprehensively under the given category of women.

**Globalisation:**

Feminist qualitative research has focussed on the process of liberalisation and its impact on women’s lives. The Feminist theorisation of globalisation leads to an argument that globalisation’s impact is not homogenous in nature and the process continues to exercise patriarchal oppression of women of different castes, class and region. In a similar way, feminist qualitative research has expanded to the inherent gender segregation of labour market. According to Olesen (2006, p. 242), the feminist analysis of the globalisation process has broadly touched two critical issues:

- Interplay of the state and the new economic processes on women’s lives.
- Generation of new opportunities for women in the labour market within the existing oppressive structure of capitalism.

**Lesbian Research:**

Several feminists have criticised the existing qualitative research methodologies on account of completely ignoring the issue of sexuality. Essentially, it questions invisibility of LGBT community’s representation in the area of gender research. Feminist qualitative research deals with the issue of sexual identity in two fundamental ways: focussing on sexuality as an object and understanding sexuality as a concept.

**Box. No. 2.3**

- Research on sexuality as an object has systematically deconstructed the homogenised nature of lesbians and focuses on multiple subjectivities like motherhood, familial relations, medical construction of homosexual identity, and sexual identity intersecting caste, class and regionality.
- In a similar way, sexuality as a concept has redefined the conceptualisation of gender as an inscribed identity.

**Standpoint Research:**

Standpoint research has emerged from a set of theoretical positions to shift attention of feminist research towards aspects of women’s marginality in the research content and in the domain of production of knowledge. It led to the construction of feminist epistemology that had emerged from women’s particular context or situated subjectivity. The situated subjectivity implies that knowledge is produced from a particular social location, therefore
social, political and economic hierarchies of every individual has equal claim in the production of knowledge. For instance, women’s position in different class, caste, region, and ethnic background holds equal importance in the knowledge production.

This epistemic position essentially

“dissolves the concept of essentialised, universalised woman, which was to be replaced by the idea of a situated woman with experiences and knowledge specific to her place in the material division of labour and the racial stratification of systems.” (Olesen, 2006, p. 243)

Here, the idea is not to privilege the voice of any specific group. It is to produce and interpret knowledge from multiple divergent social locations.

Before reading the next section, assess your learning by answering the following questions.

**Check Your Progress:**

i) What is feminist qualitative research?

ii) Name the four traditions of qualitative research.

iii) What are the new strands and approaches contributing to feminist qualitative research

Till now you have read, what does feminist research mean and how several strands and approaches have contributed to the understanding of feminist research. In the following section you will learn about how feminists interrogate the politics of the ‘other’.
2.4 FEMINIST METHODOLOGY AND THE POLITICS OF THE ‘OTHER’

Feminist research encounters certain methodological dilemma. For instance, feminist social research can’t have direct access to all the gendered realities in society and there is no existing developed norm to transform the unjust gender relations through research. Therefore, problems are likely to be experienced by the researcher when she/he employs qualitative feminist research practices. In practice, different feminist research tools like interview, focus group discussion, oral history, and ethnography represent different gendered realities and lives, and these practices possess the abilities to interpret the ‘other’ in social research. Further, feminist qualitative research is primarily about the ‘idea of difference’, to manifest the differences of political interests between women, men and other genders and also to explore the socio-economic and cultural divisions resulting in the dynamics of social forces like the caste difference, disablism, and heterosexism.

Feminist research encourages us to take up divergent methodological practices as the researchers often deal with personal, conflicting, sensitive and sometime painful gendered lives. In this context, feminist qualitative research practices will have a major role to play in the production of knowledge as the researcher will continuously position herself/himself in relation to the ‘differences’.

Box No. 2.4

Thus, documenting experiences, understanding the idea of politics, and to acquire emotional skills to hear different experiences, form the core of the feminists qualitative research methodology.

Feminists in the twentieth century argue that majority of women experiences subordination in relation with their male counter parts. Therefore, documenting and interpreting women’s subordinated experiences through feminist research will lead to the conceptualisation of new knowledge. For instance, women’s location in a particular caste group will become the source of generating concepts emanating from caste-based gender violence.

Feminist qualitative research is a critique of empiricist tradition of research which is firmly embedded in principles of centralisation, reductionism and objectivity. On the other hand, feminist qualitative research demands that science needs to have social interpretations and concepts and theories that can be drawn from individual case experiences. Therefore, feminists’ qualitative research draws data sources from a variety of methodologies such as, Ethnography, Focus Group Discussion, Action-research, oral histories, and narratives and so on.
Let us now have a quick look at ethical issues specifically in relation to qualitative research. You have earlier read about ethical issues in research in Block 1 Unit 4.

