
UNIT 14 METHODS AND TECHNIQUES

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Learning Objectives

This unit would help the learner to explain the:

- methods used by social and cultural anthropologists to collect data;
- tools and techniques used; and
- differences between interview schedule, interview guide and questionnaire.

14.0 INTRODUCTION

In the earlier unit, we have discussed the steps like formulating a research design, selecting a research topic and going for fieldwork and how after fieldwork data are compiled, analysed and a report is written, in short how to conduct fieldwork. In Anthropology, one needs to understand that fieldwork is not the only method. There are other methods also that a researcher can use. In this unit, we will discuss the methods used in social and cultural anthropology along with the tools and techniques that a researcher uses for data collection.

14.1 METHODS OF DATA COLLECTION

There are four methods of data collection. Each one of them comprises a set of techniques. Further, each of these methods is followed by one or the other discipline. For example, historians work in archives, museums and libraries and it is from there that they retrieve their data. Economists derive their information from census and

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sample surveys; among the popular ones are National Sample Surveys, Survey of Industries, etc. Each of these methods has its own conception of reality and the relationship that exists between the observer and the reality that is observed. Although these methods have been developed by different disciplines, they can always be combined, in the sense that the demerits of one can be overcome with the merits of the others. The technical term used for combining different methods of data collection is called 'triangulation', a term having its origin in the science of geometry. Triangulation is not only of methods and techniques; it can also be of theoretical perspectives, and also of different investigators. Although the aim of the researcher is to gather adequate and representative data in the shortest spell of time, each method has its own rules regarding the amount of time it would require for proper data collection and the researcher has to subscribe to this.

Thus, a researcher should have an understanding of various methods that are available in social sciences and how these could profitably be combined. It is important to mention here that today the researchers are expected to write up an account of the procedures of data collection and analysis they employed; and how they combined different methods, and at which point of time in their research they moved from one method to the other.

Let us discuss the four methods.

14.1.1 Fieldwork

The first one is called fieldwork. Fieldwork is a firsthand study of a situation in its natural habitat. One of the succinct definitions of fieldwork is that it is an *in situ* study, meaning the study of the phenomenon where it is naturally located. For example, one of the longest field studies that is still going on is the study of troops of chimpanzees in Gombe Stream National Park in Tanzania, which was started by Jean Goodall in 1968. It is the study of chimpanzees in their natural habitat rather than in a situation of their captivity, as it would have been had the study been carried out in a zoological garden or a laboratory.

Fieldwork is usually intensive in nature, in the sense that the fieldworker lives with the community (or the people under study) for a long period of time, generally not less than one year. During the course of the annual cycle, the field worker is able to observe the social life as it is led for the entire year, with the assumption that what happens in one year is likely to be repeated the following year, although it is possible that what might not have happened in one year happens the following year, for instance, death, a natural calamity, man-made disaster, etc.

Some fieldworkers (particularly Edward Evans-Pritchard) advise that the first fieldwork in a community should be for two years, with a gap of few months after the first year's fieldwork. This period of staying away from the field for a few months provides the fieldworker an opportunity to reflect upon his work, and also to discuss with fellow colleagues what one has learned in the field. With renewed understanding one goes back to one's field site. In the second year, one will be able to verify the information that was collected in the first year of fieldwork, and also look for answers to the new questions that have surfaced primarily because of reflecting upon the data and also with discussions with the others. Repeating one year's fieldwork will not only weed out an erroneous understanding but also deepen the perception. The second year's fieldwork will be the one carried out by an 'experienced investigator'.

However, later field studies in other situations may be of shorter duration, as one has

learned the art of fieldwork and would not commit the mistakes one committed on an earlier occasion. Another piece of advice here is that one should try to write the first draft of one's work in the field, for if there is any wrong understanding on the part of the fieldworker of a practice or custom, it could easily be rectified.

A year's (or a couple of years') fieldwork generates a lot of data from which a large number of publications can be attempted on different aspects of the society under study. One may remember here the writings of Malinowski on the Trobriand Islanders or of Evans-Pritchard on the Nuer. Generally fieldwork is also a solo exercise – the field worker is all alone in the field along with the local inhabitants. He does not take with him his spouse or friend, for this will lead to the formation of a 'closed group', and, as M.N. Srinivas has said, the likelihood is that the fieldworker will not venture out to be with the people at all moments of time.

