Indira Gandhi National Open University
School of Journalism and New Media Studies

# MDCE-006
# RESEARCH METHODS IN DEVELOPMENT COMMUNICATION

**Block**

# 3

**RESEARCH METHODS- QUANLITATIVE**

# UNIT 10 INTERVIEW TECHNIQUES

**Structure**



## 10.0 INTRODUCTION

You have read in the previous units that Interview is one of the most commonly used and fundamental research techniques. Interview is a 'focused, purposive conversation' between the researcher and an informant - it involves asking questions, listening to individuals and recording their responses. You would have watched interviews with political leaders, celebrities, sports persons and even common persons on television channels. Interviews are also conducted for jobs. The broad purpose of any interview is to obtain information. However, when we refer to 'interview as a research technique', its objective and focus is much more systematic and scientific in nature and approach, hence the need to understand the technique. In this unit, we shall focus our attention on Interview techniques which enable a researcher to obtain information that cannot be gained by other research methods.

## 10.1 LEARNING OUTCOMES

After reading this unit, you should be able to:

- discuss Interview as a tool of data collection;
- describe different types of interviews - Informal, Structured, Semi-structured and Unstructured Interviews;
- examine the strengths, limitations and applications of each type of interview; and
- apply interview technique in your research study.

## 10.2 INTERVIEW: CONCEPT AND TYPES

The term interview draws upon the French term *'entreuve* 'which means 'to see one another or meet'. One of the important purposes of research is to get information about people. Many methods and techniques of research are used for this purpose. These include methods such as observation. While observation method involves the study of a phenomenon in natural settings and uncovers the ongoing and present activities of the respondent, it does not explore the past and the opinions, beliefs and motivations of a person. To get that information, it is imperative that 'right questions' are asked, the interview technique allows us to do so. Interviews aim to explore why people are behaving in a particular way and what do they think about something. It usually involves a face-to-face interaction; however, the use of technology allows interviews to be conducted online in social networking sites, through telephones, among others. Before proceeding further, let us first look at the different types of interviews.

Interviews have been variously classified as structured and unstructured, formal and informal and so on. For the purpose of our discussion, we shall follow the classification given by Berger (2000) as all these types of interviews are extensively used in communication research:

- Informal Interviews
- Structured Interviews
- Semi-structured Interviews
- Unstructured (In-depth) Interviews

This block is devoted to qualitative research method hence the focus of our discussion shall be more on the qualitative interviews - semi structured and unstructured interviews; while the remaining two types shall be briefly touched upon, to place them in a context.

## 10.3 INFORMAL INTERVIEWS

Informal interviews are also known as 'informal conversational interviews' which can take place anywhere. As the name suggests, these are not organised systematically or focused with specific questions. The informal nature of the method allows the information to build naturally. Informal interviews are commonly used in field research to gain the confidence of the subject. Informal interviews are generally on one-on-one basis and hence generate highly individualised responses which may vary from one person to another. Informal interviews have been found useful to develop a big picture by obtaining and clarifying information. The individualised nature has been found useful for obtaining information on sensitive issues and can add depth to data obtained by other methods such as participant observation. The interaction can be held even after intervals. In such types of interviews especially those conducted in rural areas, it is possible that the subject may not be fully aware of the information being probed.

The technique is useful largely at an individual level and is less applicable with groups as it may not be possible to get clear understanding of what is being said in a group situation. Like any other tool of data collection, there is a need to establish good rapport with the respondent to open up hence may take more time than other forms of interviews. It also requires certain skills and care in asking questions such as avoiding leading questions etc. The information obtained is random in nature so it may take a long session or more than one session to cover all areas. Moreover, data from one respondent may not be comparable with other respondents as the nature of questions and the sequence is likely to vary from one person to another. In view of the informal nature of the method, subjectivity may also creep in recording responses. According to Bertrand & Hughes (2005), if primary concern of the research is to obtain individual descriptive responses, for instance building upon observational data from field work - these problems may not matter but if you wish to use your interviewees as a sample of a larger population, there will be need to choose more structured interview.

**Activity-2**

Conduct an informal interview on a topic of your choice for five to ten minutes. Identify the pros and cons of undertaking such type of interview. List the issues involved.

**Check Your Progress: 1**

**Note:** 1) Use the space below for your answers.

2) Compare your answers with those given at the end of this Unit.

1) List some strength of Informal Interviews.

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2) List some limitations of Informal Interviews.

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## 10.4 STRUCTURED INTERVIEWS

Structured interviews are useful in obtaining information about prevalence and distribution of an issue from large number of people. Survey Method discussed in Unit 7 of the previous block falls in this category in which we had discussed that questionnaire or interview schedules are designed in advance in a manner in which questions are carefully worded and delivered identically to all the respondents. The resulting data are quantitative and comparable, hence easier to analyse. Such interviews can be completed quickly in the field thus are relatively economical in terms of cost and time.

We had also discussed that greater skill is required while designing questionnaires or interview schedules, which need to be pre-tested. Highly structured questionnaires yield little insight into how people feel about the issues involved and the interviewer may not be able to respond to a valuable issue/situation which does not appear on the schedule and emerges during an interview. In a larger study, individual differences among interviewers may affect the quality of data. At times, it may be difficult to find those selected in the sample, while some people may be reluctant to answer some questions due to reasons such as lack of time, disinterest, language barrier or sensitivity. Structured Interviews are also conducted using telephones and the Internet.

### 10.4.1 Telephonic Interviews

Telephonic interviews are relatively cheaper and easier to conduct. In such interviews, closed ended questions are generally included as these are easier to administer to obtain feedback on an issue under study. Telephonic interviews have been found more useful in journalistic research exploring few focused questions. However, for academic research, these have severe limitations as a tool of data collection. Yet another limitation of a telephonic interview is that in the absence of a comprehensive mobile phone database, there is possibility that some segments of the population may be systematically missed out. About a decade ago, the access to telephones was limited to the affluent sections, but the spread of mobile phones has facilitated access to diverse section of population. In earlier times, the telephone directory published by the telephone departments in different cities used to provide address details and location of the person listed, which is not available any more. Thus it is possible that the sample may not be representative leading to a skew in findings. Moreover, those contacted over phone may not be interested to provide feedback and discontinue the interview midway or give superficial answers thus affecting the quality of data.

### 10.4.2 Online Surveys

Interviews are also conducted online by sending questionnaires through emails and uploading the link on websites. The links take the respondents to different web pages on which the closed-ended questions are listed. The respondent is expected to tick the appropriate response and when all the questions on a page are responded to; s/he has to proceed to the next pages till all questions have been responded. An example of online survey for obtaining feedback on the New Education Policy on Open and Distance Learning and Online courses from different stakeholders is given below. In this survey, three questionnaires were uploaded on IGNOU website requesting feedback from practitioners/experts/ learners and employers with a brief introduction and links:

**New Education Policy: Survey on Open and Distance Learning and Online Courses**

*The Ministry of HRD has entrusted the responsibility of developing Draft Policy on Open and Distance Learning and Online Courses to IGNOU. In this connection you are requested to provide us your valuable feedback in the questionnaire relevant to you available at below link:*

Click here to participate for **Practitioners and Experts** survey

Click here for **Learners** survey

Click here for **Employer** survey

A similar process is followed while using an email listserv in which the link to questionnaire is emailed requesting for feedback. It needs to be mentioned that in online survey, the number of questions is generally kept small - not exceeding 25 to 30 as many a time, the respondent may lose interest midway leading to a high rate of incomplete responses thus loss of data. Further, the use of mobile phones and Internet may reduce the cost of conducting surveys, but technology also introduces its own set of biases. For example, despite its increased outreach; the access to technology is still limited in rural areas and certain sections of society, including women. In addition, linguistic and socio-cultural barriers may also affect the quality of data. Finally, response rates in online surveys are very low; as a result, data from online surveys can be taken only as indicative and not as definitive in terms of results.

**Activity 2**

Prepare an Interview Schedule comprising 15-20 questions to study social media usage patterns of the youth in your area. You may draw upon the do's and don'ts of designing Interview schedule as discussed in unit 7 of Block 2.

**Check Your Progress: 2**

**Note:** 1) Use the space below for your answers.

2) Compare your answers with those given at the end of this Unit.

1) What are the uses of telephonic surveys?

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2) What are the limitations of online surveys?