2.5 ETHICAL ISSUES IN QUALITATIVE RESEARCH

The difficulty of decision-making on the part of the researcher remains a concern within the qualitative research. Since, qualitative research is open-ended by its nature, you will find questions not to be specific and target oriented. Often the researcher faces the difficulty of drawing a line between ethical and unethical practices, permissible and non-permissible limits. Diener and Crandall broke down ethical principles in four areas which are given in the box below (cited in Bryman, 2008).

Box No. 2.5

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Four Areas of Ethics in Qualitative Research</th>
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<td>1) Whether there is a lack of informed consent;</td>
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<td>2) Whether there is an invasion of privacy;</td>
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<tr>
<td>3) Whether deception is involved; and</td>
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<td>4) Whether there is any harm to the participants.</td>
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It is important in qualitative research to inform the participants about the aims of research and without invading their privacy. With regard to feminist qualitative research, women investigators may use their identity as women to develop rapport and win the confidence of the female interviewee to inquire into their lives revealing their emic or inner experiences and feelings. According to Oakley (1981) and Finch (1984), researcher’s using his/her gender identity can be viewed as her/his commitment towards feminist research.

Now let us look at some of the sources of the data collection as an impetus to generating concepts and theories in the field of women’s and gender studies.

2.6 VARIOUS DATA SOURCES

This section discusses various data sources which are crucial to feminist qualitative research. The period from 2000-04 is referred here as ‘The Methodological Contested Present’ in which discussions were surrounded around the issues about how to conduct qualitative research and contestations on methodological differences (Bryman, 2008, p. 368).
Qualitative data is drawn from a wide range of methods which are mutually exclusive in nature and which can be used as primary data source.

Let us read about a few widely acknowledged feminist qualitative data sources.

**2.6.1 Ethnography**

Ethnography and participant observation has been interchangeably used as a source of qualitative data collection since 1970s onwards. Ethnography was primarily used in the areas of social anthropological research whereby the investigator (being a part of the community) gains access to foreign land, a community or an ethnic group and spend substantial amount of time with the group or community to explore its socio-cultural dynamics. Observation, everyday interaction, interpreting artefacts, taking field notes, and participating in group activities are different sources for primary data and become important ways of carrying out an ethnographic research.

According to Agar (1980), ethnography can be described both as a process and an outcome of research (cited in Creswell, 1998). As a process, ethnography involves continuous observation of the groups or communities through participant observation.

‘The researcher is immersed in the day-to-day lives of the people or through one-on-one interviews with members of the group’ (Creswell, 1998 p. 58).

To understand the social pattern and the way of life of a particular group, researchers engage in extensive fieldwork. The researcher studies the language, behavioural pattern, forms of social interaction, interpretation of culture and artefacts of communities.

Ethnography has its origin in cultural anthropological works of Boas, Malinowski, Radcliffe Brown and Mead, who have studied the culture of primitive communities. Of late, scientific approaches to ethnography have expanded its model to include different schools of thought and theoretical orientations such as structural-functionalism, symbolic interactionism, feminism, Marxism, critical theory, postmodernism, and so on.
fieldwork, gaining access to the community through the gatekeeper, identifying key informants, developing reciprocity between the investigator and the subject, reactivity and deception, are some of the existing patterns to carry out ethnographic research work.

Read below a case study to make it clear to you as to how ethnography becomes source of data in quantitative research.

**Box No.2.8**

**Case Study : Ethnography**

*The study was conducted in Odisha.*

To quote

‘at least 30 women from a women’s group had gathered to talk to me. However, answering their questions about why I wanted to write about them was not at all simple………………………………Some women sang a song about how women and men together looked after the forest and the welfare of the village. I was then told that it was my turn to sing. ......................I managed to croak out a song, after which they began to tell me about themselves’...

In the context of ethnography, gaining access to the community is extremely important because the investigator’s continuous struggle is to uncover the inner understanding of the community about their culture, social order and interpretation of both the material and non-material things.

‘I got to hear about their group - about all the work they did in the village, their negotiations with violent husbands and nasty mother-in-law, struggles with rich landowners and their work for everyday village life’.

Gaining access and building rapport gives the researcher much needed advantage of documenting or eliciting information about the group from an insider perspective.

Arora-Jonsson (2013) in her study on *Gender, Development, and Environmental Governance*, employed ethnographic method to theorise the decision-making process which takes place in the sphere of environmental governance and which excludes women’s participation.