14.1.2 Survey Method

Survey is defined as asking questions at a particular point of time to a group of respondents. Most of the surveys are completed within a short span of time; however, some are extended over a length of time. Survey method could be either a trend or panel study. A distinction is made between a panel study and a trend study. When the same group of respondents is interviewed at different points of time to see if there are any changes in their opinion, it is known as a panel study. When different people are interviewed over time to see how the changes are occurring in the opinions of people, it is called a trend study. The major instrument (tool) of survey is questionnaire, which is a set of questions pertaining to a particular topic of study. When the questionnaire is sent by mail/email, it is called 'mailed (or emailed) questionnaire'; but when it is administered in a face-to-face interview situation, it is termed 'interview schedule'. We opt for the latter because one of the major problems with the mailed questionnaire is 'low response rate', and moreover, the open-ended questions may remain unanswered.

14.1.3 Documents

Documents' study is the third method. It is the study of the documents which are available. The documents are not only the written manuscripts or statements; they could be archaeological implements (or artifacts), inscriptions (as may be found in temples), paintings or any other evidence. The documents are already in existence; that is why they constitute the secondary data. The researcher focuses on the analysis of the documents. Documents belong to several categories – they could be official in the sense that they are found in the institutions and kept in their records. One of the greatest contributions of the British period in India was to set up the record rooms where these documents could be kept for knowing about the past practices and also for undertaking a study. These documents are often called the 'official documents'. In addition, there are private documents. They are with the people, such as their diaries, account books, their description of the events, etc. Researchers collect both these types of documents for their analysis. Documents can also be prepared at the behest of the investigator, when he requests his respondents to write up the accounts of their lives (or certain aspects of their lives) for the purpose of research.

14.1.4 Experimentation

This is one of the central methods of data collection in natural and biological sciences. Among the social sciences it is practiced in the discipline of psychology. Some sociologists who work on small groups also conduct experiments. By

experimentation, we mean testing of hypotheses in a controlled situation, a laboratory situation, where external variable do not confuse the situation. The ideal experimental design presupposes the division of the subjects of experimentation in two groups – the experimental and the control group. The experimental group receives the benefits of the independent variable which is denied to the control group. And then the results of the impact on these two groups are compared. Experimental design in this form is not possible in social sciences, mainly because it is difficult to control the external variables. It also has certain ethical consequences. Thus deviations occur from a classical experimental design, for which the term used is quasi-experimentation.

By making use of fieldwork and the other methods of investigations, the anthropologists prepare ethnographic accounts of the communities that they have studied. These ethnographies are central to the work of the anthropologists and they are read with interest and profit by scholars from other disciplines.

In the next section let us discuss the different tools and techniques that are employed by anthropologists to collect data.

Check Your Progress 1

1. List the four methods of data collection?

2. What is the difference between trend and panel study?

3. List some of the articles that can be used as documents in a study.

4. ‘Experimentation is testing hypothesis in a controlled situation.’ State whether the following statement is true or false.

14.2 TOOLS AND TECHNIQUES

Let’s begin this section with an understanding of what are tools and techniques with an example of making a cup of tea.

In order to make a cup of tea first we need to decide what kind of tea we want to make, as there are many types of teas, like green tea, black tea, tea with milk and sugar, or our very own *masala chai*. Each tea has a different style of preparation

and accordingly the utensils that one would use would also vary along with how the tea is to be prepared. Say we decide on green tea, here we would need green tea leaves, a strainer and an utensil like a pan or any cook ware that can be used on a hot plate, gas, or microwave and a mug or tea cup to pour the tea. Once we boil the water using either of the techniques (boiling water in a pan on the gas stove or a hot plate, or electric kettle or just boil water in a cup in the microwave), we can pour the water into the cup or mug and allow the green tea leaves to seep for a few minutes and our green tea is ready. So, we see that green tea can be made using different techniques based on the tool we decide upon. Likewise in the field situation too, a researcher first needs to decide on the topic and based on the topic select the tools and techniques. Broadly speaking the tools for data collection are mainly a. observation, b. interview c. life history d. case study and e. focus group discussion, within which we can use different techniques like for observation either participant observation or non-participant observation, for interview either direct interview or indirect interview.