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## 10.5 SEMI-STRUCTURED INTERVIEWS

Semi structured interviews, as the name suggests are interviews which are neither structured (such in as a field survey) nor totally freewheeling (like unstructured interviews) but placed somewhere in between. The roots of semi structured interviews are in Ethnographic Research and Focus Group Discussion (FGD) comes under this category which has the inherent strength of collecting qualitative data from several people in quickest possible time. In recent years, FGDs have been used precisely to find out how people respond in a group, how their feelings and opinions can be shaped by the experience of discussing the subject with others (Bertrand & Hughes, 2005).

FGD is considered a user friendly and 'non-threatening research method' which participants find stimulating and enjoyable. It has been found useful in assessing people's reaction to new products, service, messages, problems or ideas in a participatory mode. The size of the sample can be increased without increasing time and costs so it is relatively economical. It invites participants to monitor each other, providing checks and balances that do not operate for individual interviews or for surveys (Bertrand and Hughes, 2005). FGDs are also used to help people express themselves openly about sensitive issues as well as to bridge social and cultural differences (Morgan, 1998). FGDs can provide a forum to participants to express themselves. For instance, feminist researchers use FGDs to "provide women with safe space to talk about their own lives and struggles" (Kamberelis & Dimitriadis in Brennen, 2013).

### 10.5.1 Planning Focus Group Discussions

Focus group discussions need to be carefully planned and executed. The researcher outlines a basic checklist of the areas/topics to be covered and also who will attend the discussions. A group comprising 6-9 members is selected purposively for eliciting data on opinions, beliefs and experiences. FGD are free-form discussions by a group of people, led by a moderator designed to obtain information about some topic. The researcher tries, to the extent possible, to maintain the casual quality found in unstructured interviews (Berger, 2000). Focus groups can be exploratory in nature and exercising less control over the groups can lead to wide ranging discussions. The participants respond to the moderator as well as to one another and the conversations and reactions closely approximate normal conditions. It also gives freedom to the researcher to respond to any situation which emerges during the course of interview.

However, FGD should not be considered as a simple way to get a lot of interviews in a hurry - they are 'focused efforts at gathering data'. Merely gathering people together does not guarantee that a meaningful discussion will take place and there must be an effort to gather research data through such focused discussions. Some scholars argue that like any other research method, it is useful to conduct FGD in combination with other qualitative or quantitative research methods. Often focus groups are used as an exploratory technique then followed up with surveys for generalising results for larger populations. Morgan (1998), however, argues that for many purposes, the strengths of focus groups will be entirely sufficient which can be used for varied purposes such as problem identification, planning, implementation and assessment.

### 10.5.2 Process of Focus Group Discussions

For conducting the FGD, you may start by introducing yourself and team members to establish rapport, and to explain the purpose of the session. You should share the need for audio/video recording or note taking, mention the need for a check list and explain its purpose. You must also take the group's informed consent for any such recording and assure that their participation is entirely voluntary. Start the discussion with a focus question and invite response, if you do not get any, address someone and keep the conversation going. Monitor the discussion and keep track of what needs to be covered. It is important for you as a researcher to listen carefully - this will enable you to respond to new ideas and encourage those who have something interesting to say. You should remain flexible if a useful debate is happening, but if discussion goes off track, interrupt politely but firmly. You should refrain from giving your own opinions or try to reach to consensus as that is not the purpose of the FGD. You also need to make eye contact for involving everyone and stay in charge without being obtrusive. The discussion should be kept moving and on track in the light of research objectives. Time needs to be carefully monitored to elicit desired information.

**Limitations:** FGDs are time consuming and expensive. The selection of a representative sample is difficult as people may refuse for various reasons. It is not easy to conduct effectively without proper training. The discussion has to be kept moving and it should not falter at any stage. The data obtained from FGD is not comparable and it requires complex analytical and interpretative techniques.

**Activity-3**

Prepare a list of areas you wish to explore using FGD as a tool of data collection. Sequence them in a logical order and frame in the form of open-ended questions. Administer these questions to a group of 6-8 participants as discussed above and record the experience.

**Check Your Progress: 3**

**Note:** 1) Use the space below for your answers.

2) Compare your answers with those given at the end of this Unit.

1) List some limitations of FGD.

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2) Describe the role of a moderator for the success of FGD.

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## 10.6 UNSTRUCTURED (INDEPTH) INTERVIEWS

An unstructured interview is an 'open-ended conversational exploration of an individual's worldview and gives an insider's perspective'. In-depth interviews which are also known as "intensive interviews" fall in this category. It is a key ethnographic technique of data collection useful for a holistic inductive approach. The method is useful for collecting complex information on opinions, beliefs, attitudes and personal experiences of the respondents. In-depth interview collects qualitative data and is generally used to supplement the information collected through survey method or participant observation. It does not follow a rigidly set structure - some basic questions are outlined and the discussion is largely free-ranging. In-depth interviews elicit verbal responses which are richer as compared to the written responses. These provide useful inputs/feedback for gaining a meaningful understanding of what might be a very different perspective.

The sample size of an in-depth interview is generally kept small as a select few purposively selected people are subjected to a detailed interview, which can be scheduled at a mutually convenient time and place. As compared to survey method, in-depth interviews allow flexibility to the researcher in terms of freedom to ask follow-up questions and seek clarification on an issue. The topics of in-depth interviews are generally in the form of tentative questions which allow the researcher to cover all the topics but also probe further.

In studies involving large number of field investigators for data collection using in-depth interviews, you will have to orient and train the interviewers to create a common understanding and approach to the study. In such studies, it is useful to exchange notes with other interviewers at the end of the day/week to bring about necessary changes in approach in the light of their experience.

**Limitations:** In-depth interviews, like any other form of data collection also have some inherent limitations. These can be conducted on limited number of respondents and can be time consuming. The researcher has little control over the responses as respondents tend to speak more on issues concerning them instead of the subject under study. Less caution can generate enormous data which may be later difficult to organise and analyse hence require more efforts and skills on the part of researcher. Interviewing a number of people every day could be a tiring experience and may cause fatigue. The tendency of getting personally involved with the interviewees may lead to the risk of introducing bias in the results as researcher may impose his/her own perspective.

It is possible that at times, respondents may not be able to properly articulate what they actually think or believe. In such situations, the researcher will have to ask probing questions for seeking clarity. Some respondents may give 'politically correct' statements for various reasons and it will depend upon your skills as an interviewer to adequately examine their responses and arrive at findings.

Purposive sampling technique is generally used for in-depth interviews, which involves choosing the region and the respondents for a specific purpose. In this regard, you may refer to the points discussed in Unit 4, Block-I on Sampling Methods.

**Activity-4**

For undertaking in-depth interviews with Block level officers on a development project of your choice do some background research. List some key areas for exploration and formulate questions on them.

**Check Your Progress: 4**

**Note:** 1) Use the space below for your answers.

2) Compare your answers with those given at the end of this Unit.

1) List some limitations of in-depth interviews.

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2) What steps will you take for planning an in-depth interview?

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## 10.7 INTERVIEWING SKILLS

From above discussion it is clear that despite being a common tool of data collection, interviews are difficult to conduct and require skills as well as certain amount of tact. The following points are common to all the interviews discussed above and need to be kept in view while conducting Interviews:

- You need to build rapport with respondents by making some introductory remarks about the purpose of the study and seek their cooperation. Ensure that you take informed consent that their participation is voluntary and they are willing to cooperate.
- For better results, the interview may precede by a more general information gathering and observation exercise to identify critical areas for pursuing in greater depth.
- You need to ask questions which are clear, neutral and unambiguous. Loaded or leading questions should be avoided which will elicit leading answers (We have discussed different types of questions - leading, ambiguous, double barrel, etc. in the Unit 7 of Block 2).
- You need to stay focused and the interview should be kept moving in the direction consistent with the objectives of the study. If the discussion losses focus, the researcher should bring the discussion back to the main point.
- If you do not understand something said by the respondent during the interview, ask supplementary questions and explore the issue further to seek clarity.
- As a researcher it is extremely important for you to be a good listener and do not give your own views on an issue as the interview is *not* an exchange of information but *obtaining* information from the respondent.
- You need to maintain neutrality and objectivity throughout the process of data collection and remain non-judgmental. Any show of sign through facial expressions or body language etc. is likely to impact upon the responses.
- You should keep the interaction polite and formal. You should be sensitive for an entirely different perspective which the subject may hold.
- You should refrain from offering unsolicited advice and any false promises which may place you in an awkward position, at a later stage
- At the end, you should check that all questions are covered and thank the respondents and ask them if they have any questions to ask.

