
UNIT 8 CASE STUDY AND LIFE HISTORY*

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8.0 OBJECTIVES

After going through this Unit, you should be able to:

- distinguish between extensive research and intensive research;
- explain the nature and scope of case study method and life history;
- discuss the significance of case study method and life history in social science research; and
- differentiate between case study method and life history

8.1 INTRODUCTION

We have heard the words, ‘case study’ and ‘life history’ on several occasions. Now-a-days people use the two terms in different senses and refer to detailed study about something. People often find it difficult to distinguish between case study and life history. In fact, most of the time people maintain that life history has something to do with the discipline of history rather than with sociology.

In this Unit, let us learn about case study method and life history closely. Let us find out in what way case study method and life history are used by sociologists to collect data. We begin by developing an understanding of what case study is and its significance in social science research. We will answer the question: what

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is a case? How many cases should be included in a study? Following this, we will discuss the technique of life history in terms of its significance. Towards the end of the Unit, we will differentiate between case study and life history.

8.2 EXTENSIVE RESEARCH VS. INTENSIVE RESEARCH

As you are aware, social research is based on study of individuals, society, culture. In a broad sense, this entails study of people, groups, organizations, institutions, villages, towns, and cities. Two options are available to researchers. First option is to carry out extensive research. Here, data is collected from a large number of informants. This could be through census or survey methods about which we learnt in Unit 5. When data is collected from a large number of informants, it is possible to draw comparison between units of observation. Often, extensive research uses quantitative techniques of data analysis. We will learn quantitative methods of data analysis in Units 10, 11, and 12. Extensive research brings large data that can be subjected to advanced mathematical models. Second option before researchers is to carry out intensive research. Here, detailed and in-depth data is collected from a small number of informants. Analysis of such data is carried out using qualitative methods. It is difficult to draw comparisons and arrive at generalizations.

Let us consider the example of a study of women's participation in elections. If a researcher seeks to carry out extensive research, she/he would obtain data on extent of women's participation using survey method in all the polling stations in a district. Of course, the questions in the survey would depend on the objectives and variables of the study. An intensive study on the same topic would focus on smaller sample size. Data collection would be limited to select polling stations and select informants. The researcher would use the techniques of, among others, participant observation, interview, and case study method. The choice between extensive and intensive research depends on the scope of the study. It is, however, possible to combine both extensive and intensive research in one study. Such a study would be voluminous but rich in content and reliable. Let us see how this is possible in the case of the example of participation of women in elections. The researcher could carry out extensive research covering all the polling stations in a district. Data from different polling stations could be combined leading to framing of generalizations. Further, she/he could use some of the generalizations to carry out intensive research. For example, the generalization in this case could be that participation of literate women in elections is higher than that of illiterate women. The researcher could carry out intensive research based on this generalization. She/he could bring in variables such as age, caste, religion etc and examine this aspect closely by way of intensive research. The sample size could be small but in-depth data could be collected on limited number of variables using various techniques about which we have discussed in earlier Units.

In this Unit, we will learn about two important methods of data collection used in intensive research. These are: case study and life history.

8.3 CASE STUDY METHOD

There are two aspects that social scientists can study. The first aspect comprises norms, beliefs, values and customs. The second aspect is the way in which these norms, beliefs, values and customs are negotiated or dealt with by people in day-to-day life. Consider the example of a fight on the road. Personal experiences, motivations and other aspects of people's lives are of tremendous importance to social scientists.

8.3.1 What is Case Study?

A case study is a holistic study of a social phenomena carried out in its natural context i.e., in the situation or framework within which it exists. It is carried out over a period of time/during a certain period of time. Yin (2003:4) explains that in a case study the 'case', i.e., phenomenon being studied, is not separated or kept apart from its context. In other words, a case is studied in totality and in its own or naturally occurring context rather than in isolation. Often students use the term 'case' erroneously. Let us go back to the earlier example of study on participation of women in elections. A student who interviews five women and reports them as case studies could be making a mistake. The student can be said to have collected case studies if she/he has carried out detailed study on each woman incorporating the socio-cultural context in which each woman lives. This would involve not one but a few in-depth interviews along with other techniques of data collection.

Box 8.1 Overall Understanding of Case Study Method

Social scientists study many culture groups, small social groups (a family, political party, a gang, a leadership group...They also study large groups as social units (sects, national and racial groups). Social institutions (courts, hospitals, churches, industrial organizations, governmental divisions have also been studied comprehensively as social units. Studies of neighbourhoods, large and small communities (Russian-Town, China-town, the Black Belt, the ghetto, the Gold Coast) have been frequent topics of studies as social units. A comprehensive study of a social unit, or a community is called a case study....

