

EDITORIAL

Introduction

The Quest for Knowledge in Social Sciences

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It cannot be that axioms established by argumentation can suffice for the discovery of new works, since the subtlety of nature is greater many times over than the subtlety of argument.

— Francis Bacon

The quest for knowledge about self and the circumstances in which one lives is perhaps as old as human beings. It is this quest which has been the mother of all myths and doctrines, and philosophies and sciences, including social sciences. Social sciences, as we know them today, have emerged out of social philosophies of various kinds as a result of the eighteenth century intellectual movement called Enlightenment; a movement which emphasised reason and rationality over religion and tradition. The success of natural sciences, and particularly physics, inspired various emergent social sciences to adopt it as a model in their quest for reliable knowledge about human beings and their conditions of life.

In the course of the evolution of the social sciences, however, there has been considerable reflection on the nature of their disciplines as a science, and the strategy that they can and cannot adopt to approximate the ideal of science in their quest for knowledge. This continuing reflection and strategising in social sciences is discussed under the rubric 'research methodology'. Reflecting as it were 'the growing-pains of an immature discipline', it is in sociology, than in other social sciences, that there has been a preoccupation with research methodology. Sociologists have remained, what French mathematician and philosopher Jules Henri Poincare (1854-1912) long ago called, 'hierophants of methodology' (Merton, 1968: 141).

Considering the long existence of human beings on earth, the quest for social science knowledge is very recent. Obviously, for centuries, human beings lived without social scientific knowledge; they lived with commonsensical knowledge, handed down from generation to generation through socialisation and modified suitably in each

generation. How, then, is social scientific knowledge different from commonsensical knowledge?¹ Common sense is taken-for-granted knowledge. It is derived from long human experience and is designed to cope with the routine activities of everyday life. However, such knowledge is frequently inconsistent and contradictory. This is because it is not a product of deliberate or rigorous thought: it does not develop according to a consistent, systematic and cumulative process. There are no objective criteria for assessing the merits of apparently conflicting common sense statements.

Social sciences, on the other hand, seek to go beyond a ritual stock of knowledge to an objective assessment of the social world. Based on the discovery of facts, they aim to provide proven explanations of the way social reality works. This distinguishes social scientific knowledge from other kinds of knowledge, for example, magical knowledge and religious knowledge, which are primarily a matter of faith. A particular magical or religious belief-system will be accepted by those believing in it; any serious questioning of the belief system will result in the formation of another belief system or sub-system of beliefs (for instance, sects or denominations). Social scientific knowledge, however, is open to question; it is doubt rather than faith which is the driving force of all science, including social sciences.

On a closer examination, it will be revealed that the above view of science is too simplistic. For, there may be 'facts', but they do not present themselves directly to us as such. Rather, phenomena appear to us as facts because we selectively interpret the world about us. We may perceive and interpret the world according to our particular practical interests. In other words, ways of seeing the world are not simply a result of the physical act of looking at the world. The selective perception of the world also occurs in response to our attempt to understand and explain the world. That is, the 'facts' of perception are meaningful as facts only because they have been identified and understood in terms of an explanatory model of the world. Thus, what is a 'fact' is essentially the product of interpretation and selection.

It can be argued that the establishment of scientific truth is ultimately an act of faith not unlike that associated with religion. For example, if we think that knowledge can be gained through observation, we are likely to believe that our senses give us an accurate picture of reality. But do we really 'know' that what we see, hear or feel is actually there? How do we know we are not dreaming or imagining things? We do not, of course; such a belief in the truth of what our senses tell us rests on an act of faith just as a religious belief does.

We could consider the method that science uses to mark it off from other kinds of knowledge. Controlled laboratory experimentation is perhaps the hallmark of natural sciences. However, in some sciences, such as astronomy, direct experimentation with the raw data is clearly technically impossible. Even so, the scientific status of astronomy is not challenged

because of this practical problem. This suggests that there may be more than one way of going about scientific investigation. There may be different methods of collecting evidence. More importantly, there may be different ideas about what can be accepted as evidence. All this raises a host of questions: Are propositions only to be accepted if supported by directly observable data? Do explanatory models differ from one another? Can a phenomenon be accounted for in more or less adequate ways? With reference to social sciences, these and similar issues are the substance of 'the philosophy of the social sciences' (see Brown, 1963; Lessnoff, 1974; Mukherji, 2000; Ryan, 1970). Scholars engaged in social research must have a sound understanding of this philosophy.