### Recording Medium

To ensure accuracy of the information collected during the interview, the recording medium needs to be selected with care. These generally include hand written notes or audio/video recording. While taking notes, you have to be extremely careful in both listening as well as noting down the responses. Many a time it is not possible to note down everything in the presence of the respondents. A good researcher goes back in time and tries to recall the entire sequence of events as it took place once the interview is over. In larger studies involving many interviewers, debriefing sessions are organised on a regular basis for exchange of information. If audio recording has to be conducted in rural areas, adequate supply of batteries needs to be carried as there may be power failure. Video recording has been found useful for certain studies, however, the presence of camera can make the subjects conscious and they may put on an act or give politically correct answers. Please remember, informed consent for audio or video recording is mandatory.

### Transcription

Once the interview has been conducted and recorded, the entire conversation has to be transcribed which is a time taking and tedious process. In some cases, it may take even 5-6 hours to transcribe an hour long interview. After transcription the entire material has to be checked for accuracy and making sense of the entire conversation. Then the data has to be classified and coded under certain themes and categories using appropriate qualitative data analysis techniques such as constant comparative technique, the analytical induction strategy, etc. According to Berger, there are no absolute rules about how coding is done as a great deal depends on the nature of the material being coded. You will read more about analysis of qualitative data in the subsections 15.5 & 15.6 of Unit 15 of Block 4.

## 10.8 ETHICAL ISSUES

The purpose of research is knowledge production and generation. However, as researchers you are not expected to adopt any means to obtain information hence some ethical norms will be in order while using Interviews as a research tool. Some of these ethical issues have been discussed in previous units such as the participation of people in interview should be voluntary and nobody should be compelled to participate. They need to be informed about the nature and objectives of the study and how the findings will be used. Further, if they do not feel comfortable at any stage during the interview; they have the choice to opt out Thus 'informed consent' forms the basis of selection of respondents and if confidentiality has been promised, you must uphold it. You must treat all your research subjects with respect and protect them from invasion of privacy and any form of physical, financial or emotional harm. Some subjects may not be capable of fully understanding the implications of your study thus may be more vulnerable or sensitive for a particular subject. For example, for selecting children as subjects you need to take the approval and cooperation of parents. Parents and/or legal guardian must be present when children are being interviewed.

The recruitment of respondents is yet another ethical area, especially in FGD. Inclusion of respondents known to researcher who do not meet the criteria for selection will lead to a skew in findings. Payment for participation is generally made in market research to cover the travel expenses and the time used. However, in academic research it has ethical implications as it may be argued that findings of the study have been compromised. Like other research methods, ethics are involved in data analysis and reporting of Interviews also. According to Wimmer and Dominick (2003) data should not be tampered with, the responses should not be fabricated or changed. Further science being a public activity, researchers have ethical obligation to share their findings and methods with other researchers who may wish to examine the research instruments, methodology, sample selection and other relevant items and apply in their own research work.

**Activity-5**

You have to collect data using interview method from rural women on their reproductive health. Discuss some ethical issues involved.

**Check Your Progress: 5**

**Note:** 1) Use the space below for your answers.

2) Compare your answers with those given at the end of this Unit.

1) List some ethical issues which need to be kept in view while doing research.

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2) Why publishing is considered to be an obligation for the researcher?

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## 10.9 LET US SUM UP

In this unit, we discussed interview as a research method under the broad classification of informal, structured, semi structured, and unstructured interviews. The strengths and limitations of each type of interview was thoroughly discussed and analysed. The application, process of undertaking interviews and care to be taken were described in detail. We also looked at some guidelines for conducting interviews and emphasised the need for following certain ethical norms largely pertaining to minimising harm, respecting autonomy, protecting privacy and others. As a researcher you need to make conscious efforts to use interview method systematically for generating new knowledge and insights through your study.

## 10.10 REFERENCES AND FURTHER READINGS

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## 10.11 CHECK YOUR PROGRESS: POSSIBLE ANSWERS

**Check Your Progress 1**

1) Informal interviews are useful in:
   - Gaining confidence of the subject in the initial stages of field research
   - Obtaining information on sensitive issues
   - Adding depth to data obtained by other research methods.
2) Some limitations of informal interviews are:
   - The information obtained is not systematic in nature
   - Data from one respondent may not be comparable with other respondents
   - It is not effective for interviewing a large section of population.

**Check Your Progress 2**

1) Telephonic interviews are:
   - Relatively cheaper and easier to conduct
   - Select closed-ended questions can be easily administered to respondents
   - Useful in journalistic research exploring a focused area.
2) Online surveys have the following limitations:
   - The access to technology is limited in rural areas hence cannot cover all sections of society.
   - If a representative sample is not included, the findings of a study will be skewed.
   - Linguistic and socio-cultural barriers may affect the response rate and the quality of data.

**Check Your Progress 3**

1) Some limitations of FGDs are:
   - Not easy to conduct without proper training
   - Difficult to select a representative sample who meet the specific criteria
   - Data obtained is not comparable and require complex analytical techniques.

2) The role of moderator is crucial for the success of FGD as s/he has to facilitate the discussion and keep it on track in the light of research objectives. S/he has to respond to new ideas and encourage those who have something interesting to say. S/he has to involve everyone in the discussion and stay in charge without being obtrusive.

**Check Your Progress 4**

1) Some limitations of indepth interviews are:

- It requires more efforts and skills on the part of researcher
- Researcher may impose his/her own perspective and introduce bias in the results
- Interviewing a number of people every day may cause fatigue
- Over enthusiasm can generate enormous data which may be difficult to analyse at a later stage.

2) While planning an indepth interview, I shall take the following steps:

- Outline some basic questions in the light of study objectives
- Identify the respondents for interview
- Outline the purpose of my study
- Persuade them to participate in the study
- Follow up with them as it may take several attempts
- Schedule the interviews at a convenient place and time.

**Check Your Progress 5**

1) The following ethical issues need to be kept in view while doing research:

- Informed consent and voluntary participation of the respondents
- Providing information to them about the research objectives and process
- Protecting them from invasion of privacy
- Protecting them from any form of physical, financial or emotional harm.

2) Publishing scientific results is an ethical obligation on the researcher as science being a public activity, researchers need to share their methods and findings with other researchers who may wish to examine the research process followed and apply in their own work. The knowledge thus accrued is shared with other scholars enabling the society at large to benefit from the results.

# UNIT 11 CASE STUDY

**Structure**



## 11.0 INTRODUCTION

You have read in the previous units that research in mass communication is a twentieth century phenomenon. From effects studies to textual analysis to critical discourse analysis to semiotics we have a wide spectrum of research methods applied to every communication situation. The case study is one such qualitative research method which is flexible and accepts all methods of data collection. Case studies may use findings of content analysis but they focus on the overall situation of an event, institution or phenomenon. Case studies may use survey findings as part of their data but it is not survey research per se. The most suitable analogy is that of a doctor maintaining a case history of a patient for a specific therapeutic treatment, drawn from specific cases or general experience. A case study may have historical perspectives in it but it is not a complete historical research. It may use statistics but not a quantitative study to the core. Individuals, events and institutions form the basis of case studies to a large extent. The method gathers data from many sources as much as possible and is used for investigating individuals, groups, events and organisations.

In this unit, we shall discuss the types, functions, strengths, limitations and the process of case study method in detail.

## 11.1 LEARNING OUTCOMES

After going through this unit, you should be able to:

- describe the importance of case study as a qualitative method of research;

- discuss different dimensions of case study as a research method;
- analyse the strengths and limitations of the case study method: and
- use case study method in your own research work.

## 11.2 CASE STUDY: A QUALITATIVE METHOD

Case study is one of the popular methods of research adopted by communication researchers. It is also a method of qualitative research. In social science research, there are three broad approaches, namely, positivism (objectivism), interpretive and critical. Each one has a paradigm that helps in the selection of appropriate research method. The classification of research is based on that intent and methods used for research.

### 11.2.1 Research Paradigms

Although some of these issues have been briefly touched upon in other units, it is worthwhile that we explore the research traditions and paradigms in social sciences and mass communication a little more. This is necessary because the case study can be seen as an approach to research, as a methodology or as a tool to be used. So, a context for case study as discussed in this unit is essential.

A few researchers like Blaikie and Neuman have identified three different approaches to research in social sciences. They are: *positivism, interpretative and critical* paradigms. Paradigms are based on statements that are accepted by all as valid. Paradigms help in the selection of an appropriate research method. Each approach has its own paradigm (theoretical framework or model of research).The positivist paradigm is the oldest and is extensively used in mass media research. Scholars like Augustus Comte and John Stuart Mill in the 19th Century have contributed enormously for popularising positivism, which is the bedrock of research in natural sciences.

