

SOCIAL SCIENCE METHODOLOGY : SOME QUERIES

The Indian Council for Social Science Research has been surveying all the research work in the various fields of social sciences carried out in India.¹ Similarly Prof. Buch² surveyed the doctoral and grant-in-aided research projects in education. These are by far the best available sources of information on social science research in India. In addition to this, some research work is also carried out at the *master's* level. A small part of it also gets published through the efforts of some more enterprising teachers who guide such research. The problem is of identifying what is a good research. In fact quality is not dependent on whether it is a master's or doctoral or post-doctoral level work. Often, there are comments made even on the Ph. D. level research in newspapers, journals and in conferences. If the published research has to have any value it must help in building up of theories and / or in improving the related practices. Short of this, the erroneously conducted research is not only inferior to what might be an intelligent layman's common sense but it may also be more harmful.

The Problem of Relevance

The controversy between what is called pure or fundamental research on the one hand and the applied on the other is age old. The high-brow, ivory tower approach to academics generally upholds the value of pure and fundamental approach and pleads for complete academic freedom in this respect. It runs down the applied or pragmatic approach as something second rate and inferior. Recently the national leaders as also the public seem to have taken a more pragmatic stand that the scarce resources of the country

1. Surveys in the different social sciences are already published and available.
2. M. B. Buch (Ed.), *A Survey of Research in Education*, Baroda; Centre of Advanced Study in Education, 1974.

require to be expended on studying problems which are more urgent and practical in nature. They do not explicitly say that theoretical research is unwanted or should be given up or even neglected. Their emphasis is on spending whatever meagre public support is available for research, on finding solutions to more immediate problems of the society. They want that psychologists concern themselves with school-drop-outs rather than the learning of nonsense syllables, sociologists with the problem of satisfaction and discrimination, anthropologists with cultural deprivation, economists with poverty and so on. And to this effect, numerous statements are made by people occupying positions of high public responsibility.

The question before us is what is the responsibility of academic community in relation to such public statements? On the one hand we may plead for a complete freedom to work in our own areas of interest. But on the other hand all our academic activities are to be supported by the public. None of the academic institutions supports itself, not even the engineering or the agricultural. Within the structure of an undeveloped or underdeveloped society, as in our country, there are likely to be a number of needs and limited resources. And it is quite natural that the society expects that all the resources go to satisfy its most urgent needs, till such time as it is in a position to support production of comforts and luxuries. It is for us to decide what we do under these circumstances. *The alternatives are* : We may cooperate with the public in addressing ourselves to its most urgent and practical problems or we may continue to fight for our academic freedom with complete disregard of what is expected by the public.

The present status of the social science research in India reveals that it needs to progress in three main dimensions. These are : (1) methodological sophistication; (2) adequate content coverage with an eye on social relevance; and (3) communication of research.

The lack of methodological sophistication is a major problem today. Though this is more applicable to some social sciences than the others; there are instances of research work within each discipline which in fact, lack scientific rigour. Teaching of methodology courses at P. G. Level is common in some but not all the social sciences. The salient drawbacks of the research reports could just be mentioned here. (a) Although the representative and adequate sample is the essential condition of generalisability, still many investigators resort to purposive or incidental samples on the grounds of easy accessibility and convenience in data collection work. (b) Instrumentation leaves much to be desired. Very often, variables taken up for study are such that standardized instruments for measurement are either not available or cannot be conveniently constructed. Treatment effects are assessed with regard to such variables and conclusions are reported. A sophisticated reader, however, fails to separate the treatment effects from the error of measurement where the two are confounded. At times, standardized tools are available and yet are not used. Variables such as attitudes and motivations are measured by casual questionnaires even after a fifty years' history of standardization methodology. (c) Control of the conditions, experimentally or statistically, is an important but difficult problem in social science research. While dealing with the human beings, some of the organismic variables like previous experience, intelligence, motivation, value orientation, etc. being covert, it is all the more difficult to study or control them. This necessitates extra carefulness on the part of the researchers. Many studies are found to deal with such superficial variables as age, sex-education, socio-economic background, etc. and avoid reaching depth on account of the relative difficulty in quantifying variables like values, attitudes and so on. (d) Statistical methodology has advanced a great deal in the field of social research. A discerning use of appropriate techniques is not difficult but few take the trouble to understand their exact applications and limitations. The common areas of misapplication are with

reference to the use of parametric vs. non-parametric techniques, hypothesis testing and limits of inference. Sometimes, advanced statistical techniques are used when they should not have been, and sometimes no statistics are used and still inferences are drawn and generalisations made. Not that the statistical techniques are the *sine qua non* of all researches. Clinical analyses are equally valuable. But the former are easier and more mechanical to apply once they are understood. The investigator shoulders much less responsibility in the matter of inference. Clinical methods on the contrary, depend very much upon the subjective judgement of the investigator, on his insight, imagination and interpretative skills. The unfortunate situation, however, is that investigators in psychology have resorted to this because of the apparent difficulty of the mathematical techniques which raise a phobic reaction in them.

