UNIT 4 APPROACHES TO EDUCATIONAL RESEARCH: ASSUMPTIONS, SCOPE AND LIMITATIONS

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4.1 INTRODUCTION

Men and women have long been concerned with coming to grips with their environment and to understand the nature of the phenomena it presents to their senses. The approaches by which they set out to achieve these ends may be classified into two broad categories: Quantitative and Qualitative. Far from being independent and mutually exclusive, these categories must in fact be seen as complementary and overlapping whenever solutions to complex modern problems are sought.

There was a time when most researchers believed that the only phenomena that counted in social sciences were those that could be measured. To make that perfectly clear, they called any phenomenon they intended to study a 'variable', indicating that the phenomenon could vary in size, length, amount, or any other quantity. Unfortunately, not many phenomena in the human world come naturally in quantities. How many people tune in to a certain television show, how long they watch it, and what their average is, for instance, are variables of interest to a person curious about human affairs, but such observable behaviours and statistics merely scratch the surface.

Why did people choose this show? What do they get out of it? What does it make them feel like? Why do people watch television in the first place? To understand more about human phenomena of this kind, first, we have to create concepts or psychological constructs and second, invent a way of measuring them. Developing measuring instruments and comparing groups of people on how they scored on these instruments, consumed a major portion of the social scientist's time. Even things as tenuous as opinions and attitudes were converted into numbers, which in turn were plugged in to statistical formulae that yielded other numbers. Of course, even hard headed quantitative researchers concede that a person scoring 3 probably does not like the matter in question.
precisely three times as a person scoring 1. Nor would any one claim that a confidence level of .05 is definitely more acceptable than one of .06 when considering whether the size of differences between score results obtained from comparable groups could have occurred by chance or not. Yet at least the procedure is objective and, besides, it is the only accepted method for testing hypotheses about the way the social world functions.

Then again, Sigmund Freud discovered plenty about the way human beings function, and so did Jean Piaget. Neither of them tested hypotheses, or used large and representative enough samples of people to satisfy the rules of statistics. Yet they both made important assertions about human beings and created many psychological constructs for use in the description of their theories. Both Freud and Piaget were master observers. They tried to make sense of what they saw, or, as you could also say, they tried to find out what it means (Wertz, 1987).

Which of these two ways of doing research is the best, measuring and testing, or observing/listening and interpreting/constructing? That depends on what you believe. Moreover, the process of research is a process of persuasion. You must believe what you find most convincing.

In this unit, you will get to know the nature of phenomena, how a single phenomenon can be viewed and interpreted from two major approaches—quantitative and qualitative. In this context, both objective and subjective conceptions of reality will also be discussed.

### 4.2 OBJECTIVES

After having studied this unit, you will be able to:

- differentiate between Quantitative and Qualitative research.
- discuss the nature of education as a broad canvas to accommodate both these approaches,
- explain the multidimensional aspect of reality,
- enumerate the assumptions underlying the different approaches,
- discuss the limitations of the approaches, and
- examine the required/desired methodology for a particular piece of research.

### 4.3 NATURE OF EDUCATIONAL PHENOMENA

Education is a process, a design for causing anticipated learning in individuals. This learning represents changes in individuals, which are basically intrinsic but get manifested into action forms in different situations in an individual’s life. There would also be a qualitative improvement in the life of collectivities. Schools and colleges have become the widely recognized educational institutions ensuring that individuals ‘experience’ education: and schooling is a term connoting institutionalized learning. In other words, education directly focus the quality of life of individuals in society under given conditions. Educational practice pertains to deriving substance from the overall body of disciplinary knowledge, formulating them into transactable curricular forms, making choices of curricular components and also deciding the modes of transacting them. Such actions for selectivity make education an action-oriented, practice based programme or activity. In such an endeavour, while articulating on education, the researcher adopts several concepts borrowing from cognate disciplines. This is not to say that concepts in the discipline of education are not there. In fact, if one looks for concepts in education, one does find them in plenty, such as, curriculum, syllabus, work experience, drop-out, instruction, etc. However there are many other concepts...
Perspective of Knowledge

which are used in education such as learning, motivation, habits, intelligence, instructional system, cultural heritage, national integration, social justice, etc. It is often said that these are concepts from other disciplines, ‘borrowed’ into education (Yadav and Laxmi, 1995). Thus, the broad canvas of education encompasses a multitude of concepts from different disciplines. Since each concept emerges from a particular disciplinarian perspective, their connotation changes when used in other disciplines. For example, ‘effectiveness’ is a concept used in natural science but used differently in education and psychology. Therefore, while trying to understand education, one has to have an interdisciplinary attitude. It is only then possible for us to have a holistic perspective about any educational phenomenon.