Social scientists subsequently started using a modified version of positivism. This paradigm uses quantitative methods, hypotheses, and objective measurement. Sociologists Max Weber and Wilhelm Dil they advocated the *interpretative research* tradition. Here the main purpose was to know and understand how people create meaning and interpret the issues and events in their every day natural environment. The interpretative approach has gained popularity since 1970s. The *critical approach* is widely used in the humanities. Critical research focuses mainly on concepts like freedom, justice, power in society and political ideologies, all of which have values associated with them.

The positivist approach differs from the interpretive school in three ways. First, both schools differ on the concept of reality. For a positivist, reality is objective and 'it is out there'. For interpretive scholars, no single reality exists. Each researcher can create reality as part of his/her research. In other words, reality is subjective. Positivists say that reality can be divided into various components and by looking at each component; an understanding of the whole can be acquired. The interpretive scholar analyses the entire process, because for him/her, reality is complex, interlinked, and complete and cannot be divided. Second, the positivist considers all human beings are similar and prefers general categories to summarise their behaviours. The interpretive researcher believes each human being is different and cannot be fitted into general categories. Finally, the positivists would like to produce general laws of behaviour while interpretive researchers would like to generate a unique explanation regarding a particular situation or individual.

Based on the approach adopted, there have been different types of research in mass communication. The classification of such research is based on the intent and methods used for research. According to the intention, we can classify research as pure, applied, exploratory, descriptive, and evaluative and action. It can also be qualitative or quantitative. If quantitative research focuses on numbers and their meaning when analysed, qualitative research has an emphasis on the elements of subjective interpretation. Many of these approaches have been discussed in Block 1; we only recapitulate them here.

However, it is difficult to define the term 'qualitative research' because there are multiple definitions available. People consider that by defining the term, they will be restricting the boundary of research. The term 'qualitative research' can be used to mean:

1) A broad approach to research
2) A methodology of research, and
3) A specific group of research techniques.

Today, most researchers combine both qualitative and quantitative methods to evaluate a given phenomenon. Researchers use data collected from qualitative and quantitative data to gather a complete or holistic assessment of the phenomenon under study. This process of using both methods is known as **'triangulation'.** Qualitative researchers use small samples. The issue of generalisability is solved by increasing the sample size. Qualitative researchers use flexible questioning modes while in quantitative research questions are static or standardised questions are employed. All respondents are required to answer the same set of questions. When both methods are used, we cross check, or verify one set of data against the other, resulting in triangulation. Amore rounded and complete picture of a problem or phenomenon is thus arrived at. With reference to the focus of this unit, i.e. the case study, this means that we use data from quantitative sources, combine it with data collected through case studies, to arrive at a broader picture of the issue being studied.

### 11.2.2 Main Features of Case Study Method

Case study is a common qualitative research method which isused extensively in anthropology, psychology, management, medicine and history. Historically, the case studies have roots in the beginning of modem social and cultural research between 1920s and 1950s. The case study method was linked to the Chicago School, especially in the works of Elihu Katz and Paul Lazarsfeld. It was on the same lines as that of Frankfurt School. The case study approach has a problem of defining a case. A case can be single person or social aggregates or cultural phenomena such as media organisations, media products, media events, interpretative communities or socio-cultural processes. The contemporary trend is to focus on case studies.

Case studies are considered ideal when a scholar wants to understand a phenomenon in depth. In psychology, Sigmund Freud has been credited with the writing of case studies of his patients, while Margaret Mead was known for her use of case studies in anthropological research. However, for all practical purposes, the case study researcher collects data from many sources as much as possible to understand individuals, groups, events and organisations.

The case study method has also been described as an empirical inquiry that uses multiple sources of evidence to investigate a contemporary phenomenon within its real- life context, in which the boundaries between the phenomenon and its context are sometimes not clearly evident (Yin, 1994). Take for instance, an experiment- it separates a phenomenon from the real-life context. In a laboratory, the environment is controlled, while in the field, multiple factors are at play. If you take the survey method, we attempt to define the phenomenon under investigation and we may limit the number of variables for research. In contrast, the case study method will have both single and multiple cases. One example of use of multiple case study method can be seen in political science in which comparative case study research techniques are frequently used. Mass media research also widely uses the case study method.

Sometimes, the case study is used to explore a situation, a location, a problem, or a context before a larger quantitative survey is undertaken. When used like this, the case study is part of exploratory research.

Wimmer and Dominick (2003) quote Merriam who has identified four main features of case study investigation.

1) **"Particularistic:** The case study focuses its attention on a particular situation, programme, phenomenon or an event. By doing so, it becomes a relevant method to study real-life issues.
2) **Descriptive:** The final outcome of this research will be an elaborate description of the topic being investigated.
3) **Heuristic:** A case study enables people to understand what is being inquired with new perspectives, new insights, new meanings and new interpretations**.**
4) **Inductive:** Case study method mostly depends upon inductive reasoning. Generalisations come out from the data evaluation. Case studies attempt to find out new relationships instead of verifying the hypotheses already in existence."

To summarise, the main features of case study method are:

1) It can combine different methods and analytical approaches.
2) Defining a case study within a context of an approach is necessary, because the term remains vague and imprecise otherwise.
3) Construction of case study limits or borders is a serious and difficult issue.

### 11.2.3 Functions of Case Study

The main functions of case study method are:

- It permits collection of enormous amount of data.
- It allows the description of the uniqueness or peculiarities of a case.
- It offers an opportunity for intensive evaluation of the case.
- It analyses the causal and complex factors involved in the process.
- It attempts to study varied factors associated with the topic selected for investigation.

The case study method is widely used in administrative, diagnostic and therapeutic situations. It prompts the generation of new concepts or helps in testing the one in existence. It may also lead to the testing of well- formulated hypotheses.

### 11.2.4 Types of Case Studies

There are three types of case studies: **Intrinsic, Instrumental and collective.**

1) **Intrinsic:** This is undertaken for better understanding of the particular case. The purpose is not theory building. It always begins with an identified case.

2) **Instrumental:** It analyses a particular case to order to provide an insight into a more general issue or to validate or revise a generalisation.

3) **Collective:** This focuses on different cases to inquire into a general phenomenon. In a way it is an instrumental study stretched to several cases.

Both instrumental and collective case studies have cases that are selected by the researcher. Case studies can be descriptive and/or theoretically oriented.

**Check Your Progress: 1**

**Note:** 1) Use the space below for your answers.

2) Compare your answers with those given at the end of this Unit.

1) Explain the concept of positivism.

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2) Define case study method.

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3) What are the main functions of case study method?

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## 11.3 CASE STUDY METHOD: STRENGTHS AND LIMITATIONS

Case Study is a very versatile method of research, enabling in depth study of a phenomenon. However, it can also be highly subjective. In this section, we shall look at some of the strengths and limitations of case studies.

### Strengths

The case study research generates enormous amounts of data in relation to the research topic. It produces huge details of the subject. When researchers are not sure of what they want, then this is the best method. If a researcher is seeking clues or ideas for further research, case studies are highly beneficial. The method is not limited to exploratory research only, its boundaries can extend to descriptive and explanatory research as well. It can be used to supplement quantitative data collection when a sub-sample is chosen for further analysis. The case study method also helps to understand the 'why' of a phenomenon, i.e. by showing us causal relationships between what can be different variables and explaining the nature of the relationship. The best way to find out reasons for certain results in quantitative studies is through case studies. Combining such findings with the existing understanding of processes, one can help to build or strengthen existing theories.

### Limitations

The case study method has its own limitations. Experts have pointed out mainly three. The first criticism is that in most cases the method does not have the scientific rigour, especially if used by an amateur. It seems easy to do because a rigorous case study demands more time and effort. The second one is that the case studies do not provide scope for generalisations. Researchers will have to opt for some other method if they want to make normative statements based on statistics to substantiate the occurrence of a phenomenon in a particular population. But it is not to assert that the findings of all case studies are unique. If theoretical generalisations are the research purpose, then the case study method suits well. Lastly, case studies consume a lot of time and may produce massive amounts of data and in such a situation, understanding, analysing, and summarising the data may become a difficult task.

It is a fact that case studies allow an investigation of interplay of factors responsible for development over a specific period of time. As listed by reputed scholars, the case study method is flexible in the sense that it accepts all methods of data collection. It also studies any aspect of the topic taken for research or all aspects and can be done in any social setting. The case study method is best suited for groups or process analyses, more than individuals. It provides a broad range of insights into human life, one can also test certain specific theories. However, it cannot be used for investigation of macro issues. There is also a possibility of researcher's bias due to perceptional mistakes, over - confidence, and conclusions based on wrong judgement or analysis of findings.