14.2.1 Observation

Observation can be defined as viewing a particular incident or phenomena or even interactions and interpersonal relationship between two or more people. However, this viewing to be a part of a scientific investigation needs to be systematic and in context to an event. For example, if you go to a community and observe a tree in the village, just to describe the tree, its location within the village is not enough, one needs to relate this tree to the activities of the community, how the people relate themselves to the tree, the significance of the tree in the lives of the community, if that is observed, recorded and reported, the tree becomes a part of the scientific observation. Observation has further been divided into a. Participant observation; b. Non-participant observation; and c. Quasi-participant observation. While some also talk about a. direct participation; and b. indirect participation.

- (a) **Participant Observation:** Participant observation owes its subsistence to Malinowski whose study among the Trobriand Islanders of Papua New Guinea set the benchmark for fieldwork in anthropology. Malinowski had stated in order to participate in the everyday activities of the community, “one has to cut oneself off from the company of other white men, and remaining in as close contact with the natives as possible, which really can only be achieved by camping right in their villages” (Malinowski, 1922: 6). This was one of the classic ways to carry out observation and to a certain extent it is right to state that in order to connect with the people under study one needs to live the lives of those people. However, in the twenty-first century when the very definition of field has changed from an ‘exotic’ location far away from the researchers homeland, camping right in the middle of the community might not be possible, if the study area is an institution like school, non- government organisation, corporate space, etc. More so, anthropologists need not be far away from their own kind, as the researchers today also conduct work among their own communities to have an insider’s view. Participant observation amounts to the researcher participating in the activities of the community under study where the researcher directly involves himself or herself to be a part of the community or activity.
- (b) **Non-Participant Observation:** In non-participant observation the researcher observes the activities of the community under study from a distance without

getting directly involved. Here the researcher is detached and does not experience the lives of the people under study. The researcher herein records observations and data as an ‘outsider; viewing the activities in an objective manner, whereas, if the observer participates and gets involved both physically and emotionally, the observation becomes subjective in nature, where the observer not only records data on the basis of observation but also on their personal experiences.

- (c) **Quasi-Participant Observation:** In most cases the observation conducted by researchers in the field is known as quasi-participant observation as complete participation in many cases is not possible. Many a times it is not possible for the researcher to get directly involved in the field situation. For example while studying the *rites de passage* in a community, a researcher may closely observe the initiation rituals being performed for the boys or girls, however, the researcher cannot in person go through the initiation rites. Thus, even though there is participation, yet it is not complete.

14.2.2 Interview

‘Interviewing is fundamentally a process of social interaction’, so say Goode and Hatt (1981). In a field situation, it is not enough to observe. Observation needs to be linked to questioning of phenomena, incidents and events. There are many ways of conducting an interview as there are many types of interviews. The basic interview techniques are: a. direct interview; and b. indirect interview. In direct interview, the researcher meets the informant and conducts a face-to-face interview. While in indirect interview, the researcher can either send the interview questions to the informant via mail/post, email or conduct a video, web or telephonic interview. Direct interview may either be formal or informal. In a formal interview, a researcher needs to follow certain protocols, like taking prior appointment with the person to be interviewed, consent of the informant, and deciding upon a space and time for the interview. In many cases, the length of the interview time is also pre-decided. Such interviews involve key stakeholders, like government officials or renowned persons in their field for whom time is of outmost essence. However, in the field situation in a village, most interviews are informal and at times impromptu in nature. When a researcher is staying with the people s/he can conduct interviews while working with the community people, helping out with some community work or even while sharing a cup of tea in the village tea stall or at some one’s place; what has been called ‘deep hanging out’ by many anthropologists (Fontein 2014: 77). During fieldwork as the researcher is present in the field, direct interview is the norm, either formal or informal. Consent of the participants, be it verbal or non-verbal, is of essence while conducting any type of interview.

The advantages of direct interview over indirect interview is that while interviewing, it is not just what is being said that is important but how it is said is equally important and a significant aspect of data. People may say one thing or say it in a way that what they mean is different from what they speak. Also a silence or reluctance to speak is also data in its own way. Facial expressions and emotional responses are recorded along with what is actually just spoken. Thus for anthropologists, face-to-face as well as open-ended interviews are a much preferred technique than formal structured and restricted interviews. What we call open-ended interviews also allow free flow of ideas and information, that give rise to a rich depth of data that is not possible in structured formats.