Case data may be gathered exhaustively of an entire life cycle of a social unit or a definite section of it. Whether a section or the whole life is studied, the aim is to ascertain the *natural history*, that is, an account of the generic development of a person or group, or whatever constitutes the social unit in a particular study, revealing the factors that modeled the life of the unit within its cultural setting. Because of its aid in studying behavior in specific, precise detail, Burgess termed the case study method, 'the social microscope' (Young 1996: 246-247).

You may be wondering, what a 'case' is? What can be considered as a 'case' depends on the objectives of research, the way research questions are framed, and the scope of the research. A case could be an individual, some event, an entity, an organization, or an institution. The next question which comes to mind is how

should cases be selected? It is appropriate to choose case(s) that will most likely address the research question(s). Case could be one or more in number depending on the way the research is planned. Only one actor may constitute the totality of case study or many actors could constitute the totality of case study. Selection of case(s) is guided by theoretical propositions—they suggest what needs to be focused. Researchers should choose case(s) that are most likely to shed light on research questions.

Research studies could be based on a single case or multiple cases. Each of the case in a study based on multiple case studies would be of the same type so that they replicate each other. For example if I want to do a case study of what happens when washing machine is introduced for the first time in a small town. I may take one single household using the washing machine and do an intensive case study. The choice of the household would be such that it represents all other households. Such a case can be referred to as a typical case. Alternatively, I could choose to study more cases of the same type and in same situation to make sure that nothing is missing. Two options are available. The first option is to take more cases of the same type. The expectation is that the same kind of findings will emerge. The second option is to take some case studies of households using a washing machine and some case studies of households that do not use the washing machine. Here we can expect contrasting results. Households can be opposed in terms of composition or they may be similar, but one has a washing machine and the other does not.

8.3.2 Significance of Case Study Method in Social Science Research

One of the distinguishing features of case study method is that it incorporates all aspects of a case. Consider the example of construction of road passing through a village in a hilly terrain. Now there are different lobbies of stakeholders emphasizing or opposing the construction. One lobby takes the development view, another takes the environmental stand and a third takes a humanitarian stand supporting the villagers' right to their way of life. I can undertake a case study of the village incorporating environmental and development variables, all at the same time. The result of my study need not be positive, but it should let me see what exactly would happen considering all dimensions: environmental, developmental, and humanitarian if road construction did take place. Depending upon the results, such a study can influence further policy making and also initiate debates and raise issues.

What a case study can demonstrate is the relative value of the variables and the way in which each stakeholder can be situated in relation to the others. For example, if we look at a project from one point of view only we are likely to prioritize that particular point of view, it could be only development or only environment. But a study that covers all the aspects will let us see what happens to environment if development is pushed to a certain level and how we can hold development at a certain level so that the society and culture undergo least trauma and also how to prioritize one variable over the other.

Case study method enables researchers to overcome the inability of individuals to explain norms and actual outcomes of those norms. Adamson Hoebel and Karl Llewellyn carried out a collaborative study on how disputes are resolved among the Cheyenne community. They made use of the case study method in the course of the study. They are credited with introducing the case study method in anthropological studies. They examined the processes by way of which dispute cases were settled. This included examining the situation, what each participant did in relation to the dispute, what steps were undertaken by other people who had something to do with the dispute, who intervened, what was the reasoning pattern, final outcome of attempts to resolve the dispute, effect of the dispute on the parties involved in the dispute and on the future of similar disputes, and on general life of the community. They found that people did explain the norms and rules to deal with disputes. It was possible to identify ideal patterns against which researchers could assess actual behaviour in real life situations. This was, however, not enough to arrive at an understanding of dispute resolution in practical situations. There was a divergence between what was expected and what actually happened when disputes arose. Use of the case study method resolved these issues. By using the case study method researchers were able to overcome the inability of individuals to explain how norms and rules are interpreted and made use of in dispute situations.

Check Your Progress 1

- 1) Define case study.

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- 2) How should cases be selected?

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8.4 LIFE HISTORY METHOD

Case Study and life history are closely related in the sense that both examine the subject under study in detail and holistically. When a case study is focused on the life of an individual person, it takes the form of what we refer to as life history. Let us understand what life history is.

8.4.1 What is Life History?

One of the main objectives of social scientists is to obtain the real and personalized account of individual's experiences, expectations, aspirations,

tensions, motivations and all that which influences her/his action, behavior and philosophy of life. As Young (1996:246) mentions, 'To understand his behavior fully and intimately, he must supply a detailed and penetrating account of what he does and has done, what he thinks he does and has does, what he expects to do, and says he ought to do. A fairly exhaustive study of a person or group is called a life or case history.'