### Check Your Progress: 2

**Note:** 1) Use the space below for your answers.

2) Compare your answers with those given at the end of this Unit.

1) Examine two strengths of the case study method.

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2) Mention two limitations of the case study method.

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3) Can a researcher's judgement influence the findings of a case study?

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## 11.4 THE PROCESS OF CASE STUDY

Unlike other methods of research, the case study method does not have a well-written or documented procedure of research. For instance, both survey and experimental method have a well laid out processes. Nonetheless, we can identify five stages of the case study research, these are design, pilot study, data collection, data analysis, and report writing.

### 11.4.1 Design Stage

We begin the case study design with questions that have the elements of how and why. A clear question can clarify the rest of the efforts in a case study. Then is the question of what to analyse or what is the case? Mostly, it is an individual or an event. If it is individuals, information must be collected about each individual and then the results could be reported in the single or multiple case study format or matrix. Sometimes, the boundaries of how, why, and what we are going to study are not clear. We then have to define them, either as a particular person or persons, a decision, or a specific organisation, or a programme or an event.

As discussed in Unit 5, the review of literature is a first stage and a helpful practice, since much of findings may have been already reported in terms of previous investigations, research, and theories. Using the review of literature will also help in defining the boundaries of the study.

### 11.4.2 Pilot Study

The second stage is the pilot study. The pilot study is part and parcel of case study research, and precursor to the main study. Before embarking upon a pilot study, the researcher must prepare what is called the **case study manual.** This is a well- constructed document, an operational manual that details the procedures to be employed for the case study. An active and well-defined study manual includes the procedures needed to reach an identified person or organisation and the procedures to access relevant records. The manual outlines the ethical steps to be followed when approaching cases, especially if they are individuals. It lists and describes the data collection instruments in detail. The manual should also include the schedule of data collection and guidelines to solve the issues of logistics. The study manual should contain important questions of the study, and a list of possible sources of information. The manual must clearly mention the questions for interviewing prominent personalities.

The researcher should start the pilot study only after the study manual is prepared. As discussed earlier, a pilot study is conducted as a first step to test the research design as well as field procedures and to revise them, if needed. Some unexpected variables may surface during the course of pilot study. There may be issues with the study protocol or with logistics. The manual also permits researchers to employ different data gathering methods and observe many different activities from different perspectives. By analysing the results of the pilot study, we can get an idea of what the case study will probably look like, where the snags are and then revise and finalise the study manual.

### 11.4.3 Data Collection

The third stage is data collection. After a case is chosen, there are many ways to collect data about the case. We can identify several major sources of data for case studies. As discussed in Unit 6, these may include both primary and secondary sources. Documents are a rich source of data. These may be letters, memos, minutes, agendas, brochures, pamphlets, posters, historical records and many others. Survey research tools, such as questionnaire, intensive interviewing are also used for data gathering. Ethnographic methods of observation are another technique of data collection. A physical artifact like a tool or a piece of furniture can also be a source of evidence. For instance, the old news-gathering tools such as the tele-printer and the typewriter, when replaced by computer and Internet based news sources tell a story about the impact of technology in the mass media. So, we can use multiple sources of data providing scope for triangulation, and improved reliability and validity of findings. That is why multiple source data will always be preferred to single source evidence. That is also why case studies are used in conjunction with other sources and methods of data collection.

### 11.4.4 Data Analysis

The fourth stage is data analysis. Quantitative techniques offer specific procedures for data analysis. When it comes to case studies, no specific data analysis formula is available, as each case study can be different. However, three broad analytic strategies are recommended: they are: pattern matching, explanation building, and time series.

Let us take the first one, **pattern matching.** In this strategy, an empirically based pattern is selected and compared with one or more predicted patterns. Imagine a newspaper has a new management tool in the regular meetings between top management and reporters, excluding the editors. As per organisational theory, a researcher can predict consequences of the new practices such as stress between editors and reporters, higher productivity and changed supervisory roles. If the data analysis confirms the occurrence of these management changes, conclusions can be drawn. In case the predicted pattern does not coincide with the actual one, the earlier study inferences may have to be revisited.

In the second analytic strategy, **explanation building,** the researcher attempts to build explanation about the identified case by making statements about the cause or causes of the phenomenon being inquired. The strategy can be in several forms. Normally, a researcher prepares a theoretical statement about a process or result and compares the statement. If need be, s/he revises the statement, examines another comparable case and repeats the process any number of times. For instance, the issue of technological failure in media can be taken for explanation. A researcher may presume that lack of management expertise was responsible for it but may find that lack of management expertise is only partially responsible for the failure. Lack of market research may have been another factor for the failure. With this revised version of explanation, the researcher can move to another medium to check whether the explanation holds or needs further revision, until s/he reaches the level of getting a satisfactory answer.

The next strategy is **time-series analysis.** Here the researcher attempts to compose a series of data points (time intervals) to some theoretic trend that was predicted before the research, or to some alternative trend (Wimmer and Dominick, 2003). To take an example, if several cities in the country experienced newspaper workers strikes across several years, a case study researcher may produce predictions as to the information seeking behaviours of the people in these cities during the times of strikes. S/he may conduct a case study research to find out whether such predictions can be validated.

### 11.4.5 Report Writing

The case study report does not have any single fixed format for writing - in other words, the report writing can take many forms. It can be a conventional report format, starting with problem, methods, findings and discussion or it can opt for a different non-conventional format. Some reports look best when written in the chronological fashion, a few others may opt for a comparative analysis. Sometimes, it may be best to provide a broad report of findings, with small text boxes or sidebars of descriptions of individual case. When dealing with human beings for case study data collection, it is prudent to change the name to protect the source. However, the case study report should be written keeping in view the audience for whom it is written. The style of writing for decision-makers is obviously different from that of writing for a reputed scholarly journal.

**Check Your Progress: 3**

**Note:** 1) Use the space below for your answers.

2) Compare your answers with those given at the end of this Unit.

1) Identify the five stages of case study process.

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2) What is a case study manual?

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3) Does the case study method have a particular report writing style?

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## 11.5 LET US SUM UP

Case study is one of the popular qualitative research methods adopted by communication researchers. There is sometimes a misconception that it is an easy way of carrying out research. What must be clearly understood is that it is not a simple way of conducting research. The case study method needs rigour, objectivity, and clarity of objectives. The case study method is part of all scientific research, in both natural and social sciences.

In social science research, there are three broad approaches, namely, positivism (objectivism), interpretive and critical. Each one has a paradigm that helps in the selection of appropriate research method. The classification of research is based on that intent and methods used for research. Today most researchers combine both qualitative and quantitative methods to evaluate a given phenomenon. Qualitative research is flexible, as such, the case study method is also flexible. The issue of subjectivity is the major drawback of qualitative research.

The case study method gathers data from many sources as much as possible. It is used for investigating individuals, groups, events and organisations. Case studies are ideal when a researcher wants to understand and describe a phenomenon. Some of the areas that make a large use of case studies are anthropology, psychology, management, medicine and history. There are four main features of case study investigation. They are: particularistic, descriptive, heuristic, and inductive. Unlike other methods of research, the case study method does not have a well - documented procedure. However, we can identify the five stages of case study research such as design, pilot study, data collection, data analysis and report writing. There is no specific data analysis formula for case studies. Yet three broad analytic strategies are recommended: These are: pattern matching, explanation building and time series.

The main functions of case studies are:

1) They permit collection of enormous amount of data.
2) They allow the description of the uniqueness or peculiarities of a case.
3) They offer an opportunity for intensive evaluation of the case.
4) They analyse the causal and complex factors involved in the process.

The three types of case studies are intrinsic, instrumental and collective. The four aspects of case studies within the framework of qualitative studies are: the history of case studies, the problem of case definition, the way that case studies are done, and the question of generalisation and theorisation. The case studies are commonly used in public relations campaign or project evaluation.

The case study report does not have any single format fixed for writing. It is flexible and can take many forms. Irrespective of the way it is written, it should keep the audience in view. One-shot case study is a type of case study research. It is based on observing a single group at specific point of time. The case study method has its own advantages and disadvantages. It generates huge amounts of data and it is useful when researchers are not sure of what they want. Case study can extend to descriptive and explanatory research as well. Critics argue that this method lacks scientific rigour, is time consuming and the findings cannot be generalised easily. However, with care and proper training, the method can be use deffectively in research for generating new insights.

## 11.6 KEY WORDS

**Heuristic:** Enabling people to understand what is being inquired into. To provide new perspectives, insights and meanings.

**Inductive:** Finding out new relationships among different phenomena, instead of verifying the hypotheses already in existence.