The idea about the nature of education, presented thus far, clearly indicates the scope for viewing educational phenomena differently from different perspectives. Let us now discuss these perspectives.

Check Your Progress
Notes: a) Space is given below for writing your answer.
   b) Compare your answer with that given at the end of the unit.

1. Why is it necessary to have interdisciplinary attitude in order to understand education properly?

4.4 CONCEPTIONS OF VIEWING REALITY

A characteristic feature of education in India and elsewhere has been its uneven progress. Perhaps a major reason for the slow and unsure progress in education has been the inefficient methods used by educators in acquiring knowledge and solving their problems (Borg, 1963). This rather gloomy but none-the-less accurate assessment of the position maintained generally for many years and which still characterizes some areas of education has now, fortunately, been tempered by the knowledge that in the past few years modest advances have been made as a result of the application of the methods of social science to the study of education and its problems. Interestingly, this development has itself resulted in a controversy and debate for, in adopting a social scientific orientation, educational research has at the same time absorbed two competing views of social sciences—the established, traditional view and a more recently emerging radical view. The former holds that the social sciences are essentially the same as the natural sciences and are therefore concerned with discovering natural and universal laws regulating and determining individual and social behaviour; the latter view, however, while sharing the rigour of the natural sciences and the same concern of traditional social science to describe and explain human behaviour, emphasizes how people differ from inanimate natural phenomena and, indeed, from each other (Cohen and Manion, 1994). These contending views—and also their corresponding reflections in educational research—stem in the first instance from different conceptions of social reality and of individual and social behaviour. Let us examine these in a little more detail.

The two views of social science mentioned above represent strikingly different ways of looking at social reality and are constructed on correspondingly different ways of interpreting it. Burrell and Morgan (1979) have developed a typology of paradigms in sociology that has proven useful in provoking thought and reflection about some deep
assumptions that undergird approaches to research. Their work is presented in the next section as a guide to help you think about where you stand on some basic questions and to begin to situate yourself along two continua of assumptions; one about research and the other about the social world.

**Check Your Progress**

**Notes:**

a) Space is given below for writing your answers.

b) Compare your answers with those given at the end of the unit.

2. State the traditional view of social science held by educational researchers.

3. State the radical view of social science held by educational researchers.

4.4.1 The Objective and Subjective Views of Reality

Let us suppose that as an organizer of a training programme you are seeking some information from your participants. While the participants are responding, you ask a rhetorical question to know if the participants are telling the truth. Although you may not fully realize it, you are asking a fundamental question about assumptions you are making, about the construction of knowledge, and about what that knowledge is – what is “the truth” and how do we know it? Assumptions that relate to these questions are captured by the subjectivity and objectivity continuum. Think about what you believe is “truth”. How do you know something is true? How do you trust what someone says to you? When you ask a friend or colleague, “how do you know that?”, what do you take as evidence that convinces you? What is the relationship between the knower and the known, or the learner and what he or she learns? What do you believe about the nature of reality? How do people act in that reality? What do these beliefs imply for doing research – your methodology? The continuum appears as follows:

Subjectivity \[\leftrightarrow\] Objectivity

Where our researchers position themselves depends on answers to important sets of questions. Table 4.1 presents the polar extremes of the continuum.