THE FOUR ASPECTS OF RESEARCH

In simple terms, research may be defined as an activity that consists of *asking questions* and *attempting to answer them*. The attempt at answering questions does not mean that the researcher will eventually find a satisfactory answer. It is likely that the researcher may end up with more questions about the phenomenon than he/she had set out to answer. This must not be viewed as a negative reflection of the way the research was conducted; rather, it is a valuable contribution to the discipline(s), as questions direct the practitioners of the discipline(s) to hitherto unknown aspects of the phenomenon in question. After all, questioning is the driving force of any science.

Thus, asking meaningful questions (that is, formulation of the research problem) is the fundamental step which determines how the researcher goes about studying a phenomenon and the eventual usefulness of his/her findings. Intellectual curiosity (that is, the desire to gain knowledge), practicality (that is, the urgency to solve a problem), and intrinsic orderliness (that is, observation of a regularity or pattern) of a phenomenon may motivate a researcher to ask questions. Personal experience, state of knowledge on the subject of research, social premiums (that is, 'hotness' of a topic and availability of money for researching it), everyday life and personal values of the researcher may also play an important role in the selection of the research problem (see Neuman, 1994: 110).

'A problem well put', as the aphorism goes, 'is half solved'. However, there is no formal recipe for the formulation of a research problem. Systematic immersion in the subject matter and training in the art of interrogating the existing stock of knowledge about a phenomenon will help the researcher in this (see Greer, 1977).

What are the characteristics of 'good' research questions? According to Punch (1996: 49), 'good' research questions are:

Clear: They can be easily understood, and are unambiguous.

Specific: Their concepts are at a specific enough level to connect to data indicators.

Answerable: We can see what data are required to answer them, and how the data will be obtained.

Interconnected: They are related to each other in some meaningful way, rather than being unconnected.

Substantively relevant: They are interesting and worthwhile questions for the investment of research efforts.

Be it in the natural or social sciences, the questions we ask about the world do not suddenly appear out of the blue. Rather, our questions only arise within the context of general interpretations of what the world is, or what Hughes (1976) has called our 'meaning systems'. Different models of reality will lead to different propositions about what reality is, and so different ways of establishing what can be accepted as real, different ways of justifying the data relevant to reality, and different strategies for collecting such data.

These four aspects of research and understanding are built into all meaning systems. They are respectively designated by four key terms, namely:

1. *Ontology:* Ontological issues are concerned with *being* — that is, with what *is*, what we believe to exist. Here, then, the question may be: 'What is the particular object of social research or subject matter of a social science discipline?'
2. *Epistemology:* Epistemological issues are concerned with *knowing* — that is: What sort of statements will we accept to justify what we believe to exist?
3. *Methodology:* Methodological issues are concerned with the *logic of inquiry* — that is: How are we to discover and validate what we think exists?
4. *Methods:* Issues of method concern the *technique* for collecting data — that is: Which specific techniques do we use to get at evidence which will support our propositions? (Jayaram, 1989: 3).

All these four aspects of research and understanding are closely tied to one another. That is, neither methodologies nor methods are constructed or chosen in isolation from ontological and epistemological positions. Thus, the way we get at knowledge and the techniques we use to collect evidence are directly related to our image of reality and the way we think we can know it. Different ontological and epistemological positions generate different methodologies and methods of research (Jayaram, 1989: 4).

In social sciences there has been and continues to be considerable debate about the nature of social reality. Although some texts on research methodology often skate over this issue, it is apparent that there is no one undisputed or self-evident research strategy to be adopted. Following Kuhn's analysis of 'the structure of scientific revolutions' (1970), social sciences may be described as multi-paradigmatic disciplines. They are

characterised by a methodological pluralism: there is no one style of social research, with one method which is *the* method. Much depends on the question(s) that a researcher sets out to answer, and the ontological and epistemological assumptions that he/she makes. A trained researcher examines upfront the ontological and epistemological assumptions that he/she makes about the reality that he/she wants to study, and accordingly adopts the methodology and methods most appropriate for its study.