**One-shot case study:** Based on observing a single group at particular point of time.

**Pattern matching:** An empirically based pattern is selected and compared with one or more predicted patterns.

**Positivist paradigm:** This model uses quantification methods, hypotheses and objective measurement in research. For a positivist, reality is objective and She/ he considers that all human beings are rational and similar.

## 11.7 REFERENCES AND FURTHER READINGS

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## 11.8 CHECK YOUR PROGRESS: POSSIBLE ANSWERS

**Check Your Progress 1**

1) Positivism is the oldest school of inquiry. It was popularised by Augustus Comte and Stuart Mill. Positivism uses quantification methods, the bedrock of natural sciences. For positivists, reality is objective and can be divided

into various components. They consider all human beings as rational and would like to produce general laws of behaviour.

2) Case study is a common qualitative research method. It is an empirical inquiry that collects data from multiple sources to examine a contemporary phenomenon in its real life context. Case studies can go beyond exploration to be descriptive and explanatory as well.

3) The case study method:

- Permits huge amounts of data.
- Allows the description of uniqueness.
- Offers an opportunity for intensive evaluation.
- Analyses the causal and complex factors involved in the process.
- Attempts to study varied factors associated with topic selected for investigation.

**Check Your Progress 2**

1) Case studies can yield enormous amounts of data. They can explain why things have happened and provide an understanding of issues, events, or institutions.

2) Case studies lack scientific rigour, do not provide scope for generalisations, and are time consuming.

3) If the researcher is inexperienced, does not follow procedures, or does not analyse the data correctly; his/her judgment can influence the findings of a case study.

**Check Your Progress 3**

1) Five stages of case study process are:

   **Design stage:** It should answer questions of why and how. Then it must move to answer what to analyse and fit the results into a fixed matrix.

   **Pilot study:** Case studies are based on well-defined study protocol for a larger investigation. The study protocol can be revised as a follow up of pilot study.

   **Data collection:** This is done by using multiple sources like documents, interviews, surveys, observations and others.

   **Data analysis:** No specific formula is available but normally analytic strategy, pattern matching and time-series analysis are used.

2) Report writing: Both conventional and non-conventional methods or styles can be used.

3) The study manual is a document which contains detailed instruction on how the case study is to be carried out.

4) There is no particular format for writing up a case study and it can take different formats.

# UNIT 12 OBSERVATION METHOD

**Structure**



## 12.0 INTRODUCTION

Being observed and observing others are central aspects of our lives. We observe events, environment and people around us all the time for various reasons. However, everyday observation is random in nature as compared to scientific observation which is focused, objective and systematic. Observation method is a qualitative research method which relies on physically observed phenomenon. It is integral to Ethnography and is often referred to as its primary research tool. The method is based on the assumption that one can learn a great deal about the world by just careful observation. It provides an opportunity to study people in real life situations and involves the process of detailed, in-depth description of everyday life and practice.

In this unit, we shall discuss various aspects related to Observation Method. We shall discuss the characteristics and uses of this method and outline the types of observation including participant and non-participant observation. We shall also look at the process of observation which largely includes selection of a group, documentation, analysis and interpretation but may vary according to the focus and objectives of a study.

## 12.1 LEARNING OUTCOMES

After reading this unit, you should be able to:

- describe the characteristics of observation method;

- examine the strengths, limitations and applications of observation method;
- describe the process involved in observation; and
- apply observation method in your research work.

## 12.2 CHARACTERISTICS OF OBSERVATION METHOD

Observation method is used to study select issues, cases, or events in depth in order to obtain rich contextual details of an issue under study. In contrast with survey method which explores 'what' of an issue, this method explores questions of 'why' and 'how' in a systematic way and has been found more useful to study the nature of human behaviour, social conditions and characteristics of people. Observation is central to and one of the oldest forms of Ethnographic research methods and as stated earlier, is based on the assumption that one can learn a great deal about the world by just careful observation. Let us try to understand the concept of ethnography first.

**Ethnography**

The term Ethnography is often used interchangeably for all qualitative research, methodology or a research tool. Ethnography has been defined as 'a systematic description of social group and its way oflife', the study and systematic recording of human cultures, and a descriptive work produced from such research. It has also been referred as 'a scientific description of the races of mankind'. Listening, watching and interacting are central to ethnography as people go about their lives. A key principle of ethnographic work is 'holism' which involves that the group or culture must be understood as whole system and not as isolated parts. "The researcher's task is to not to explain the apparent oddities but to look for the internal consistency that weaves together - from an insider point of view" (Priest, 2010).

According to Brennen (2013) "for some researchers ethnography means the on-site study of foreign cultures over an extended period of time, while others suggest that ethnography can be done locally within a researcher's culture and it need not take years to complete, as long as it helps us to understand a specific group, community or culture". With the advent of the Internet, Ethnography is also used in virtual spaces in which the groups and communities using chat rooms, blogs and are observed systematically.

Drawing upon the principles of ethnography, observation is a direct method of collecting data in which one or more persons observe some real life situations and record them. It is used to analyse the 'overt behaviour of people in controlled and uncontrolled situations'. It enables the researcher to record specific activities or behaviour at the time of occurrence in the natural setting and provide data rich in detail and subtlety. According to Berger (2000), the method is useful to study what "people *actually do* rather than what *they say they do".*

According to Wimmer and Dominick (2003) observation method was rarely used in mass media research before 1980. Lowry (1979) reported that only 2-3 percent of the articles published in journalism and broadcasting journals used this technique. Recently, however, observation is being extensively used in mass communication research, mostly in combination with other research methods.

**Activity-1**

Go through some journals in mass communication and identify the studies which have used Observation as a research method. Examine the type of subjects explored in these studies.

### 12.2.1 Strengths

The method relies on 'physically observed phenomenon' - this means that it provides direct and in-depth experience which leads to useful insights on the issue under study. When combined with some training and a little common sense, the behaviour of the subjects can be recorded. The context in which certain behaviours take place can also be understood and recorded. The range of information collected will be much wider since you will be observing different people doing different activities at the same time. According to Reddi & Singh, 2003), "it also provides useful insights in the initial stages of needs assessment and development of audience profiles and in determining what other research methods need to be used. The findings can open certain critical areas of enquiry for further study".

### 12.2.2 Limitations

Observation method has some limitations as well. If the subject knows that s/he is being observed, s/he may put on an artificial behaviour. The presence of researcher is likely to change the group dynamics and how people react. If the problem under study requires several observers, frequent visits or extended stay in the study area, the expenses may increase. One may get overwhelmed with their problems in the study area and forget to record observations about its causes, impact etc. Moreover, the findings are relevant for a particular group, section or area in which the study has been undertaken and may not be applicable for other groups/sections/areas.

Unless the events are recorded accurately on a regular basis, much of their value might be lost. The method is good in observing what is going on but of little help in knowing the past and private behaviour of the respondents. It can generate mistaken conclusions based on the interpretation of the situation. The observer may not fully know what group members really think or how they react in his/ her absence. The method is less effective in collecting information about personal beliefs, feelings, opinions, motivations and expectations, unless relevant questions are asked. The values, attitudes, and prejudices of the researcher may affect her objectivity leading to bias in the findings. There is lack of control and quantification.

Wimmer and Dominick argue that if the researcher is concerned with external validity then observation method may not be an appropriate choice. Reddi & Singh (2003) further caution that," choosing methods is a process of 'matching' which should be in relation to the questions you want to answer, the resources and time available to you and also matching with your skills, training and experience". Thus observation method has some inherent limitations, and may not be an appropriate technique for every research question and as a researcher you need to take a great deal of care while using the method. Quite often, observation is combined with other research methods to obtain a wider and fuller perspective of the situation.

**Check Your Progress: 1**

**Note:** 1) Use the space below for your answers.

2) Compare your answers with those given at the end of this Unit.

1) List five strengths of Observation method.

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2) List five limitations of Observation method.

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## 12.3 TYPES OF OBSERVATION

Observations have been variously classified as Structured and Unstructured Observation; Overt and Covert observation; Participant Observation and Non-Participant Observation; among others.

**Structured observation** as the name suggests, are formal in nature and record information in a systematic manner. In this type of observation, the researcher generally knows the problem and collects detailed information on specific categories of behaviour.

**Unstructured observations** are often exploratory in nature in which the researcher records and examines the available information. The researcher is generally an unobtrusive observer who strives to remain invisible. This type of observation is more useful at the initial stages of research in identifying issues in problem and for developing hypotheses.

**Overt Observation:** When the subjects of observation are informed that they are being observed, it constitutes overt observation.