14.2.3 Life History

Life history is used by anthropologists to reveal the extensive account of a person's life, whether written or narrated by the person, or by others, or by both (Langness 1965). Life history presents the characteristics which are unique to the individuals and distinguish them from others in the group (Young 1996: 26). It also at times might represent the characteristics of a group, way of life. The selection criteria of a person whose life history is to be taken into account depends on that person's contribution as a member of that community. It need not be of a reputed person having name and fame. It can be of the person you select as the key informant who has knowledge relevant to your topic of study.

Reflection

Key Informant: Key informant can be a person either female or male who has knowledge about the topic of research and can provide insider's view. A key informant is generally selected by a researcher during the time of rapport building when the researcher goes around the field space trying to know the community and adjust to the surroundings.

A life history allows an in-depth study. The rationale behind the collection of life-histories is that people do not live in vacuum. They live in society and according to society, guided by its norms and values. Unlike historians and biographers who look for the life history of the unique or powerful persons, anthropologists collect the life histories of ordinary persons, in their ordinary day-to-day existence; so that they can learn about the general culture and the way of life in a time period. Life histories often reflect changes and the impact of social and cultural events and transitions on the life of a person. One of the most celebrated life histories in anthropology is of Pedro Martinez, written by Oscar Lewis, which describes the life of an ordinary Mexican person and his family in great detail.

The individual life history method was developed in American cultural anthropology, as it faced the distressing situation of vanishing tribes. Quite often, they could locate only a single or very few members of a tribe and collection of detailed life history of a single person was the only way in which something about this vanished tribe could be reconstructed.

14.2.4 Case Study

Herbert Spencer was the first sociologist to use case material in his ethnographic work. A case study involves an in-depth research of a particular event, incident or phenomena where a community or a group of people are directly involved or affected. Herein, we can take the example of the Bhopal Gas Tragedy which happened in Bhopal on 3rd December, 1984. One can study the aftereffects of the tragedy in terms of physical or biological issues, psychological issues or medico-legal issues, etc. In such a study, the homogeneity of the group is described in terms of its association with the tragedy and how the individuals relate to the tragedy. Human mind has a way of remembering incidents and occurrences that are relevant to their own selves. Thus, case studies of different people which relate directly or indirectly to the incident can provide information on the same context, but from different perspectives or levels of memories and understanding of the event.

A case study is a holistic method that enables us to get an all-round perspective on a single incidence or event. Some anthropologists, like Max Gluckman and Van Velson, had also devised what was known as the extended case method. This was

often used for analysis of conflicts and legal disputes and cases and basically consisted of following a case or an event over a long period of time, so that one could get an insight not only into structures and norms, but also into processes of social life.

14.2.5 Genealogy

By now you must be familiar with genealogy, how to draw genealogies, as we have discussed genealogy at length in Unit 6: Institutions II: Kinship Family and Marriage.

Genealogy helps in tracing the line of descent. It forms an integral part of anthropological fieldwork as it connects the past to the present. Genealogical studies have also unveiled the myths and beliefs associated with ancestors and ancestor worship. For example, during a genealogical study in a Karbi village, it was seen that many people in the family shared the same names. The genealogy revealed that newborn in a family could be named only after those ancestors for whom the *chomangkan* (ritual related to ancestor worship) ceremony had been performed. As the *chomangkan* ceremony required a huge amount of funds and finances, the Karbis have almost stopped performing this ritual and in the village the last *chomangkan* had taken place some twenty years ago, when the study was being conducted in the late nineties (Zaman 2003).

14.2.6 Focus Group Discussions

Till now we have been discussing one-to-one interaction via direct or face-to-face interview of the researcher, with the individuals in the community. Focus group discussion is a way of interviewing a group of people within the community who can contribute to the topic of study. The researcher at times might feel the need to have interaction with more than one person on the same topic or the opinion of many people on the topic might prove beneficial to the research. In such a case Focus Group Discussions (or FGDs) are conducted. While conducting FGD, the group comprises of 8-10 people. A small group is manageable and the moderator can keep the conversation going. If the group is large, some might not feel comfortable to speak, while others might dominate the flow of conversation. In a FGD, normally a heterogeneous group or different stakeholders are selected so that their views and opinions on the same topic can be understood. While conducting an FGD the researcher does not participate in it but observes and records the entire session.