THE DEBATE ON METHODOLOGICAL PERSPECTIVES

Notwithstanding their methodological pluralism, social sciences are not in complete chaos. It is possible to identify at a very general level the major ontological, epistemological and methodological perspectives that social scientists have adopted. Koshy Tharakan [in this Issue] distinguishes two philosophical approaches regarding the methodology of social sciences: the positivistic and the anti-positivistic. The former, following the French philosopher and sociologist Auguste Comte (1798-1857), proclaims methodological monism (that is, the unity of method as the basis of all science), and the latter, following the German philosopher Wilhelm Dilthey (1833-1911) and the German sociologist Max Weber (1864-1920), advocates methodological dualism (that is, separate methodologies for natural sciences and human sciences).

Tharakan examines the methodological debate between positivists and anti-positivists. Positivism, he emphasises, claims that 'the methodological procedures of natural sciences can be applied to social phenomena so as to form a science of society'. As opposed to this, anti-positivism argues that 'the method of social sciences is fundamentally different from that of natural sciences', and most of its exponents even 'debunk the idea of forming a "science" of society'.² After juxtaposing positivism and anti-positivism, Tharakan shows how phenomenology — propounded by Edmund Husserl in philosophy, Maurice Merleau-Ponty in psychology, and Alfred Schutz in sociology — mediates between the two diametrically opposite methodologies, and, thereby defends 'a conception of social science that does not violate the central tenets of anti-positivism'.

One observation of Tharakan needs emphasis here. That is, in its quest for objective knowledge, the positivist methodology 'completely relegates the perspective of the actors'. This is tantamount to 'imposing the perspective of the scientists or the policy makers upon the people'. The programme of 'planning from the above', resulting from the positivist methodology, 'suppresses the voice of the people'. While the *verstehen* approach of the methodological dualists does justice to the perspective of the actors, it 'institutes a sharp boundary between the natural sciences and the social sciences' and it tends to 'insulate the social from the domain of nature'. The 'new interpretivism', which responds to this problem, 'spins off a welter of interpretations that lead

to the impasse of unmitigated relativism'. Tharakan concludes that a phenomenological methodology provides a solution by 'synthesising the empirical and the interpretive elements of social inquiry'.

The positivist dispute, which shaped the debates in the philosophy of the social sciences for much of the twentieth century, has been overshadowed by the debates centring round 'constructivism'. During the past decade or so, constructivism as a methodological perspective has entered and gained a vantage position in virtually all social sciences. Sasheej Hegde [in this Issue] notes how constructivism seemed 'to radically challenge established views and "truths", even seeking to subvert what has been characterised as the Western rationalist tradition of scholarly and scientific inquiry'. Constructivism holds that social reality is not stable and objective; it is recreated in and through human discourse.

Hegde notes that there are different kinds of constructivism: 'distinguishing between positions that articulate an idea of society as socially constructed, those that affirm a view of scientific knowledge as constructed by society, and a more radical notion that science itself constructs society'. The variety of positions notwithstanding, there is a discernible undercurrent of assessments of 'a possible basis for a new epistemology relevant to modern concerns'. That is, constructivism has opened new and refreshing avenues for research; it has led to a movement of critical questioning of cultures of inquiry in social sciences.

Reading constructivist literature, according to Hegde, however, reveals a 'macho constructionist view' of social reality. He finds a strong constructionist view of social and historical reality to be 'partly trivial' and 'partly misleading'. It is trivial 'because objects of the social and material world cannot be understood without human interpretations'. It is misleading because social constructions are always constructions of something; hence, they are not entirely arbitrary, and people are not able to design the world deliberately according to their wishes. Therefore, 'constructivist insights should not be seen in contradiction with realist ontology'. In this context, Hegde examines 'truth as empirical adequacy', and makes out a case for moving 'beyond relativism'.

ON THE DISTINCTION BETWEEN QUANTITATIVE AND QUALITATIVE METHODOLOGIES

One offshoot of the positivism versus anti-positivism methodological debate has been the distinction between 'quantitative' and 'qualitative' methodologies. Since the 1980s, this distinction has become entrenched in social science research: texts books on research methodology deal with this distinction elaborately, scores of books have been written exclusively on quantitative or qualitative methods, and these methods form the core of separate courses on research methodology. Social

scientists are even divided into camps, fashionably called 'quanti' and 'quali' (in student circles),³ each challenging the validity, reliability, and rigour of the other.