**Table 4.1: A scheme for analyzing assumptions about the nature of social science.**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Subjectivist Assumptions</th>
<th>Bases</th>
<th>Objectivist Assumptions</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Nominalism</td>
<td>(\rightarrow) ONTOLOGY</td>
<td>Realism</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Anti-Positivism</td>
<td>(\rightarrow) EPISTEMOLOGY</td>
<td>Positivism</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Voluntarism</td>
<td>(\rightarrow) HUMAN NATURE</td>
<td>Determinism</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ideographic</td>
<td>(\rightarrow) METHODOLOGY</td>
<td>Nomothetic</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Source:** Burrell and Morgan, 1979.
4.4.2 The Nature of Reality

As mentioned earlier, Burrell and Morgan (1979) have identified four sets of assumptions, and the same have been presented in Table 4.1. The first set of assumptions are of an ontological kind - assumptions, which concern the very nature or essence of the social phenomena being investigated. This facet of the subjective-objective dimension explores beliefs about reality - which is no small task. This question is important because social science, whatever its methodologic guise, seeks to learn about social phenomena - reality, as people understand it. To locate on this continuum, ask the following questions: Do I believe that reality is of an objective nature? Is it “out there”, independent of human perception, and therefore something that I can learn about without direct experience? Does it exist independently of my perception? In contrast, do I believe that reality is the product of my individual experience and understanding? Is reality constructed through my subjective experience and intersubjective understanding?

Objectivist assumptions hold that reality exists independent of human cognition and that the work of social science is to discover important facts and processes that constitute the reality. The processes are out there, waiting to be uncovered. Subjectivist assumptions, however, argue that humans construct understanding of reality through their perceptual and interpretive faculties. Social processes are created by human interpretation; they do not constitute reality per se but are concepts that describe it.

The questions presented above on the continuum of subjective and objective dimensions spring directly from what is known in philosophy as the nominalist-realist debate. The former view holds that objects of thought are merely words and that there is no independently accessible thing constituting the meaning of a word. The realist position, however, contends that objects have an independent existence and are not dependent for it on the knower.

Check Your Progress

Notes: a) Space is given below for writing your answer. 
   b) Compare your answer with that given at the end of the unit.

4. In one of the classes on research methodology, students were discussing where the ‘conflict theory’ would fit along the subjective and objective continuum. One group of students asserted that conflict as a principle of social organisation, exists. Almost in one voice, the other (second) group of students dissented, countering that conflict theory is a social construct that helps us better in understanding reality. They argued that conflict did not exist “out there”, waiting for others to discover it.

On the basis of the above situation answer the following questions.

a) Which group of students hold objective assumptions about reality?

b) Which group of students hold subjective assumptions about reality?

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4.4.3 The Nature of Knowledge and Knowing

The second set of assumptions are of an epistemological kind. These concern the very bases of knowledge - its nature and forms, how it can be acquired, and communicated to other human beings. Subjectivists hold that the very notion of “truth”
is problematic. They argue that, except for certain principles about the physical world, there are few truths that constitute universal knowledge; rather, there are multiple perspectives about the world. An objectivist, by contrast, asserts that there is truth about a particular circumstance that can be determined. Your question, then follows: In doing research, will you search for Truth — with a capital T — or Truths — multiple perspectives?

Questions you can ask yourself include the following: How do I learn about something? What do I take as evidence to support a point? Do I accept what I read and hear, or do I examine it critically, based on my own experience? From an objectivist position, one may argue that knowledge is tangible and "hard". With more subjectivist belief, another person may argue that knowledge comes in multiple forms, many quite personal, including dreams, and spiritual and transcendental. Another question invites you to think about where you believe knowledge can appropriately be produced and who can legitimately engage in that creation. Subjectivist views hold that knowledge about the social world arises from many quarters; important understandings are evident in novels, the arts, the media and in formal social science reports and articles. A poem or drawing is as legitimate a portrait of life experience as a research report. An objectivist would see such knowledge as soft, unscientific, and idiosyncratic: How one aligns oneself in this particular debate profoundly affects how one will go about uncovering knowledge of social behaviour. The view that knowledge is hard, objective and tangible will demand of researchers an observer’s role, together with an allegiance to the methods of natural science to see knowledge as personal, subjective and unique, however, imposes on researchers an involvement with their subjects and rejection of the ways of the natural scientist. To subscribe to the former is to be positivist; to the latter anti-positivist.

Check Your Progress

Notes: a) Space is given below for writing your answer.
   b) Compare your answer with that given at the end of the unit.

