

UNIT V TOPIC: OBJECTIVES AND ASSUMPTIONS OF SOCIAL RESEARCH

Introduction:

While identifying order in the complexity of social life is the most fundamental objectives of social research, there are many other, more specific objectives that contribute to this larger objective. They are quite diverse. For example, the objective of testing theories about social life contributes to the larger objective of identifying order in complexity; so does the objective of collecting in-depth information on the diverse social groups that make up society. Another factor that contributes to the diversity of the of social research is the simple fact that social research reflects society, and society itself is diverse, multifaceted, and composed of many antagonistic groups. It follows that the objectives of social research are multiple and sometimes contradictory. Today, no single objective dominates social research.

Seven major objectives and assumptions of social research

1. Identifying general patterns and relationships
2. Testing refining theory
3. Making predictions
4. Interpreting significance
5. Exploring diversity
6. Giving voice
7. Advancing new theories

1. Identifying general patterns and relationships

Significant social phenomena may be significant because they are common or general; they affect many people, either directly or indirectly. This quality of generality makes knowledge of such phenomena valuable. Thus, one of the major objectives of social research is to identify general patterns and relationships. In some corners, this objective is considered the primary objective because social research that is directed toward this end resembles research in the hard sciences. This resemblance gives social research more legitimacy, making it seem more like social physics and less like social philosophy or political ideology.

For most of its history, social research has tried to follow the lead of the hard sciences in the development of its basic research strategies and practices. This was most valuable especially when one was searching for general patterns. For example, if we know the general causes of ethnic antagonism (one general cause might be the concentration of members of an ethnic minority in lower social classes), we can work to remove these conditions from our society or at least counteract their impact and perhaps purge ourselves of serious ethnic antagonism.

As more and more is learned about general patterns, the general stock of social scientific knowledge increases, and it becomes possible for social scientists to systematize knowledge and make connections that might otherwise not be made.

Knowledge of general pattern is often preferred to knowledge of specific situations because every situation is unique in some way. Understanding a single situation thoroughly might be pointless if this understanding does not offer generalizable knowledge - if it doesn't lead to some insight relevant to other situations. From this perspective, knowing one situation thoroughly might even be considered counterproductive because we could be deceived into thinking an atypical situation offers useful general knowledge when it does not, especially if we are ignorant of how this situation is atypical.

Because of the general underdeveloped state of social scientific knowledge, we are not always sure which situations are typical and which are not. Furthermore, because every situation is unique in some way, it also could be argued that every situation is atypical and therefore untrustworthy as a guide to general knowledge. In short, when the objective is knowledge of general patterns, social researchers tend to distrust what can be learned from one or a small number of cases.

According to this reasoning, knowledge of general patterns is best achieved through examination of many comparable situations or cases, the more the better. The examination of many cases provides a way to neutralize each case's uniqueness in the attempt to grasp as many cases as possible. If a broad pattern holds across many cases, then it may reflect the operation of an underlying cause which can be inferred from the broad pattern. For example, political violence exists in all countries and in both democratic and undemocratic countries. Still, across many cases the pattern of relations between violence and undemocratic regime may be clear and strong.

2. Testing and Refining Theories

A primary objective of social research is to improve and expand the pool of ideas known as theories by testing their implications and to refine their power to explain. Testing is carried by deriving hypotheses from theories and the implications of these theories are then tested with data that bear directly on the hypotheses. Ideas and hypotheses that fail to receive support gradually lose their appeal, while those that are supported more consistently gain greater stature in the pool. Testing theories can also serve to refine them. By working through the implications of a

theory and then testing this refinement, it is possible to progressively improve and elaborate a set of ideas.

It is possible to conduct social research without paying much direct attention to this pool of ideas and the theoretical knowledge. There are many aspects of social life and many different social worlds that attract the attention of social researchers, independent of the relevance of these phenomena to social theory. After all, social researchers, like most social beings, are curious about social life. However, improving the quality of social theory is an important objective because this pool of ideas structures much thinking and much telling about society, by social scientists and by others.