One should recognise that quantity and quality are two dimensions of a thing, one amenable for measurement and the other can only be described to capture its essence. As such, they could be viewed as complementary rather than being opposed to each other. It is true that quantitative methodology is rooted in positivist epistemology, whereas qualitative methodology is grounded in non-positivistic, if not necessarily anti-positivistic, epistemology. Which methodology a researcher adopts, obviously depends on his/her ontological and epistemological assumptions vis-a-vis the reality being studied. Failure to recognise this and blindly adhering to 'quali' or 'quanti' methodology for its own sake results in methodological fundamentalism. As all fundamentalisms do, methodological fundamentalism puts blinkers on the eyes of a researcher.

Over half a century ago, Sorokin critiqued the tendency among sociologists and other social scientists to uncritically apply quantitative techniques, especially to claim scientific status for their research, as 'metrophrenic preoccupation', and the cult of numerology in psychosocial studies as 'quantophrenia' (1958: Chs. 7-8). To be sure, Sorokin was not against using quantitative methods: 'So long as the method is genuinely mathematical and is applied to those psychosocial facts which lend themselves to quantitative analysis, it proves fruitful and deserves ever-increasing cultivation' (Sorokin, 1958: 103). However,

When the true quantitative method is replaced by pseudo mathematical imitations; when the method is misused and abused in various ways; when it is applied to phenomena which, so far, do not lend themselves to quantification; and when it consists in the manipulation of mathematical symbols in a vacuum or in the mere transcription of mathematical formulae on paper without tying them to the relevant psychosocial units — then the approach misfires. Under these conditions, use of mathematical method becomes a mere quantophrenic preoccupation having nothing in common with mathematics and giving no cognition of the psychosocial world (Sorokin, 1958: 103).⁴

Sorokin's was a critique of quantophrenia in sociology and psychosocial sciences. But Andreski finds, besides other social sciences, economics too resorting to 'quantification as camouflage' (1972: Ch. 10). Since 'money provides a ready-made quantified criterion, ..."figures" with an attainment of true exactitude', economics has developed as a social science which has 'opportunities for measurement unrivalled in the other social sciences' (Andreski, 1972: 140 and 142). However, its 'infatuation with numbers and formulae' has often led to 'empirical irrelevance and fraudulent postures of expertise'. Many economists claim

to act as arbiters on matters of planning, on the assumption (whose efficacy depends on its being tacitly made rather than explicitly recognised) that the factors which can be measured must serve as the basis for decision. In truth there is no reason whatsoever to presume that amenability to measurement must correspond to importance; and the assumption in question has often led economists to aid and abet the depredations of a soul-destroying and world-polluting commercialism and bureaucratic expansionism, by silencing the defenders of aesthetic and humane values with the trumpets of one-sided statistics (Andreski, 1972: 142-43).

Sorokin's debunking of quantophobia and Andreski's criticism of 'quantification as camouflage' in social science research, besides Darrell Huffs 'splendid piece of blasphemy against the preposterous religion of our time', namely, statistics (John Connell on Huffs *How to Lie with Statistics*, 1973: back cover), should gladden the hearts of fundamentalists of the qualitative methodology camp. However, I should hasten to add that Andreski is also critical of the way qualitative methodology is used in social sciences; it is also a form of sorcery, according to him.

Most social researchers, who swear by qualitative methodology, are into it by default, not by choice or training. Arithmophobia (the fear of numbers) has turned some of them away from quantitative analysis, notwithstanding its immense potentials; others opt for qualitative methodology thinking that it is a soft option. A good qualitative study is more demanding in rigour and personal involvement of the researcher than a quantitative study. Often, researcher scholars learn this the hard way! Thus, which way to go — the quantitative or the qualitative — depends on the ontological and epistemological assumptions that a researcher makes. Opting for quantitative or qualitative methodology before being clear of those assumptions is akin to putting the cart before the horse.

Be that as it may, a distinction needs to be made between quantitative and qualitative *methodologies*, on the one hand, and quantitative and qualitative *data*, on the other. Thus, in a predominantly quantitative study briefed by positivistic ontology and epistemology, one could use qualitative data. Similarly, in a predominantly qualitative study briefed by non-positivistic ontology and epistemology, one could use quantitative data. Qualitative data serve to illustrate the statistical results, and lend the human dimension to the dehumanising tendency of social statistics. Similarly, the use of quantitative data in a qualitative study can enrich the descriptive understanding of the phenomenon.