5. Professor ‘X’ has just finished his class on qualitative research. Students have left the class without adequate understanding of the principles and steps of doing qualitative research. Since it is compulsory for them to conduct research work following qualitative methodology, they are engaged in discussing the subject. Their discussion is centered on the class experience and what professor ‘X’ did or did not say and mean or did not mean. On the basis of the following, answer the following questions.
   a) From an objectivist point of view, what would be your stance?
   b) From subjectivist point of view, what would be your stance?

4.4.4 The Nature of Human Agency

This facet of the subjective—objective dimension focuses on assumptions about our relationship to the world we live in. You might ask yourself the following: Do I assume that people respond mechanically, in an independent manner? Are we conditioned by external circumstances such as social forces? Are we more creative, exercising free will in shaping our environment and everyday lives? Objectivists assume that human actions are predictable and, hence, controllable; subjectivists, however, hold that human
agency is crucial for shaping everyday lives. They maintain that unpredictability is the hallmark of human action; the goal is to describe and interpret how people make sense of and act in their worlds. In these two extreme views of the relationship between human beings and their environment, we are identifying a great philosophical debate between the advocates of ‘determinism’ on the one hand and ‘voluntarism’ on the other.

Check Your Progress

Notes: a) Space is given below for writing your answer.
   b) Compare your answer with that given at the end of the unit.

6. Jean (12 yrs) & Jim (30 yrs) are on an expedition in the dense jungles of Africa. Both of them hope to shoot exclusive wildlife photographs. Suddenly, Jim slips and falls into a marsh and is attacked by a ferocious alligator.

Now consider Jean’s possible response

a) Conditioned by fear and knowing that the alligator possesses exceptional ferocity and strength, Jean should refrain from helping Jim.

b) Despite knowing this, Jean should jump in and try to match her cunningness with the crocodile’s physical strength.

c) Knowing that she cannot do much, she must run to their vehicle and contact someone for help.

Which of these is the most objective approach?


4.4.5 Methodology

The assumptions made in the previous three categories have implications for the methods you choose to conduct your work of inquiry. Different assumptions incline you toward different methods. Investigators adopting an objectivist (or positivist) approach to the social world and who treat it like the world of natural phenomena as being hard, real and external to the individual, will choose from a range of traditional options – surveys, experiments, and the like. Others favouring the more subjectivist (or anti-positivist) approach and who view the social world as being of a much softer, personal and humanly created kind, will select from a comparable range of recent and emerging techniques – accounts, participant observation and personal constructs, for example.

When one subscribes to the view which treats the social world like the natural world – as if it were a hard, external and objective reality – then, scientific investigation will be directed at analyzing the relationships and regularities between selected factors in that world. It will be predominantly quantitative. This perspective expresses itself more forcefully in search of universal laws which explain and govern the reality which is being observed. An approach characterized by procedures and methods designed to discover general laws may be referred to as ‘nomothetic’. However, if one favours the alternative view of social reality which stresses the importance of the subjective experience of individuals in the creation of the social world, then the search for understanding focuses upon different issues and approaches them in different ways. The principal concern is with an understanding of the way in which the individual creates, modifies and interprets the world in which he or she finds himself or herself. The approach now takes on a qualitative as well as quantitative aspect. As Burrell
and Morgan observe, the emphasis in extreme cases tends to be placed upon the
explanation and understanding of what is unique and particular to the 'individual rather
than of what is general and universal. This approach questions whether there exists
an external reality worthy of study. In methodological terms it is an approach which
emphasizes the relativistic nature of the social world (Burrell and Morgan, 1979). In
its emphasis on the particular individual this approach to understanding individual
behaviour may be termed as 'idiographic'.

In this review of Burrell and Morgan's analysis of the ontological, epistemological,
human and methodological assumptions underlying two ways of conceiving social
reality, the foundations have been laid down for a more extended study of the two
contrasting perspectives evident in the practices of researchers investigating human
behaviour and by adoption, educational problems.

Each of the two perspectives on the study of human behaviour outlined above has
profound implications for research in classrooms and schools. The choice of problem,
the formulation of questions to be answered, the characterization of pupils and teachers,
methodological concerns, the kinds of data sought and their mode of treatment — all
will be influenced or determined by the viewpoint held.