To initiate a scientific ethnographic enquiry, the researcher used the participatory and feminist approaches in which the data will remain close to reality and will be able to connect the research with the theory. Use of feminist approach to ethnography will enable the researcher to maintain a natural distance from the subject and yet can produce knowledge from the field out there.
Qualitative Research

Feminist approach to ethnography aims at producing scientific knowledge through collaborative - participatory approach. It reflects an alternative way of interpreting scientific knowledge, i.e., science cannot be viewed independent of society. In this study, the researcher took women’s groups as the vantage point to discuss about environmental governance which embodies gender inequalities in subtle forms.

Source: Arora-Jonsson (2013): Gender, Development, and Environmental Governance

2.6.2 Biography

Study of biographical works is another variety of qualitative research enquiry. It is the study of an individual which is narrated before the researcher or documented in archival materials. Biography in the form of a document, serves the purpose of qualitative data source. According to Denzin (1989b, cited in Creswell, 1998), biographical method is the study of collection of documents which describes the departure points in an individual’s life. Thus, that qualifies biography method as a source of data. Biography refers to individual biography, autobiography, life history and oral history.

Box No. 2.9

Biographical writings and methods have its root in disciplines of literature, history, anthropology, psychology and sociology. In the recent past, the use of biography is growing in interdisciplinary fields like gender studies and cultural studies.

Denzin (1989b) has identified different types of biographical study that may be rooted in various disciplines. These forms are as follows:

**Biographical study:** Writing and interpreting the life story of an individual by the researcher with the help of archival documents and existing records.

**Autobiography:** The life story is written by the subject herself/himself and can be interpreted as both primary and secondary sources of qualitative data.

**Life History:** A researcher’s reports or write ups about any individual’s history that reflects the cultural character and social history of a society. The life history captures the life story of an individual’s life in his/her words. The researcher collects these stories or life events through interviews or conversational method.

**Oral History:** This is an approach in which the researcher gathers personal events, its causes and its effects from individual’s or a group of individuals through discussions, informal conversations etc.
In addition to these forms, broadly two more variants are followed while writing biography. These are classical biography and interpretative biography (cited in Creswell, 1998 p. 50).

In classical biography, interlinking the biographical writings with the theory, formation of hypothesis, interpreting or criticising the documents or any other materials are based completely on the researchers’ perspective.

In interpretative biography, the separating line between the facts and fiction gets blurred and the author becomes the subject in the text.

To make interpretative biography free from biographer’s biases and subjectivity, Denzin (2005) advanced five stages to go about interpretative biography.

1) The investigator begins with a set of experiences that had happened in the subject’s life (it can be written in accordance with the life stage of the subject).

2) Researcher collects the contextual experiences of the subject in the form of stories or narratives with the help of the interview.

3) These stories can be organised around individual’s life that is indicative of a turning point for the subject.

4) The researcher construct meaning behind these stories that may be supported by the subject’s understanding and clarification.

5) The researcher situates/locates these stories in the large social process to create multiple meanings.

Biography is fundamentally democratic and egalitarian in nature, therefore biography is a strong source of data in feminist qualitative research. Both classical and interpretative biography can unfold critical movements or life events in women’s life that can interpret women’s struggle for justice and equality in the society. Biographical work has been seen as a rich qualitative data source in areas of dalit feminism, gender and science, women in conflict-ridden zone and in tribal literature.

*Lilavati’s Daughter: The Women Scientists of India* is a classic example of biography as a source of data reflecting upon the lives of 100 women scientists who have worked or presently working in pursuit of science.
**Rosalind Franklin: The Woman Scientist: An Example of a Biographical Work**

Rosaline Franklin died of cancer at the young age of 37 in 1958 of cancer. She was never awarded Nobel Prize as it is not given posthumously. But it was Franklin's unpublished measurements of the crucial distances in the DNA molecules, shared by her colleague Wilkins, without her knowledge to Watson and Crick. That enabled them to build a model of DNA. ......................... In their Nobel Prize Lecture neither Watson nor Crick thanked Franklin for making their discovery possible.............

At the age of 21, Rosalind started her research on crystalline materials in support of an important wartime project. Franklin investigated why some kinds of coal are more impervious than other kinds to gas and water......................... Under great stress of hostility, she discovered the B form of DNA........ She wanted to delay her final decision about the structure until she and Gosling were completely convinced by the data........................

Her first biography was written by her personal friend Anne Sayre in 1975 and the recent book *Rosalind Franklin: The Dark lady of DNA*, written by a brilliant biographer Brenda Maddox who was never known to Franklin. .........................

(Source: Uberoi, C, www.ias.ac.in/womeninscience/Biograph.htm)

Last accessed on 21st Feb. 2014

Here, it is suggested that you take up the following activity to enhance your understanding of how biographical works are rich sources of data.

**Activity:**

Read Lilavati’s Daughter: The Women Scientists of India.