Symbolic Interactionists like Denzin (1989) have recommended the use of multiple methods to explain social phenomena, and Denzin has described this approach as 'triangulation'.⁵ This is now a widely adopted practice, especially among qualitative researchers. Since qualitative researchers often use more than three methods,

'triangulation may not be the most accurate descriptor' (Abercrombie, Hill and Turner, 2000: 364). Nevertheless, the term has come to stay in social science research. Denzin has identified four forms of triangulation:

- (i) *data triangulation* — use of a number of types of data in a project;
- (ii) *investigator triangulation* — use of several different researchers;
- (iii) *theory triangulation* — application of multiple perspectives to interpret the data; and
- (iv) *methodological triangulation* — use of multiple methods to study a single issue.

Generally, a quantitative study starts with a predetermined research design. If it is explanatory in design, then it has as its objective the testing of hypotheses. In such a study, the concepts have to be clearly defined, the values of the variables have to be categorically identified, the instruments of data collection have to be pre-tested and finalised, and the sampling method and strategy has to be decided in advance of embarking on data collection. Most often, the code design and analytical procedures are also worked out before data collection. A well-designed quantitative explanatory study is premised upon the availability of a reliable stock of descriptive data, and often on the existence of theories about the phenomenon being studied.

However, it is not always that a researcher has the luxury of a reliable stock of descriptive data and the existence of theories to guide the directions of the study. It is here that qualitative methodology, which does not make serious demands in terms of design and whose outcome is not dependent on such design either, is useful. With the respect to the phenomena on which not much is theorised and about which not much reliable descriptive data are available, a qualitative study may ideally be embarked upon to explore 'the sensitising concepts' and generate hypotheses. Again, how the researcher goes about this depends on his/her research question.

SAMPLE SURVEY AND QUANTITATIVE ANALYSIS

Sample survey is one of the most acclaimed research strategies in many social sciences. Just as experiment is the defining research method in many a natural science, sample survey is the defining research method in social sciences such as economics, social demography and sociology. Although sample survey has a long history, dating perhaps before the birth of modern social sciences, it has been vastly improved as part of social science research during the last century. The advancements in information and communication technology have further revolutionised this method. However, some issues concerning its quality and credibility have persisted.

R. Sooryamoorthy [in this Issue] highlights the undiminishing appeal of sample survey in empirical social research, not only as a

method of data collection but also as a research design. Among the persistent issues in sample surveys, he examines response rate and response error and the ways of dealing with them. He then discusses the recent trends in and the emergent forms of surveys — computer-assisted telephone interviewing, web surveys, and email surveys — and their pros and cons, in the background of the advancements in information and communication technology and in data management.

If the advancements in sample surveys have enabled the collection of large-scale data from more reliable samples, the advancements in computing techniques and the development of software packages for statistical analysis have revolutionised the way we deal with the data so collected. With the advancements in quantitative data analysis, it is now possible to handle large-scale data and to examine complex relationships among characteristics and arrive at findings unthinkable a couple of decades ago. D.P. Singh [in this Issue] discusses the application of two such statistical techniques of data analysis — logistic regression and multi-level analysis — and the resulting interpretations.

As Singh notes, the main objective of any research using quantitative data is 'to find out the variations in resultant responses (outcome or dependent variables) and try to explain these variations by references to the characteristics of respondents (independent variables). For this, researchers have been using a repertoire of statistical techniques. However, when the study is based on a complex sample survey design, the analysis of data becomes complicated. The data generated by the National Family Health Survey (NFHS) (1992-1993 and 1998-1999) and the successive rounds of National Sample Survey (NSS), using multi-stage sampling design, are two cases in point. Using large-scale data available from the second round of the NFHS (1998-1999) about Maharashtra, Singh elucidates the application of logistic regression and multi-level analysis.

Space has been a neglected dimension in social sciences. The classical tradition of research in social sciences, inspired as it was by positivism, accorded recognition to time, but not to space. Thanks to social geographers, the analysis of space-society nexus is now put on the agenda of social research. R.B. Bhagat [in this Issue] discusses the methodological issues concerning the incorporation of space in social research. Such incorporation is not a mechanical exercise; it has its ontological and epistemological underpinnings.

