

CUET · SOCIOLOGY · CLASS XI · CODE 326

Doing Sociology: Research Methods

CUET unit: Introducing Sociology — Doing Sociology: Research
Methods

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Snapshot

- Establishes why **method** (not the content) distinguishes the sociologist from a lay person — all of us already "know" society through lived experience.
- Frames the core methodological problems unique to social science: **bias, reflexivity, multiple truths, multi-paradigmatic discipline**, and the redefinition of objectivity as a continuous process rather than an achieved end-state.
- Surveys the principal primary-data methods of sociology — **participant observation / field work, surveys, and interviews** — with their procedures, strengths, and weaknesses.
- Traces the discipline's history: amateur "armchair" anthropology → Malinowski's institutionalisation of field work in the Trobriand Islands → Indian village studies of the 1950s (Srinivas, Dube, Wisers, Cornell project).
- Introduces the statistical scaffolding of survey method — **stratification, randomisation, sampling error, margin of error** — and contrasts it with the depth/intimacy of field work and the flexibility of interviews.

Detailed Notes

2.1 Core concepts

- Sociology is called a **social science** because of its method — i.e. the procedures through which knowledge is gathered — not because of what or how much it knows; sociologists differ from lay persons in **how they acquire** knowledge rather than in the quantity of knowledge they hold (NCERT §I, p. 82). This is a critical opening claim — every household, every market interaction, every classroom is full of people who already "know" society at a common-sense level, but they have not subjected that knowledge to disciplined collection, comparison, recording and analysis.
- Sociology must capture both the **outsider's** (observable behaviour) and the **insider's** (lived experience, opinions, feelings) point of view — illustrated by how the shopkeeper and the customer interpret each other's behaviour and intentions during bargaining (NCERT §I, p. 82). The bargaining example matters because it shows that the **same observable act** (offering ₹50 for an item) carries contradictory subjective meanings (the buyer thinks he's being generous, the seller thinks he's being short-changed).

- **Objective** in everyday usage means unbiased and based on facts alone; **subjective** means based on individual values and preferences. Every science is expected to be objective, but this is harder in social science because the researcher is herself part of the social world she studies — she cannot step outside her family, class, caste, religion, gender, region or generation (NCERT §II, p. 83).
- Two sources of bias in sociology: (i) **direct personal experience** of the group being studied (e.g. a sociologist studying family relations is herself part of a family); (ii) **indirect influence of values and prejudices** of one's own social context (e.g. studying a caste or religion other than one's own and unconsciously interpreting it through one's own categories) (NCERT §II, p. 83).
- **Self-reflexivity / reflexivity** is the technique by which the sociologist continuously examines her own ideas and feelings and tries to look at her work through the eyes of others. Practical aspects include **careful documentation of procedures** and **citing of sources**, so others can retrace the steps and judge whether the conclusions follow (NCERT §II, pp. 83–84).
- Even self-reflexive sociologists face **unconscious bias**; they therefore explicitly mention features of their own social background relevant to the research — gender, caste, region, language, religious background — alerting readers to compensate for it (NCERT §II, p. 84). This declaration is now standard ethical practice in sociology journals.
- The social world has **many versions of the truth** (e.g. the shopkeeper's view of what is a "good" price vs the customer's view). Sociology does not adjudicate between these competing accounts; it is interested in **what** people think and **why** they think so (NCERT §II, p. 84). This is sometimes called methodological pluralism.
- Sociology is a **multi-paradigmatic science** — competing, mutually incompatible schools of thought (functionalism, conflict theory, interactionism, feminist sociology, structuralism, post-structuralism) coexist; therefore the older notion of objectivity as an "achieved end-result" is outdated. Objectivity is now treated as the goal of a **continuous ongoing process** of self-criticism and external scrutiny (NCERT §II, pp. 84–85).
- **Multiple methods**: classifications include **quantitative vs qualitative; observable behaviour vs non-observable meanings; primary vs secondary data; micro (interview, participant observation) vs macro (survey, some historical methods)**. The boundaries are conventional and overlap is common — many studies combine methods (NCERT §II, p. 85).
- **Triangulation** = use of multiple methods on the same problem from different vantage points so that the methods complement each other and produce better-validated results (NCERT §II, p. 86). The metaphor is borrowed from land surveying — a third reference point pinpoints location.
- **Participant observation / field work**: the researcher spends a long period (about a year or more) living among the people being studied as one of them, learning their

language, immersing in everyday life to acquire both the explicit and implicit knowledge of the insider — the "child" model where the researcher learns society the way a child learns a culture (NCERT §III, p. 86).