As regards the coverage of content, again, a reference could be made to the surveys mentioned above. They have clearly indicated the neglected areas. A social science teacher today still draws heavily on the Western researches. Another limitation is the smallness of our departments and our work in isolation. Such small scale work does not help much by way of theory building. Moreover, it is puzzling why the scholars do not take up more urgent and practical problems. The areas of significance to the society are poverty, prejudices, school drop-outs, resistance to change and so on. Yet very little of significance has been contributed to the understanding of these or similar problems by the social scientists in this country. Some of them look down upon what is called applied research. Some of these problems have been studied extensively in the West, but those findings cannot be taken for granted under changed social and cultural contexts. The studies need replication before any of those findings are accepted and any policy decisions are based on them. As long as those problems exist with us, we have to carry out this exercise without feeling concerned about working on stale problems. There is always scope for improving

the tools and the techniques. And it also may happen that the problem remaining the same, its parameters may be entirely different.

Scientific communication is poor due to a number of reasons. There are not sufficient number of journals for publishing scientific research; and whatever gets into print, also very often leaves an impression that some of it could have been improved. Inadequate references, superfluous details of data-analysis, unwarranted generalisations, lack of recognition of the limitations are some of the common drawbacks of the published reports. Recently the ICSSR has heavily financed the publication of Ph. D. theses. Who reads them? Was it necessary to publish all these?

Research at Various Levels

The discussion so far has dealt with social science research in general and may be applicable to all the levels. Regarding each level, some specific suggestions can be made.

(1) At the master's degree level, a few social sciences offer training in the research methodology, while others do not. At least one semester course should be compulsory for all. In addition, whatever is done by way of practicals in some subjects could be properly oriented to give training in methodology. Optional dissertation can provide an opportunity to the interested ones to further specialise in methodology. The research work at this level should concentrate on small practical problems with a view to demonstrating the use of research techniques in their understanding. Methodological aspects should be properly emphasized. Instrumentation and tool development can be introduced at this stage. Various tools like questionnaires, interview-schedules, attitude scales, socio-economic status index, etc., could be profitably constructed by students under competent guidance. If a department can easily develop a kit of a few tools required to study a certain specific area, the others could

make use of these and keep adding to the findings. Though an individual student may not achieve much, a systematically planned collective approach may help even a small department to study some major problems. Of course, due caution should be exercised while using either data collected by students or tools developed by them at this stage.

(2) It is at the doctoral level that the real research begins. Significant areas of research need to be tackled though a sophisticated, flawless methodology. It is better for the research guides at this level to restrict research guidance to areas of their own competence. Collaborative guidance is to be recommended. Methodological expertise is still not very common with every research guide. So teachers of methodology, could be associated with others for methodological guidance.

Rigid insistence on the use of properly chosen or constructed tools and appropriate analytical techniques should be adopted. It is likely that certain departments would develop research programmes in some limited areas, depending upon the interests and areas of competence of the faculty. However, this should not matter. No pharmaceutical manufacturer makes all the medicines nor any machine tools factory makes all the machines.

(2) At the post-doctoral or institutional level much that has been said about the applied, community-oriented research applies. The departments should establish a firm footing in the local community by studying its problems and trying to make definite contributions toward their solution. At this level, the research should be more collaborative and interdisciplinary in view of the complex subject matter. Methodological sophistication should be of the highest order. Many standardised tools are needed for research these days. Everyone cannot start with tool construction. Each department should be able to work on developing the needed tools and refining them from time to time so that the students and others can conveniently use them in their studies. The department of

psychology can be involved in this area to a great extent in view of the sophisticated technology developed in the field of psychometry.

Models of research work have to be developed at the institutional level mainly in view of the resources available. The various research techniques can be used in a variety of settings. This makes evaluation of methodologies possible. Institutions have a responsibility to develop indigenous research evidence to support its teaching programmes. To plan this rationalisation and collaboration among departments from the various universities is necessary.

To conclude, it is obvious that there is ample scope for improving the quality of research work in the social sciences in India. It is also obvious that a better planning at the level of the social science faculty can by itself help to improve the situation a great deal without much inputs from outside.

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