3. Making Predictions

While social researchers use theories to derive "predications" about what they expect to find in a set of data, they also use accumulated social scientific knowledge to make predictions about the future. Consider the following example: Research indicates that ethnic conflict tends to increase when the supply of economic rewards and resources decreases. Thus, a social scientist would predict increased ethnic tension in an ethnically diverse country that has just experienced a serious economic downturn. Prediction is often considered the highest objective of science. We accumulate knowledge so that we can anticipate things to come.

Two kinds of knowledge help us make predictions. Knowledge of history (past successes and failures) and knowledge of general patterns. Knowledge of history helps us to avoid repeating mistakes. Understanding of the Stock Market Crash of 1929 and the ensuing Great Depression, for example, has motivated economic and political elites to moderate the violent swings of market-oriented economic life. Knowledge of general patterns is useful for making projections about likely future events. For example, we know that certain types of crime (drug dealing, for instance) increase when legitimate economic opportunities decrease. We can use this knowledge to extrapolate future crime rates given different employment conditions.

While making predictions is one of the most important objectives of social research, it's not always the case that prediction and understanding go hand in hand. Sometimes our predictions are quite accurate, but our understanding of the actual underlying processes that produce outcomes is incomplete or simply erroneous. For example, the causes of drug addiction are quite complex, as is the process of becoming an addict. However, it is a relatively simple matter to forecast level of drug addiction in major US cities based on knowledge of the social conditions that tend to favor high level of addiction.

Predicting rates is much easier than predicting specific events. The kinds of things many social scientist would like to be able to predict - namely the occurrence of specific events at specific points in time in the future - are simply beyond the scope of any science. For example, many social scientists chastised themselves for being unable to predict the fall of communism in Eastern Europe in 1989. Their failure to predict these dramatic events made them feel impotent.

However, no science, social or otherwise, could possibly achieve this kind of prediction - the timing of specific future social events. It is very difficult to predict specific future events.

Consider the "hard" science of meteorology. At best, this science can predict the probability of rain over the next several days. But what if we want to know when it will start, when it will stop, and how much it will rain? It should be possible to predict these things. After all, no human intervention, interpretation, or subjectivity is involved, only measurable physical qualities like temperature, wind direction and velocity, moisture, and so on. But the hard science of meteorology cannot offer this precision; it simply cannot predict specific events. Nor can meteorology predict which day, or even which year, a hurricane will again sweep across Mexico. Even when there is a hurricane in the middle of the Gulf of Mexico, it's very difficult to tell which, if any, city it will hurt.

In a similar manner, no social scientists could predict, say in 1980, that communism would fall in Eastern Europe in 1989. For many years, some social scientists claimed that communism was likely to fall in the near future. Even in 1980 a few would have been willing to attach specific probabilities to specific years, say a 40% chance of falling by the year 2000. Social science is not impotent, but appears so because of the specificity of the predictions we desire. It would certainly be impressive to be able to predict the timing of events but it is outside the scope of any science to offer this degree of specificity. At best, social researchers can make broad projections of possibilities using their knowledge of general patterns.

4. Interpreting Culturally or Historically Significant Phenomena

Knowledge of general patterns is not the only kind of valuable knowledge, however, especially when it comes to understanding social life. In the social sciences, knowledge of specific situations and events, even if they are atypical is also highly valued. The significance of most historical phenomena derives from their atypicality, the fact that they are dramatically non-routine, and from their impact on who we are today.

For example, many social researchers address important historical events like the French Revolution. We care about these events and their interpretation because of the relevance of these events for understanding our current situation - how we got to where we are. We are fascinated by the Israeli State-formation not because we expect it to be repeated, but because of its powerful impact on current political structures and behavior.

Other phenomena are studied because of their cultural relevance. The bits and pieces of African cultures that slaves brought with them, for example, have had a powerful impact on the course and development of American culture. Likewise, the culture of Russian immigrants is expected to influence Israeli political culture. We study these significant phenomena not because they represent data for generalization but for their atypicality on the one hand and their significant impact on the other.

5. Exploring Diversity

Another major objective of social research is to explore and comprehend the social diversity that surrounds us. While this objective may seem similar to the objective of identifying general patterns, and does complement it in some respects, it is quite different. For example, one general pattern is that education and economic development tend to go together; countries with better schools and higher literacy rates tend to be richer. However, the fact that a general pattern exists doesn't mean that there aren't important and interesting exceptions. Some poor countries have well-developed educational systems and very high literacy rates and some rich countries have poorly developed schools and surprisingly low levels of literacy.