For long anthropologists and sociologists have used the life history method to supplement their ethnographies and other accounts. One of the earliest studies in which life history method was used extensively was Thomas and Znaniecki's *The Polish Peasant in Europe and America*. This is a voluminous work. The book runs into five volumes. It is based on life history data which supplements their findings and generalizations. Other sources of data are: newspaper articles, letters, records from courts and welfare agencies. Life history method has been used, among others, in studies on race, migration, delinquency. Additionally, the method has been used in dalit studies. Here, life histories of dalits shed light on their social and economic conditions, struggles and other aspects of their life. These life histories are well supplemented with their written accounts, narratives, stories, poems, etc.

One of the most frequently referred to studies using life history method is that on the people of Alor. In this study, eight life histories of Alorese culture and personality (1944) are presented and analyzed by Cora Du Bois. She used life history method to construct typical personality of the Alorese. Cora Du Bois was, however, criticized for selecting atypical individuals i.e., those individuals who did not represent Alorese personality adequately. The main criticism was that the very basis on which Cora Du Bois developed typical personality of Alorese was ill-founded. It was said that a typical Alorese men and women remained too busy to spend time with Cora Du Bois. The men and women she selected for life history were the ones who were free and had nothing better to do than talk to Cora Du Bois. Such people were an exception in society and should not have been used for projecting typical personality of Alorese.

As social scientists we have to decide which part of the life history we are interested in. Our selection should be such that the individual we select represents others of her/his kind. The choice of whose life history we are taking involves some kind of a logic like age, gender etc. We would not like the life history of a too young person, or someone who is too typical and does not represent the culture is also not desirable. We do not want delinquents, drop outs etc, for they represent the anomalous unless of course our goals of research demand it. If we are doing work on drug addicts or criminals, we will need life histories of such people.

The life history is a tool of research which places individual at the centre of research and provides much depth to analysis. It appears in the narrative form that personalizes the data and makes it more human and subjective.

8.4.2 Significance of Life History Method in Social Science Research

The usefulness of a life history is that it provides an insight of a culture through intensive and holistic understanding of life histories of individuals selected for the reason that they represent the majority of the people. Importantly life histories incorporate multiple dimensions of an individual's life. It contextualizes the individual in the historical and cultural transformations of society. Since it is in the form of a narrative, it brings together the personal experiences and the social context of an individual's life. The theoretical basis of the life history method is to be sought in the link between culture and personality. This is based on the understanding that to some extent, people are shaped by culture and also that individual life experiences reflect to a large extent the collective experience.

Life history as a tool also depends a lot on memory. It could be argued that people do not remember everything and that only those aspects that influence her/him the most are usually retained in the memory. Well, while this is true, the life history method continues to remain valid and important for the reason that people usually remember what is important to them and since people are embedded in their society and culture, what they remember would be socially important.

As a tool of research, life history is an interaction and it brings together two people (the researcher and the informant) in close interaction. Tonkin (1922) has pointed out, that both, the researcher and informant are able to understand each other better since both get an opportunity to discuss their own life histories. This enriches the data further.

Check Your Progress 2

- 1) What is the main criticism of Cora Du Bois's case studies of the Alorese?

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- 2) What is life history method in social science research?

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8.5 LET US SUM UP

In this Unit, we learnt two important methods of data collection: case study method and life history method. We discussed what a case is, how many cases should be included in a study and the importance of case study method. We also learnt the difference between case study and life history. We discussed the importance of life history method in social science research. We found that in collecting case studies and life histories the techniques of interview and

observation are most commonly used. It is also important to remember that as we deal with personal accounts of people, it is important to remain sensitive to their concerns. Also, we should not be judgmental in data collection and analysis. Social and cultural context should provide the backdrop against which data is interpreted.

8.6 REFERENCES

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8.7 ANSWERS TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Check Your Progress 1

- 1) A case study is a holistic study of a social phenomena carried out in its natural context i.e., in the situation or framework within which it exists.
- 2) It is appropriate to choose case(s) that will most likely address the research question(s). Selection of case(s) is guided by theoretical propositions—they suggest what needs to be focused. Researchers should choose case(s) that are most likely to shed light on research questions.

Check Your Progress 2

- 1) Cora Du Bois was criticized for selecting atypical individuals i.e., those individuals who did not represent Alor personality adequately. The main criticism was that the very basis on which Cora Du Bois developed typical personality of Alor was ill-founded. It was said that a typical Alor men and women remained too busy to spend time with Cora Du Bois. The men and women she selected for life history were the ones who were free and had nothing better to do than talk to Cora Du Bois. Such people were an exception in society and should not have been used for projecting typical personality of Alor.
- 2) Life history is the real and personalized account of individual's experiences, expectations, aspirations, tensions, motivations and all that which influences her/his action, behavior and philosophy of life.