Write, what challenges are faced by women scientists in India.
In the preceeding segment of this unit you have read about how biography is an important source of data. The activity based on the biographical works must have made you realise how this rich source help in capturing the marginalized voices. Next, you will read about new sources of data that are gaining credence in feminist qualitative research.

2.7 EMERGING NEW SOURCES OF DATA

In the following section, you will read about another four important methods which substantially contribute towards qualitative data enquiry across the disciplines.

Grounded Theory:
Grounded theory created by Barney G. Glaser and Anselm L. Strauss offers the possibilities of advancing qualitative research in areas of social justice and management. The concept of grounded theory refers to both method and the product of social enquiry.

According to Charmaz (2005), grounded theory encourages the researchers to remain close to the subject that offers them the possibility of generating theoretical concepts. It provides the scope of synthesising theory with interpretation of the social reality.

It proposes analytical tools of data collection to understand the social processes in a systematic way. Grounded theory focuses on the interplay between interpretation of data and theorisation simultaneously. In this framework, certain individuals (subjects) have the chance to be re-interviewed in the course of the field work.

Participatory-Action Research:
In the recent years, participatory-action research has been in use for the spectrum of social-science qualitative research. Participatory-Action Research (you have read about this in Unit 5 of Block I of this course) has its roots in participatory research, classroom action research, action learning, action science, soft system approaches, and industrial action research. The first generation of action research began with the work of Kurt Lewin in 1940s.

The second generation of action research was developed by the researchers at Tavistock Institute with an emphasis on critical and emancipatory action-research. In the late 1990s, action research re-emerged as an influential methodology in disciplines of sociology and development studies. The surfacing of new social system and the post-capitalist state became the impetus for participatory action research.
Participatory-action research can be described as a chain of interlinking processes. Kemmis and McTaggart (2005, p.563) referred to this as a spiral of self-reflective cycle and outlined the key features of Participatory-Action research as follows:

- Planning a change
- Acting and observing the process and consequences
- Reflecting on these processes and consequences
- Re-planning
- Acting and observing again
- Reflecting again

Participatory-action research can be described as a chain of interlinking processes.

Visual Sociology:

Interpretation of visual culture is emerging as a qualitative research practice within the disciplines of sociology and feminists studies. Visuals are like words that communicate the social issues in its real forms. In her work, Visual Methodologies, Rose (2012) explains the importance of visual culture in the following ways:

- Visual imagery is a powerful method of investigation
- Visual image is both descriptive and constructive of social reality
- Visual images offer a particular way of interpreting the social issues
- The visuals are rooted in culture
- Different people understand visuals differently

For instance, take a picture of a female model on the cover page of a fashion magazine. This picture can be interpreted differently by different people. The cover page can only reflect the attraction of the female model that can be captured by the men who lust at her and other women who would be imagining themselves like her (Marvasti, 2004, p. 64). Marvasti explains that categories of visual data can be still photos, videos and cinematic productions. The use of visual data varies in qualitative research that include:

- Research-generated visual material as primary data source
- Visuals can complement the written texts
- Photographs as a way to carry out further interviews
- Found photographic and film materials can be used as secondary data sources
**Photographs:**

Use of photograph in social research is also a recent trend. Photographs can be used in content analysis, or can complement the data source along with structured interview and experiments.

Photographs can be of two types such as:

- extant photographs (which have not been produced for any particular research)
- research-generated photographs (which are generated in the course of any research).

Both these types are valid source of qualitative data as they perform three types of roles in the social research. These are as follows:

- Illustrative: Photographs have prominent position in any ethno-graphic research and feminist research.
- Data: Research-generated photographs are sources of data and become a part of the field diary.
- Prompts: Photographs are used as prompts to understand people’s perception about the representations in the photographs.

**2.8 LET US SUM UP**

This unit discusses various forms of qualitative data sources. The unit begins with an introduction to the feminist qualitative research and certain ethical questions while engaging with gender issues. Briefly, the unit introduces learners to different theoretical discourses that had influenced the process of qualitative research. It ends with the description about different qualitative data sources which are largely used in feminist research studies followed by new sources of data that have been found very useful in qualitative research. However, we encourage our learners to read this unit in connection with the unit on ‘tools of data collection’ to establish the inter-linkage between the tools and the sources of data.

**2.9 UNIT END QUESTIONS**

1) What is understood by qualitative research? Discuss the emergence of feminist qualitative research.

2) Discuss different source of qualitative data with examples that you come across in your everyday situation.

3) Take one research question related to your subject and find out what would be the data sources to answer the question logically.
2.10 REFERENCES


### 2.11 SUGGESTED READINGS