**Covert Observation:** If the subjects are not aware of being observed, then it constitutes 'covert observation'. This type of observation has ethical implications which we shall discuss in detail later in this unit.

Berger (2000) classified observers as Observer as Non-Participant (outsider) and Participant as observer (insider). These categories of observers were expanded by Brennen (2013) to include: complete observer, observer as participant, participant as observer, and complete participant. All these categories can be considered in two broad classifications of Participant and Non-participant observation as discussed below.

### 12.3.1 Non-Participant Observation

In Non-participant observation, the researcher observes a situation or a phenomenon from a distance without being part of the group or culture being studied. S/he simply observes and records what is going on and his/her presence is not felt by the group. In non-participant observation, the subjects of research may/may not be aware that they are being observed. Brennen terms this type of observer as Complete Observer.

**Complete observer:** who observes at a distance and has no interaction with people, group or community. The subjects being observed may or may not know that they are being observed. The observation is undertaken by use of one-way glass mirror, binoculars, video cameras strategically placed around the site. Thus this non-participant observer uses different form of media for observation and may watch and analyse the recordings off-site at a later date and stage. Due to advent of technological tools, this form of observation is applied with the help of digital media.

### 12.3.2 Participant Observation

In Participant Observation, the researcher participates in the activities of the community being studied as a member of the culture and the community is aware of his/her presence for observation. As per the categorisation of Brennen, this type of observer can be of two types: observer as participant and participant as observer.

**Observer as participant:** The observer in this category is present on-site but maintains a distance from those being observed. S/he does not stay with the community and has limited interaction with the community members. S/he does not actively participate in their activities and takes an **outsider position** in which s/he documents what was *observed* rather than what was *experienced* by him/her.

**Participant as observer:** Participant as observer is fully integrated into the culture being studied- s/he lives with the community and participates in their activities, rituals and practices etc. S/he documents observations as well as experiences. Thus s/he takes an **insider position** to understand the meanings of the actions being undertaken by the community members.

**'Going Native'**

In addition to above there is one more category of observer who is termed as **Complete Participant.** The complete participant gets fully integrated with the group, culture, or organisation s/he studies. S/he adopts the cultural values, interests and beliefs being followed by the community. In the process, s/he becomes so identified with the group that s/he loses objectivity and abandons the research project midway thus "goes native". The term 'going native' means that the person rejects the analytical role as researcher and becomes a member of the group or community s/he had planned to study. Jorgensen argues (in Brennen), "if such researcher returns to the project even after 'going native' s/he is likely to get much richer and indepth information about the group or community s/he was earlier studying."

**Check Your Progress: 2**

**Note:** 1) Use the space below for your answers.

2) Compare your answers with those given at the end of this Unit.

1) Among various types of observers, which in your view is most effective and why?

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2) What does the expression 'Going native' mean in research?

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## 12.4 PROCESS OF OBSERVATION

Observation is considered to be one of the simplest research methods for collecting data and can take place in informal as well as formal settings. However, like other research methods, it also requires adequate planning, proper implementation and systematic analysis. It does not require a formal hypothesis like various quantitative methods, but the researcher does need to have some broad understanding of the issues involved. At the planning stage itself, the researcher needs to define the scope of observation and ascertain the type of observation discussed in sub-section 12.3.2 of this unit. S/he also needs to identify the specific activities or units of behaviour to be observed and the likely duration of observation period. Further, the permission of the individual or group to be studied will have to be taken. Taking above factors in view, a basic plan of investigation and guidelines will have to be prepared.

### 12.4.1 Selection of Group

The selection of group or community will flow from the research objectives and questions - it could be a village or a tribal community or people working in a Community Radio Station (CRS) or in the editorial section of a newspaper organisation.

Gaining access to a group or community being studied is an important part of the research process. The researcher may find it difficult to gain access to a group, culture or organisation unless s/he knows someone in the group or is introduced to them. It is important that the presence of observer is acceptable to the group and rapport is built with them. Researchers often rely heavily on individuals who are willing to devote time and explain what is going on. However, it is possible that the information provided by such an informant may be slanted, biased or incomplete. Therefore, as researcher, you should have access to a wide spectrum of people and whenever in doubt you should seek clarity and verify the information obtained.

## 12.4.2 What to Observe?

When you go to the field you may record many things happening around you but all these activities may not be relevant for the study. As the observation progresses the objectives and research questions will help to place your observations in a context.

The following quote from Berger (2000) reveals a wide range of activities for Observation:

- Where do people do what they do?
- What common ideas and background knowledge do people have?
- What do people do?
- What does what to whom?
- Who originates action, who reacts and how do they react?
- Why do they do what they do?
- When (and how often) do they do what they do?
- How do they do what they do?
- How long they do what they do? Berger, 2000

Let us try to understand the process of observation with an example. Suppose, you want to study the working of a Community Radio Station (CRS), you need to select a CRS which should be reasonably representative of other CRSs. Like other research methods, you will study available literature and relevant documents, reports etc. on CRS in general and the CSR selected for the study in particular. This will create a broader picture in your mind and help to identify the specific areas you plan to focus upon in your observation. Some of these areas may pertain to different aspects of programming, production or management of the CRS. Once the focus and objectives of the study have been finalised, then you will have to outline specific research questions and select appropriate research methods and tools. For example, for observing various production or management related activities at the CRS some of the following questions may be kept in view:

- What is being done at the CRS and in which order?
- How do people working in the CRS relate with each other?
- Who seems to be in charge and decision maker?
- What is the process of taking decisions?
- What kind of local talent is involved in the CRS?
- How is the programming undertaken at the CRS?
- What type of management practices are being followed in the CRS?
- What explanations people offer for their actions?

Based on the issues identified during observation, you may further explore them using different research methods and tools. For example you may conduct indepth interviews on the personnel working in the CRS and obtain detailed information on specific aspects. Similarly, the responses given by those working in CRS can be examined. You may use survey method to obtain audience feedback on the type of programming and presentation of the CRS. From the findings obtained from multiple research tools and techniques, you can create a complete picture of the CRS under study. While it is true that the findings of a single CRS may not be generalised for other CRSs in statistical sense, but will hold a great deal of value as they will throw light on issues and concerns relevant for other CRS as well.

### 12.4.3 Documentation

The above analysis is indicative of the complexity of field experience. It reveals that you will observe a lot happening around you and relevant information needs to be recorded and documented. Unless the observations are recorded in a systematic manner, much of their value may get lost and the information may become unwieldy at the time of writing. Thus it is important to work out an economical way or recording the information. For documentation, some of the following tools are generally used during observation:

- Field notes
- Daily diary
- Audio-video recordings
- Photographs

**Field Notes:** Field notes are one of the most common ways of recording information during data collection. These are random in nature about the people observed, and their various engagements etc. The observer records not only what happened and what was said but also 'personal impressions, feelings and interpretations of what was observed '. According to Wimmer and Dominick, a general procedure is to separate personal opinions from the descriptive narrative by enclosing in brackets. However, constantly taking notes in the presence of those being observed can make them self conscious and uneasy. It is useful to take brief notes when it attracts a minimum attention and expanded at a later stage. Sometimes field notes are jotted down in a hurried manner and may not be legible. It is desirable to transfer these notes in computer or files at the end of day while events and context are still fresh in mind. Memory is one of the best skills for any field researcher as you need to recall information and write everything as soon as possible. The field notes need to be read and reviewed periodically to assess what more needs to be observed.

**Daily Diary:** Unlike field notes which are random in nature, daily diary is more systematic with specific heads and sub-heads. It is specifically developed in the light of the research objectives and questions which the observation method aims to achieve. The construction of a daily diary is an important step in observation as it helps to arrange raw field data in an orderly format to enable systematic retrieval at a later stage. What you will record/observe will vary from one study to another nonetheless; some of the following are likely to be applicable for most of the studies:

- Location/s of the observation
- Date/s and time of observation
- The people met - their age, occupation, etc.
- The events, activities and rituals observed
- The information channels available in the community
- Types of interaction: verbal/non-verbal

It is useful to develop themes emerging from the field for recording as according to Priest (2010), if data is classified on certain pre-determined categories, it may impose researcher's worldview on the data. Instead it is useful to allow the thematic categories to emerge from the actual data being analysed by adding, eliminating or refining categories as necessary.