According to Bhagat, the space-society relationship could be analysed either quantitatively (at the macro level) or qualitatively (at the micro level). Using data from a study of fertility, education and development, conducted by Jean Dreeze and Mamta Murthi, he illustrates the quantitative analysis of socioeconomic and spatial variables, and the spatial effects on fertility behaviour as measured by regression analysis. Focusing on social mapping, he explains the

incorporation of space in qualitative analysis. Finally, using a hypothetical example, he shows how the space—time matrix of quantitative and qualitative data could be integrated.

To answer their research questions, social researchers need not always have to collect data afresh (primary data). They can use data that are readily available (secondary data). One must, no doubt, exercise caution in using secondary data: they may be incomplete, discontinuous, conceptually incongruous, dated, and so on. However, considering the scale on which data on certain social characteristics are available, and the time-series for which they are available, makes them one of the most economical bases of social research to start with. Such databases can be used for formulating hypotheses, as supplementary data to buttress findings from the primary data, or just as background information on the problem under investigation.

T.V. Sekher [in this Issue] provides an overview of the changing databases and priorities in demographic and health research in India. The decennial Census of India, the largest administrative exercise and the second largest headcount in the world, has been a veritable gold mine for social researchers since 1872. Besides the Census, Sekher reviews databases such as the NEHS, Sample Registration System, Civil Registration System, Reproductive and Child Health Survey, and other databases for health research. It appears that the wealth of secondary data available, collected at huge cost to the public exchequer, remains sadly underutilised. Should they turn their attention to these databases, research scholars could benefit immensely.

ETHNOGRAPHY AND FIELDWORK

If sample survey, statistical analysis and empirical generalisations are the principal elements of quantitative methodology, ethnography, fieldwork and grounded understanding are the hallmarks of qualitative methodology. As mentioned earlier, these methodologies are premised upon contrasting ontologies and epistemologies. Keeping positivism as a reference point, N. Nakkeeran [in this Issue] elucidates the epistemological foundation of qualitative methodology. Qualitative methodology holds that the reality social scientists study 'is not like falling apples or oscillating pendulums, but human beings and human mind'. This reality is not given; it is not out there. It involves human consciousness (subjectivity), and includes beliefs, values, intentions and meanings within a culture. Obviously, this reality is not open to the external gaze, and it is not amenable to measurement and causal explanation. The social researcher can only understand it through interpretation by locating it in its context.

Such an epistemological position naturally entails a different set of research methods and research procedures. Nakkeeran outlines the key characteristics of qualitative research methods: the naturalist (not in the sense of positivism) approach, the importance of context, the

emphasis on holism; the smaller compass but intensive/in-depth study; the long period of data collection; and the emphasis on understanding meaning and process. The key data collection methods that this methodology adopts are narratives and descriptions using unstructured interviews with informants, ethnography and participant observation, and focus group discussion and case study. In qualitative methodology, data analysis — reduction and storing of in the form of memos, notes, field diary, logs, matrices, maps and pictorial/schematic representations — goes on simultaneously with data collection. The objective being grounded understanding, rather than generalisation and causal explanation, this methodology adopts 'theoretical sampling', where the fieldwork goes on till the researcher reaches a point of saturation — that is, when he/she gets no more new theoretical leads or finds gaps in data.

Ethnography has been the qualitative method *par excellence*. It originated in the twentieth century intellectual currents of the British school of social anthropology (providing cultural descriptions of pre-industrial communities, especially in the colonies) and the Chicago school of sociology (examining the socioeconomic situation of the marginalised and dispossessed groups). In both schools, however, the focus was on the element of the local — that is, on small communities or groups that could be distinguished from others. 'In the wake of post-modernism as a paradigm in social anthropology and sociology, and globalisation as a force with impact on political, economic and social relations,' according to Nita Mathur [in this Issue], 'local cultures that have fed some of the best ethnographies seem to call out for renewed interpretation and understanding.'

Mathur observes that the post-modernist critique of ethnography heralds 'a major challenge to description of local cultures as finished products'. Post-modernists argue the case for 'multiple realities'; globalisation's thrust has been on global networks and interactions leading to 'cultural homogenisation'. However, both post-modernism and globalisation call for 'realistic adjustments between global processes and local concerns, failing which, local cultures will hold no ground as the wave of globalisation sweeps over them'. Mathur examines the representation of global-local interface in ethnographic writings, and argues that ethnography will 'survive the onslaught of globalisation, if nothing else, by sheer rearrangement of local and global cultures'.