Exploring diversity often means that the researchers ignores dominant patterns and focuses on the variety of circumstances that exist. How is living in a poor country with a high level of literacy different from living in other poor country. What happened when a low level of educational development or literacy is combined with wealth?. In short, the study of diversity avoids an exclusive focus on what is most common or on dominant patterns.

More generally, exploring diversity furthers an understanding and appreciation of socio-diversity, a concept that parallels the ecological notion of biodiversity. People are less concerned about sociodiversity than about biodiversity (protecting endangered species). Often, much diversity is simply unacknowledged or ignored. Sometimes assumptions are made about sameness (for example, that people living in inner-city ghettos think or act in certain ways) that turn out to be false when the diversity within a social category is examined closely.

Sometimes social researchers start out not knowing if studying a new case or situation will offer useful knowledge of diversity. They study it in order to make this assessment. For example, some immigrant groups are very successful. It is important to find out how and why they are successful in order to determine if this knowledge is relevant to other groups. It may be that their success is due to circumstances that cannot be duplicated elsewhere. But there is no way to know this without studying the specific causes of their success.

6. Giving Voice

Sometimes the objective of exploring diversity is taken one step further, and the researcher studies a group not simply to learn more about it, but also to contribute to its having an expressed voice in society. In research of this type, the objective is not only to increase the stock of knowledge about different types, forms, and processes of social life, but to tell the story of a specific groups, usually in a way that enhances its visibility in society.

Very often the groups studied in this way are marginal groups, outside the social mainstream. This approach to social research asserts that every group in society has a "story to tell".

In this case social theories may help the researcher to identify groups without choice and may help explain why these groups lack voice, but theory is not considered a source of hypotheses to

be tested. When the objective of a project is to give voice to research subjects it is important for the researcher to try to see their world through their eyes to understand their social worlds as they do. To achieve this understanding, researchers must gain access to the everyday world of the group. It might be necessary, for example, to live with the members of a marginalized group for extended periods of time and gradually win their confidence.

Some social researchers consider research that seeks to give voice advocacy research and therefore doubt its objectivity. How can research that seeks to enhance the visibility of a marginal group be conducted in a neutral way?. Isn't it inevitable that researchers will favor the positive aspects of marginal group?. One answer is that the researchers must be vigilant in their efforts to represent their groups appropriately. Another answer is that even the study of general social conditions that favor stable democracy across many countries enhances the importance and visibility of stable democracy as desirable condition. The problem of objectivity is not the problem of 'giving voice' approach only but is general problem of the social sciences.

7. Advancing New Theories

Many different kinds of social research advance theory, even research that seeks to interpret historical or cultural significance. The testing of theories (objective 2) also advances theory in the limited sense that these tests indicate which theoretical ideas have more support as explanations of social life. The objective of advancing theory as it used here, however, involves more than assessing and refining existing ideas. When theory is advanced, ideas are elaborated in some new way. To advance theory it is not necessary to come up with a complete model of society or even some part of it. The development of new ideas and new concepts is the most that research seeking to advance theory usually accomplishes.

Theory testing (objective 2) is primarily deductive. Hypotheses about social life are derived from theories and then tested with relevant data. The researcher then draws the implications of the results of these tests for theory. By contrast, research that advances theory, is usually described as having an inductive quality. On the basis of new evidence, the researcher develops a new theoretical concept or new relationship or advances understanding of existing ones.

While the deduction-versus-induction distinction is a simple and appealing way to differentiate kinds of social research, most research includes elements of both. For this reason some philosophers of science argue that all research involves retrodution - the interplay of induction and deduction. It is impossible to do research without some initial ideas, even if the objective is to give voice to research subjects. Thus, almost all research has at least an element of deduction. Similarly, almost all research can be used to advance theory in some way. After all, social theories are vague and imprecise. Every test of a theory refines it, whether or not the test is supportive. Research involves retrodution because there is typically a dialogue of ideas and evidence in social research.