Check Your Progress

Notes:  
a) Space is given below for writing your answer.
b) Compare your answer with that given at the end of the unit.

7. The national predicament of universalisation of elementary education could
not be realised in India because.

a) We focussed more on quantitative research wherein the generalisations
cut across the commonalities.
b) There was lack of micro planning and research at grass root level.

Which one of the above adopts the idiographic approach?

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4.5 LIMITATIONS OF THE APPROACHES

The elaborate discussion of the assumptions of subjective and objective views of
reality has set the stage for a reader / researcher to follow either qualitative or / and
quantitative approach based on his belief system. However, before embarking on any
study one should know the limitations of these approaches so that meaningful
understanding of the researched phenomena can be arrived at. Furthermore, the
limitations should be read vis-à-vis the approaches.

One of the major limitations of objectivist (Quantitative) approach is its mechanistic
and reductionist view of nature which, by definition, excludes notions of choice, freedom,
individuality, and moral responsibility. Every individual holds a meaning of his existence
which he views as 'concrete' and so his behaviour is unique and irreducible, not amenable
to quantitative conceptualization. Another limitation is the quantification of human
behaviour and experience which results in the depersonalization of self. The limitation
is not directed at quantification per se, but at quantification when it becomes an end in
itself. No matter how exact measurement may be, it can never give us an experience of
life, for life cannot be weighed and measured on a physical scale.
In line with quantitative approach, the subjectivist (quantitative) approach also suffers from some limitation. First, the researcher’s complete reliance on the actors’ definitions of the situations. It is quite probable that some of the actors might be falsely conscious of the societal situations. Second, the unscientific means adopted to construct/gain knowledge. Knowledge gained through human agency is always partial. Third, this approach does not allow any scope for verification of result. Fourth, there is an overriding concern for meaning construction which presupposes a structure of meanings and relationships between situations. Fifth, this process whereby one interprets and defines a situation is itself a product of the circumstances in which one is placed. Consequently, values and ideas of the researcher penetrate into the research process.

Limitations of approaches place some boundaries around and set some conditions. These are the reservation and qualifications inherent in any research. Limitations are derived from the design and methods used in any approach and help to contextualize the study. They stipulate the weaknesses of approaches; thereby encouraging the reader to judge it with these limitations in mind. Nevertheless, while going through the limitations, the reader should remember that no study following any approach(es) is/are perfect; that findings are tentative and conditional, that knowledge is elusive and approximate, and our claims should be humble, given the extraordinary complexity of the social world we want to learn more about.

Check Your Progress

Notes: a) Space is given below for writing your answer.
       b) Compare your answer with that given at the end of the unit.

8. Given below are a few statements. Read them carefully and state whether they are true or false. If false, write the correct statement.
   a) Quantitative and qualitative approaches to educational research can be seen as complementary and overlapping to each other.
   b) The nature of a problem and the belief held by an individual, together decide the best way of doing research.
   c) Understanding educational phenomena requires a disciplinarian attitude on the part of the researcher.
   d) The ontological assumptions of social reality are concerned with the very nature or essence of the social phenomena being investigated.
   e) The subjectivist approach to social science describes human nature as deterministic.
   f) An approach characterized by procedures and methods to discover general laws may be referred to as Idiographic.
   g) Limitations of approaches are the reservations and qualifications inherent in any research.

4.6 LET US SUM UP

In the beginning of the unit, we held the view that doing research, quantitative or qualitative, depends upon the belief we hold. Accordingly, the research process is directed at the realization of those beliefs. The belief system held by a person stems,
by and large, from the disciplinarian orientation. Education is such a discipline (in the social science field), the nature of which provides an arena for a wide variety of belief systems to be held by different individuals. This provides a scope for viewing reality differently, which can be broadly classified under subjective and objective dimensions. Each of these dimensions has certain underlying assumptions, which guide the research process. The choice of a research problem, the formulation of questions to be answered, the characterization of pupils and teachers, methodological concerns, the kinds of data sought and their mode of treatment, all will be influenced or determined by the viewpoint held. Furthermore, the discussion on the limitations of these approaches will remind the reader that no studies following any one approach is perfect, that findings are tentative and conditional, that knowledge is elusive and approximate, and that our claims should be humble, given the extraordinary complexity of the social world we want to learn more about.