Ethnography entails a long period of intensive study of a community through face-to-face interaction with its members, attempting a holistic understanding of its society and culture. What happens to the ethnographer in the course of his/her fieldwork in the community? Vibha Arora [in this Issue] provides a reflective account of her fieldwork in Sikkim: how the ethnographic terrain and the fieldwork dynamics transformed 'a hostile field into a collaborative ethnographic field' for the fieldworker, and what the fieldwork entailed.

Arora notes that fieldwork transforms the identity of the fieldworker in the field and in his/her discipline. Her fieldwork did not cease with her physical exit from Sikkim. By including archival data, worldwide web representations, audio-visual material, personal papers and legal case files, her ethnographic engagement has been a continuing one. Adopting the idea of 'writing machine' from George Marcus, she argues that 'ethnographic writing is a decision, and fieldwork is not a trope of entry and exit, but assumes an ever presence in us'. 'We take positions in the field, off the field, in writing and by not writing ethnographically.' As such, 'ethnographies are impressionist and impressionable', and the field and our locations and positions in it 'remain continually in flux'.

In quantitative research figures count; what is important in qualitative research are words. Visual images are neglected in the former and are on the margins in the latter. Dalia Chakrabarti [in this Issue] makes out a case for visuals and the visual method in social research and social work practice. She narrates the story of the visual method: its origin and development, its relatively insecure epistemological status, and its recent flourish. For a fuller realisation of its potentials, she advocates its use as an element of triangulation in qualitative research. She argues that 'both images and figures may supplement each other, yielding a set of different, but inter-related, representations of sufferance and its negotiations'. By way of illustration, she draws our attention to the possible use of short documentary films, audio-visual fillers and videos in India.

RESEARCH, SOCIAL EMPOWERMENT AND THE ETHICAL QUANDARY

Social research, involving humans studying humans, raises questions going beyond the search for facts and what to do with them. Reflecting on the process and product of anthropological research, Vineetha Menon [in this Issue] examines the issues of power and ethics. She stresses the importance of contextualising the knowledge generated by a researcher in terms of his/her biography and his/her times. Drawing insights and illustrations from missionary-turned-anthropologist Verrier Elwin's biographical sketches, she highlights how the multiple subjectivities of a researcher could interfere with the knowledge he/she generates and make that knowledge experientially more meaningful and richer. Menon argues that 'the role of the researcher in relation to policy severely limits the empowering nature of knowledge and shrouds the relationship between the research process and the utilisation of the knowledge from research for social transformation'.

Manish Kumar Thakur [in this Issue] broadens the scope of the discussion on the ethical quandary of practising research in social sciences in general. By the nature of activity that he/she is engaged in, a social researcher has to come to terms with the ethical issues that his/her activity entails. Thakur analyses these issues in terms of the relationships between the researcher and the researched, the researcher and his/her

peers, the researcher and the sponsors of research, and the researcher and the public. What is problematic is that there is hardly any consensus on how to address these issues. Professional associations of social scientists and the institutions in which they work seem to have an important role in this regard. That ethical issues of social research are on the anvil of discussion among its practitioners is, however, noteworthy.

The 12 essays to follow elucidate in detail the various facets and issues of social research that are sketched in brief in this introduction. While they cover a wide range of topics, noteworthy gaps remain. Participatory and action research, case study, the use of archives in social research, feminist critique of mainstream research, and so on, are some themes which would have enriched this special issue. Hopefully, they will be covered in a subsequent issue of the journal.

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NOTES

1. In answering this question, I have depended heavily on my adaptation of two chapters of a British textbook on sociology (see Jayaram, 1989: 1 - 4). For a lucid analysis of the distinction between science and common sense, see Nagel's introduction in his *The Structure of Science: Problems in the Logic of Scientific Explanation* (1961: 1-14).
2. Analysing the epistemological foundation of qualitative research methodology, N. Nakkeeran [in this Issue] discusses the methodological positions of positivism and anti-positivism.
3. Thanks to Ms. Prerna Kumar, I realise that these terms are used not only by students, but also by the faculty.
4. Sorokin was equally critical of psychosocial tests, which he debunked as 'testomania', and the dominance of testing specialists in psychosocial sciences as 'testocracy' (1958: Chs. 4-6).
5. Triangulation is 'a method used by land surveyors and map-makers to locate a spot, by taking bearings from three known points and plotting their intersection' (Abercrombie, Hill and Turner, 2000: 364).

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