**Audio-Video Recording:** Audio-video recordings are extensively used in field research as well as in observation method. Generally, a one-way vision screen and mirrors are used which allows the observer to see the subject but prevents the subject from seeing the observer. Video recording has also been extensively used during observations, but as earlier discussed, the presence of camera may lead some people to put on certain behaviour and distract attention of the respondents. Further, recordings tend to add extra work to the project as these have to be catalogued, indexed and transcribed. The issues relating to the use of audio-video recording have been dealt with in detail in Unit 10 of this block and are pertinent in observation method too. Thus, as researchers you will have to weigh the pros and cons of using your recording tool. There are ethical issues with audio/video recordings, these are discussed later in this unit in section 12.5.

**Photographs:** Photographs provide a wealth of rich information from the field and have always been used during data collection. Based on the old adage that 'a picture is worth a thousand words' and 'seeing is believing', photographs provide rich evidence to the issues discussed thus establish credibility. Lately, due to the increased access of smartphones, photographs have emerged as important tool of recording. Moreover, unlike audio-video recording, photographs do not require lengthy processes of transcription and translation but only crisp and pertinent captions. However, before taking photographs of the subject, event or place, prior permission of the concerned need to be taken. Further, there should be a judicious balance in using photographs which should not be used indiscriminately as substitute for real indepth research work.

### 12.4.4 Duration

One of the important aspects of observation method is the duration - how long does the group or community have to be observed and when to 'exit' from the field. The initial studies using observation method were generally conducted for extended periods - from few months to years and it was considered, that the longer duration, the better the study. However, lately, studies of shorter duration are also being undertaken using observation method. There is no rule of thumb as to what should be the duration, and when is the proper time for the researcher to exit from the field and it may be 'as much time as needed, not more, not less.'

According to Reddi and Singh, it is useful for the researcher to leave the field from time to time and discuss the findings and trends with other researchers as their added perspective might be useful in gathering further data. Discussing the trends with them will help you know whether the observations are in the right direction or are getting distracted to other issues and also what more need to be observed. It would be possible to correct the error while field work in progress. Whenever you are in a position to find answers to your research questions and decide to leave, you should exit with tact and diplomacy without causing any unpleasantness among group members.

**Activity-2**

Observe an event along with one of your friends. Write a summary of your observations on everything that you came across in about 300 words. Compare your observations and identify the differences.

## 12.4.5 Analysis and Interpretation

Once the entire sets of data have been collected, the data need to be organised, classified and analysed using appropriate analysis techniques. In observation method, the data analysis is a continuous process which starts with the collection of data itself and continues throughout the study. It is desirable to transfer the notes and interpret the observations at the end of the day while the events and the context in which these took place are still fresh in your mind. Daily analysis helps you to ascertain whether the observations are proceeding in the right direction or not. It helps to sharpen your skills to collect relevant information without getting digressed from research objectives. Daily analysis, however, requires a certain discipline on the part of the researcher.

Like other qualitative methods, the events, activities and interactions observed are analysed using conceptual frameworks. The emergent patterns and themes are uncovered and likely explanations provided. The information thus obtained is described in words, diagrams and pictures in place of numerical, tables and charts. Quotations from the observed group can also be included as part of analysis.

Some scholars argue that the interpretation of data should be undertaken by different members of the research team to facilitate cross checking of findings and eliminating bias and error. It also helps to remove inconsistency and contradictions in the findings. According to Wimmer and Dominick, use of several observers to cross validate results and triangulation to supplement the observational data with multiple data collection methods can diminish the impact of selective perception. However, many a time as a researcher you will have to analyse the entire set of data yourself. In such cases, efforts should be made to minimise personal bias and subjectivity. For that it is imperative on your part to develop a systematic approach and strong analytical skills.

**Thick Description**

Anthropologist Clifford Geertz (1973) used the expression ‘Thick description’ as blending of observation and interpretation which together provide ‘thick description’ of a culture or a group’. It is the description of data obtained by thorough and detailed investigation of a single case or narrow set of examples (Bertrand & Hughes, 2013). Within the interpretation process, researchers consider the relevant social context which helps them to understand that their observations are representations of a group’s cultural reality (Brennen, 2013).

**Check Your Progress: 3**

**Note:** 1) Use the space below for your answers.

2) Compare your answers with those given at the end of this Unit.

1) Among different forms of documentation, which one you choose while undertaking observation and why? Give reasons.

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2) Explain the term 'thick description'.

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## 12.5 ETHICAL ISSUES IN OBSERVATION

By now you would have understood that Observation method involves some ethical issues. While most of these are general in nature and applicable to other methods as well, such as taking prior consent of the participants to willingly participate in the activity, upholding the right to privacy and being honest about the motives of research etc. Some issues are very specific to this method especially to covert observation - when the community members are not aware that they are being observed for research purpose. Many scholars do not support covert observations and emphasise the need for taking the subjects into confidence by explaining the purpose of research and how you plan to use the research findings.

You also need to have a very open mind free from prejudices and pre-conceived notions about a culture or group you plan to study. You should also remain flexible and open to new observational strategies. It helps if you keep your presence rather muted and in background. Many a time people share their personal information during the process of informal interactions which if disclosed could harm them. The researcher should protect the respondents from any physical and emotional harm which my come their way due to disclosure of information as well as identity of those involved.

It is equally important that you do not impose your own worldview on people and refrain from judging how things should be or what they mean. This brings us to the concept of **reflexivity** which has been discussed by some scholars in relation to ethnography and observation method. Reflexivity is critically thinking about "the place from which they observe" (DeWalt & DeWalt, 2011). "It helps researchers to consider the difficulty of understanding those being observed with different values, rituals and experiences. It reminds them that as outsiders they may have limited access to the lives of those being studied and that there is possibility that there may be alternate interpretations for their observations" (Brennen, 2013).

You should also guard against getting emotionally involved with people and the events as you establish close association with them. While the method itself is said to be subjective it is a good idea to verify the interpretation by talking with people to bring in as much objectivity as possible. Once the project is complete, you may go back to the community members and share your findings with them. This will give them the feeling of being part of the project and impart a sense of ownership.

## 12.6 LET US SUM UP

In this unit, we discussed Observation method which involves the process of detailed, in-depth description of everyday life and practice. Observation method aims to study the overt behaviour of individuals, group, culture in different social settings by simply observing them. Observations may be structured or unstructured; participant or non participant.

It was explained that it is important for you to understand the relevant social context of what you observe. You need to analyse the sequences and frequencies of activities, rituals, interactions being held in-depth.

For analysis, select relevant examples for further commentary and discuss key observations and provide likely explanations. It is useful to compare with other available documentary evidences to provide a comprehensive picture. It is equally important to step away from the culture to think critically and then document to minimise subjectivity. Once analysis is complete, apply relevant theories to interpret the information collected and create a written account of the interpretations for sharing with others.

It was further explained that in research, different tools and techniques are combined to throw light on a common problem and view the problem from a number of angles and no method is used exclusively or in isolation. Keeping in view the inherent limitations of observation method, ideally, the method should be used in combination with other research methods for greater confidence in the findings. Moreover, each study has a defined scope therefore it can provide only partial answers. Even then the findings from observation method provide useful insights for future studies on similar nature and themes.

## 12.7 REFERENCES AND FURTHER READING

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## 12.8 CHECK YOUR PROGRESS: POSSIBLE ANSWERS

**Check Your Progress 1**

1) Five strengths of Observation method are:

- It provides direct and in-depth experience
- The context in which certain behaviours take place can also be understood.
- The range of information collected is much wider
- It allows observing different people doing different activities at the same time.
- It provides useful insights in the initial stages of needs assessment and development of audience profiles.

2) Five limitations of Observation method are:

- The method is of little help in knowing the past and private behaviour of the respondents.
- The method is less effective in collecting information about personal beliefs, feelings, opinions, motivations and expectations, unless relevant questions are asked.
- Since large number of activities takes place in the study area, the researcher may get too absorbed with one activity and leave out some important activity relevant for the study.
- The researcher can get emotionally involved in the lives of the people being studied leading to subjectivity in findings.
- The findings are relevant for a particular group, section or area in which the study has been undertaken and may not be applicable for other groups/sections/areas.

**Check Your Progress 2**

1) In my view, non-participant observation is most effective because it will give me the freedom to observe the respondents from very close quarters. However, my observation will be based on what was observed but not experienced.

2) The expression 'going native' pertains to the researcher who abandons the research project midway and gets thoroughly integrated with the community s/he had set out to study.

**Check Your Progress 3**

1) I will choose a specifically designed daily diary for documentation having specific heads and sub-heads outlined in the light of the research objectives. The raw data from the field will be recorded in a systematic way to help in analysis at a later stage.

2) Thick description is a term used by anthropologists for blending of observation and interpretation to provide a holistic view of a culture or a group. It is the description of data obtained by thorough and detailed investigation of a single case or a narrow set of examples.