This technique is more suitable for goal-oriented and action research, where one is focusing only on one aspect, like say introduction of polio vaccine in a village or assessing people's attitudes to the introduction of a new welfare scheme. It is rarely used for quantitative research.

Check Your Progress 2

5. Participant observation is associated with which anthropologist's work?

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6. Name the different types of observation techniques used by anthropologists.

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7. 'Interview is a process of interaction.' State whether this statement is true or false.

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8. 'In anthropology life history is taken only of prominent personalities'. State whether the following statement is true or false.

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9. Which sociologist first used the case study method in his fieldwork?

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10. 'We need a large group of people in a focus group discussion.' State whether the following statement is true or false.

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14.3 INTERVIEW SCHEDULE AND QUESTIONNAIRE

In order to conduct an interview we need to have a systematic approach. Questions are formulated so that the researcher is able to acquire relevant information from the informants during an interview. Different types of interview schedules and guides are prepared as per the requirement of the research work. For direct interview, either a structured interview schedule or unstructured interview guide is prepared by the researcher.

Interview schedule: Interview schedule is the format used by the researcher during an interview. An interview schedule can either be structured or unstructured. A structured interview schedule has a fixed format of questions that the researcher uses while conducting an interview which is mainly used for conducting surveys, or for gathering quantitative data. Census data is normally collected using fixed structured interview schedules. In most cases such quantitative data needs to be compiled, tabulated and analysed.

Interview guide: Unstructured interview guide is used for taking interviews where a strict format is not followed and mainly used for qualitative data. The interview guide helps in structuring a few basic questions regarding the topics that has relevance and needs to be questioned during an interview, which might not be in any set framework. These questions help in maintaining the flow in a conversation and also guide the interviewer to bring the conversation back to the topic whenever the

informants gets too carried away and move astray from the topic. An interview using an interview guide can be free flowing like while gathering information for a life history or case study.

Questionnaire: While conducting interviews where the researcher is not physically present, the researcher sends the document to the informant and the information is filled up by the informant, in such cases we use questionnaire. A questionnaire can be used in the virtual space too like creating a survey format that can be posted online on the social networking sites that allows the respondents to fill up the same online without having to take a print out. The basic difference between an interview schedule and a questionnaire is that the interview schedule is administered by the interviewer himself/herself in the field, and it is the researcher who fills up the information in the sheet, while for a questionnaire the researcher is directly not present with the informant when s/he fills up the answers. The sequence of questions is very important for a questionnaire. One begins with simple and forthright questions that can be easily answered followed by more difficult and reflective questions. Often one gives what are known as multiple choice questions where one has to choose from several options. Also one needs to place what are known as test questions. To assess the reliability of answers to vital questions, one may have to frame multiple questions to get at the same information. For a questionnaire to be administered the group has to be literate enough to fill up the forms, a drawback that is not there while administering an interview schedule.

Check Your Progress 3

11. ‘Anthropologists use interview schedules and guides for collecting data.’ State whether the following statement is true or false.

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12. ‘A researcher fills up the questionnaire during an interview.’ State whether the following statement is true or false.

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14.4 SUMMARY

In this unit we have tried to acquaint the learners with the tools and techniques that a researcher uses in the field to collect data. The basic aim of this unit is to prepare the learners to be able to select the right tools and techniques in the field based on the topic they select. By now the learners might have become aware that in conducting anthropological research, the researcher may use one or more of the methods like fieldwork, survey, documents or experimentation to conduct the field study. Herein, we have discussed observation, interview, life history, case study, genealogy and focus group discussion in-depth which are used for data collection in the field.

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14.6 ANSWERS TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

1. a. fieldwork b. survey c. documentation and d. experimentation
2. see section 14.1.2
3. see section 14.1.3.
4. True
5. Bronislaw Malinowski
6. see section 14.2.1.
7. True
8. False
9. Herbert Spencer
10. False
11. True
12. False

SUGGESTED READING

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