4.7 UNIT-END ACTIVITIES

- Given below are a few situations. Read them carefully and respond to the questions presented below.

Situation – I

A man was driving in a remote area and saw a sizable herd of sheep being driven along the road by a shepherd. Seeing that he would be delayed until the sheep would be turned off the road, he got out of the car and struck up a conversation with the shepherd.

“How many sheep do you have?” he asked.

“I don’t know,” responded the shepherd. Surprised at this answer, the traveller asked: “How do you keep track of the flock if you do not know how many sheep there are? How would you know if one was missing?”

The shepherd seemed puzzled by the question. Then he explained, “I do not need to count them. I know each one. I know the whole flock and I would know if the flock was not whole.”

Question :

With regard to the nature of knowledge and knowing, who holds the subjectivist view and who holds the objectivist view?

Situation – II

In a school, a teacher was explaining the many differing perspectives one could use in looking at the environment. While he answered questions and continued the discussion, he sent a student to inquire if the midday meal was ready.

The student did not return, so the teacher sent a second student. The second student did not return. So he went himself. He found the two students, the cook, and three researchers engaged in a heated debate. Ignoring the debate, the teacher asked “Is the midday meal ready?” The first scholar responded, “I have been explaining to these people that the state of food is not the only issue in determining readiness. A meal is not just food. The meal must include those who would partake food, so the meal is not ready until everything is in order and those who would eat are assembled”.

The second scholar said, “I dare to taste the meal. From the perspective of an experienced chef, this meal will never be ready. It is hopeless, let us return to the village.”
The third scholar said, “Readiness is a state of mind, not a physical state. Since the food has no mind, the food cannot be ready. Only people can be ready”.

The chef added, “The midday meal is at midday everyday. At midday, the meal is ready. Why ask if the meal is ready? It is midday. This is the meal. Therefore the midday meal is ready.”

**Question**:

a) Identify the base or level of discussion.

b) Which of the two things are they discussing?
   i) The Nature of knowledge and knowing
   ii) The nature of reality.

c) Identify the assumptions held by the three scholars and the chef.

**Situation – III**

It is 10.00 a.m, you are on your way to the department. While going, you suddenly come across an accident wherein a person is severely injured. What will you do?

**Alternatives**

1. You will be indifferent
2. You will intimate the police
3. You will intimate the family members of the injured person.
4. You will immediately take the person to the hospital.

Which one of the alternatives is the most voluntary humanistic response?
Which one of the alternatives is the most mechanistic response?

**Situation – IV**

Given below are two research problems.

2. A study of the Correlates of Academic Achievement of Students of Std. VIII in Science.

Categorize the above two studies as ideographic or nomothetic.

**4.8 POINTS FOR DISCUSSION**

1. Discuss in detail how the nature of education provides scope for viewing social reality differently.
2. The understanding of educational research would be incomplete without knowing the underlying assumptions of quantitative and qualitative approach.

**4.9 SUGGESTED READINGS**

4.10 ANSWERS TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

1. Academic pursuits in the field of social science are often described as interdisciplinary in nature. Moreover, the field of education draws concepts and substance heavily from the cognate disciplines. Therefore, it is necessary to have an interdisciplinary attitude to understand the field of education properly.

2. Social sciences are essentially the same as the natural sciences and are therefore concerned with discovering natural and universal laws regulating and determining individual and social behaviour.

Sharing the rigour of the natural sciences and the same concern of traditional social sciences to describe and explain human behaviour, the above emphasizes how people differ from inanimate natural phenomena and, indeed from each other.

3. a) The first group
   b) The second group

4. a) To analyse the actual words spoken by Professor ‘X’ and what went on in the classroom - fact based.
   b) To arrive at an understanding about the situation formed through personal experience, interaction & discussion.

5. a) The second response is the most objective one.

6. a) Answer B adopts the idiographic approach.

7. a) True
    b) True
    c) False – Understanding educational phenomena requires an interdisciplinary attitude on the part of the researcher.
    d) True
    e) False – The subjectivist approach to social science describes human nature as voluntary.
    f) False – An approach characterized by procedures and methods to discover general laws may be referred to as nomothetic.
    g) True