

RESEARCH ARTICLE

Effective Fieldwork in Social Science Research: A Pragmatic Discussion

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Abstract

Field work is an essential part in social science research to address various research questions properly with emphasis on region specific issues. This paper draws empirical knowledge from the field work done in various parts of West Bengal, India and tries to explore the possible issues of fieldwork in social science research and tries to formulate the solutions that are applicable for the particular issue. The focus of the paper is field issues which are discussed keeping in view the frequency of occurrence of various issues and their relevance in social science study.

Keywords: *Framework of questionnaire, Structure of questionnaire, Homogeneous information, Researcher Bias.*

Introduction

Social science research in present day times is largely based on empirical observations rather than theoretical discussions. These empirical observations relate field work in various branches of social sciences. Field work has emerged as a major contributor for empirical research conducted in various social science disciplines. The advantages of field work are seen in many part of the research, major is the ground truth verification of facts and figures, and to reach at the levels where secondary data could not reach.

The unreliable nature of secondary data forces social scientist to go for a field survey. Where the sources of secondary data are distinct and definite, there also relevance of primary survey is seen; it is then done to fulfil the minute objectives which cannot be satisfied with the secondary data sets. The major issue of the field work for social science research is that it happens in an uncontrolled environment, rather than the controlled laboratory environment. This unusual nature of environment generates many issues that are sometimes special and sometimes common to the social scientists. The effectiveness of field work depends on a) the reliability of data generated b) presentation of the data with proper techniques to draw the best conclusion. As social sciences deal with both qualitative and quantitative data, it is sometimes difficult to express qualitative statements in numerical form. The major challenge to a social scientist is to

narrate the exact situations in words or in numeric. The narration part often relates some field issues. The task of a social scientist is to understand and tackle the entire field issues on spot to get the best result within a limited time span. For this, prior concepts related with fieldwork are necessary.

Primary research, however, has got enormous significance for planners and researchers. The major obstacles, so far a social scientist face, are diverse as well as case sensitive. Still, this paper tries to examine the obstacles for field work in social sciences and highlights the probable solve to do an effective fieldwork.

A Discussion on Field Issues

Extensive fieldwork in different rural areas of West Bengal provides the background for the identification and handling of different field issues. The issues may come in more elaborate or in narrower forms. Keeping this factor in consideration, the issues for discussion are selected on the basis of the priorities and on the basis of the frequency of their occurrence in ground. This section provides a practical discussion on emerging issues and tries to figure out the possible solution that was experienced from the various field surveys.

The first and foremost issue is the dissimilarity between the objectives of the study and the

framework of the questionnaire. This requires rigorous effort to formulate concepts and defining objectives. The dissimilarity between the defined objectives and structured questionnaire drives the research in an unknown direction.

Deep understanding about physical and social landscape of the region is a must at preliminary stage. In most of the cases, objectives of the social science studies are diverse and widespread in nature. This is a great task of the researcher to see the objectives vividly and try to find out the questions that can best address the issues. Two steps can minimize the problem, first is to break the major objectives into the smallest parts and to make a list of questions for each part. Second is the editing and selection of proper questions and, to make a possible list of tables that may helpful to explain the arguments. Variables should be taken carefully and questions should address the list of variables.

Second issue is the structure of the questionnaire. It may be open ended or closed ended based on the focus of the research. But where there is a combination of open ended and closed ended questions, unnecessary questions arrives in the flow of discussion. These two sections should be entirely different and same category questions should be placed together to save the time and energy of the researcher. Closed ended questions should be placed in the first section to identify which questions should be asked from the next open ended section. At many times, the answers of closed ended questions set the limit for next open ended portion. For proper arrangement of questions in a structured questionnaire, it is necessary to do a pilot survey for all category of sample to identify the sequence and importance of questions.

Third is the issue of the selection of respondents. Proper care should be taken to choose the respondents depending on the nature of the study. The control and surveyed group of respondents should be very carefully fixed. For that, a pilot survey with complete house listing is the best solution. A detailed house listing of the selected area helps to find out the list of actual respondents and provides a glimpse of the field load in later stage. Field work can be effectively planned if the distinct workload and the time span provide the scope for empirical planning. Even, it is a practical experience to find the same respondent giving different answers at the time of pilot and main survey. It may change the respondent's category of sample and create the necessity to use different questionnaire to address the issue of that particular category. In those

contradictory cases, it is better to fix some proxy questions to get the idea about actual category of sample. If contradictions still prevail, it's better to exclude that response from the entire data set in an extreme situation.

Fourth is the diversified information that comes with informal interactions with respondents. These are sometimes very helpful and sometimes are not usable at all, though at the time of survey generally all information seems very useful. This information is sometimes receptive (verbal) and sometimes deceptive (can be captured through the body languages and facial expressions of the respondents which are highly difficult). A video of the whole conversation helps to observe it minutely even at later stage of research. These may provide the best empirical arguments for different field issues that are difficult to address. In fact, the success of social science researcher lies in the capture of true situation, which is very difficult and completely observation based. This is useful for getting insight about the situations and thus to generate qualitative data. Video recordings are also helpful in the cases where the language of the researcher and the language of the respondents are different. The quality of the local interpreter, especially in rural areas is generally poor, audio-visual tracts are helpful for getting the information translated through a trained interpreter as and when required for the study.

Fifth significant issue related with field work is the collection of proper secondary data from related authorities. This may take repeated attempt and time span to let them understand which type of data is useful for the research. In most of the cases, bunch of secondary data sets remains unusable. In that case, a brief list of information required or a table format is highly usable. This takes short time to get the right information in a framed manner and avoids hassles to go to the offices for many days.

Sixth issue is the researcher bias that may responsible for skewed result. Researcher bias, in most of the time, comes from the tendency to get the answer that can be easily assumed. It depends on a) the way of asking questions, and b) the way of taking responses. This research bias, leads to the definite conclusion, ignoring the scope of research and its various dimensions.

The last important issue faced so far in field work is the homogeneous information from the respondents. This is a very common issue of social science research. This happens due to a) the lack of interest of respondents to answer for long time

and b) the failure of investigator to place the proxy questions that can get the hint for best answer. A long and detailed questionnaire may cause the irritation of both respondent and investigator. Keeping this factor in mind, the questionnaire should be structured, brief and target oriented. It should keep in mind that all respondents are different from one another in terms of their nature, reliability and actions, so answer should not be the same. In fact, the answers should come to a conflicting way, which is a sign of successful research. The past experiences and the social position of the respondents play an important role in defining the answer of the questions. If similar answers come inspite of every care, second/ third stage investigation may be done in a time lapse to get the idea about average answers [1-2].

References

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Conclusion

Present day social science has flourished with many tools like quantitative techniques and their expressions through software, remote sensing and GIS mapping, use of GPS and other tools. But these are the tools for outcomes. We should think about the sensitivity of the research to get the best outcomes. Good outcome with proper techniques can only initiate proper planning and thus ensure sustainable development.

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