

Introduction to social research: concepts of social reality, problem statement, research objectives/questions, and data and variables

Social Research

Research, in general, is a scientific process for searching for new knowledge, i.e. knowledge that is not known to us yet or we are not sure about what is known to us. Social research, therefore, is also a scientific process through which we want to search for new knowledge about the reality of social life, often called social reality. Reality is what is right. So, social reality means what is right about human's belief, perception, attitude, values, behaviour. Social research, therefore, is an endeavour that follows a scientific process to understand human behaviour. For example, the Right to Information Act of 2009 directs every office to publicly display a citizen's charter about its services following a specific format prescribed by the government. Suppose we do not know whether the offices of the government are following this provision of the RTI Act. In that case, we have a knowledge gap regarding the implementation of the citizen's charter initiative, i.e., we do not know about its implementation status. If someone wants to research this issue, he will look for new knowledge or generate new knowledge through his research on the issue. Implementation of the citizen's charter initiative is a social issue because it involves the belief, perception, attitude, values, and behaviour of public officials and citizens. Through social research, we want to understand human's belief, perception, attitude, values, and behaviour about social phenomena.

The scientific process in social research refers to the design and implementation of a research idea. A social researcher first plans his study and then executes it. As social research tries to understand the social reality, the researcher is driven by his own belief about the concept of reality or the ultimate truth (this is called *ontology*) and the way how the truth can be studied or known (this is called *epistemology*). Some social scientists believe that reality exists independent of the knower (this belief is broadly known as *positivism*). In contrast, some other social scientists believe that reality is a mental construction, i.e., humans construct their reality using their thought process (this belief is broadly known as *interpretivism*). Based on ontological belief, a researcher can be a positivist or an interpretivist. These two belief systems direct their believers to different methods of data collection and data analysis. In the surface, we dichotomize these methods into quantitative (positivism) and qualitative (interpretivism) traditions. Therefore, research design differs based on researchers' philosophical positions about studying social reality (ontology and epistemology).

In planning and implementing social research (scientific process), a researcher first develops a proposal for his research and then implement it through collecting data, analyzing them, and writing a report. The proposal usually includes a title of the research, an introduction or background of the research topic, a statement of the problem, research objectives/questions, literature review, methodology for data collection and data analysis, rational/significance of the study, and limitations among others. Then the researcher collects data according to the proposal, analyzes them, and writes a report on his findings. The gamut of these activities is the scientific process.

The introduction or background of the topic gives a *big picture* of the issue of research. It discusses the context of the study. It may define some critical concepts used in the research. The introduction is written in a way so that it raises the interest of the readers in the research. This introductory part may also discuss the content presented in the 'statement of the problem' below without segmenting it into a different section. Different institutions use different formats of the proposal.

Statement of the Problem

Thirdly, the researcher describes the research problem, which is called the problem statement. In this part, the researcher shows the *knowledge gap*, i.e., what is not known yet about the issue. Here the researcher presents an overview of the past studies. His particular interest is to show that past studies have not addressed the issue which he has proposed to research or the past studies have some weaknesses. If the researcher wants to study the implementation status of the citizen's charters, he has to show that this issue has not been studied by anyone yet.

Suppose, some other research works on the citizen charter issue are available. The researcher still can propose his research on the same issue if he can claim that the findings or the methodology of the past studies are faulty or problematic. The researcher also needs to show why studying the proposed issue is important and how his research findings will benefit whom. The problem statement sets the focus of the research.

Research Objectives/Questions

Fourthly, the researcher further focuses his attention on what he will look for in his study. He does this by setting his research objectives and research questions. The research objectives or questions pinpoint what new knowledge the research will produce. Both objectives and questions tell the same thing but in different ways. For example, the researcher, in his study, may want to know the reasons for not displaying the citizen's charters by the public offices following the prescribed format of the government. In this case, he can write his research objectives in this way: *The objective of this study is to find out the reasons the public offices have for not displaying their citizen's charters following the prescribed format of the government.* This objective can be written as a research question in this way: *Why do the public offices not display their citizen's charters following the prescribed format of the government?* Usually, research sets one broad/general research objective/question, followed by a couple of specific research objectives/questions. Research can set either research objectives or research questions or both.

The other parts of the scientific process, i.e., writing a research proposal, methods of collecting and analyzing data, and writing a research report, will be discussed in some other sessions. The following section gives an idea about variables and data which are fundamental to research work.

Variables and Data

The whole research work revolves around some critical concepts. They refer to our understandings about social phenomena. Variables are those concepts or entities that take different values from person to person. Therefore, all concepts are not variables. In the example of the citizen's charter initiative, the concept of '*citizen's charter*' is not a variable if it does not take different values.

Nevertheless, if we use the concept of '*format of the citizen's charter*', then it will be a variable because it will take different values such as '*complete*' or '*incomplete*'. '*Place of displaying the citizen's charter*' can be another variable and '*inside office room*', '*outside office room*', '*in both places*', and '*nowhere*' can be the values which the variable can take. On the other hand, the concept of '*data*' refers to the values that the variables take. In the examples we have used so far, '*complete*' or '*incomplete*' and '*inside office room*', '*outside office room*', '*in both places*', and '*nowhere*' are the data.

Variables are of qualitative (categorical) and quantitative categories. Qualitative variables are those whose values cannot be expressed in numbers. All the examples we have used above are qualitative variables. On the other hand, quantitative variables are those that take numerical values such as '*age*', '*income*', and '*service delivery time*'. The values for these variables will be, for example, *37 years*, *35750 taka*, and *3 working days*. Therefore, *37 years*, *35750 taka*, and *3 working days* are data. We can do arithmetic operations (+ - × ÷) with quantitative variables which are not possible in the case of qualitative variables.

Quantitative variables can be discrete or continuous. A discrete variable takes on finite numbers of values while a continuous variable can take any numbers of values. '*Number of service seekers*' and '*cost of a service*' are examples of a discrete variable. '*Service delivery time*' is a continuous variable as it can take on any numbers of values. If a service takes 49 minutes to be delivered to a service seeker, the '*service delivery time*' becomes a variable, and, in this particular case, the data is 49 minutes.