- The term "field work" originated in the **natural sciences** (botany, zoology, geology) where scientists went to "the field" to study rocks, insects or plants in their natural setting rather than relying on laboratory specimens (NCERT §III, pp. 86–87).
- **Bronislaw Malinowski**, a Polish anthropologist based in Britain, established field work as the distinctive method of social anthropology. Interned as an "enemy alien" during WWI on account of his Polish nationality (Poland was then under German rule), he spent about a year and a half (financed by the Australian government) in the **Trobriand Islands** off the eastern coast of New Guinea, lived in a tent in native villages, learnt the local language, and kept detailed field notes and a daily diary (NCERT Box, p. 88).
- Standard anthropological field work procedure: begin with a **census** of the community (sex, age, family composition), **map the physical layout** of the village/ settlement, and construct a **genealogy** (family tree across generations, cross-checked with other relatives) to understand the **kinship system** which is the backbone of small-scale societies (NCERT §III, pp. 87–89).
- Anthropologists rely on one or two **principal informants** (earlier called "native informants") who act as teachers; they keep daily **field notes / diary** to record both observations and the researcher's own evolving impressions (NCERT §III, p. 89).
- **Sociological field work** uses the same techniques but differs in **context** (not necessarily remote tribal communities; may not require "living in" but does require spending most time with the community) — e.g. **William Foote Whyte's Street Corner Society** (three and a half years with an Italian-American street gang in Boston) and **Michael Burawoy** (months as a machinist in a Chicago factory) (NCERT §IV, pp. 90–91).
- In India, **village studies** dominated the 1950s–60s: the village substituted for the "bounded community" of the tribe. Reasons — anthropology was distrusted by nationalists for its colonial bias toward the "primitive" and the "exotic"; villages were where most Indians lived; the post-Independence government wanted rural development data. Key examples: **William & Charlotte Wiser's Behind Mud Walls** (Karimpur, UP, 5 years), **M.N. Srinivas's The Remembered Village** (Rampura near Mysore — Srinivas reconstructed the book after his original field notes were burnt in a 1970 Stanford fire), **S.C. Dube's Indian Village** (Shamirpet near Secunderabad, a multi-disciplinary project at Osmania University), and the **Cornell Village Study Project** in eastern UP (NCERT §IV, pp. 90–92, Box p. 92).
- **Strengths of participant observation**: rich, detailed insider perspective; long-term presence allows correction of initial impressions; tracks changes over seasons and across different contexts (e.g. a good harvest year vs a bad one); captures non-verbal communication and informal events that surveys cannot reach (NCERT §IV, pp. 92–93).

- **Limitations of participant observation:** covers only a small slice of the world (one village/community), so cannot tell whether what is observed is common or exceptional; uncertainty whether we are hearing the anthropologist's voice or that of the people; one-sided researcher–researched relationship — addressed by more '**dialogic**' formats where the researched also speak in their own words (NCERT §IV, pp. 93–94).
- **Survey** = a comprehensive overview of a population based on a carefully chosen **representative sample**; the people questioned are called **respondents**, and field staff are **investigators / research assistants**. Modes: oral face-to-face, postal questionnaire, telephone, electronic/internet (NCERT §IV, p. 94).
- The survey's main advantage is that it allows **generalisation** to a large population while studying only a small portion — saving time, effort and money. This is possible because of **sampling theory** developed in statistics (NCERT §IV, p. 94).
- Two principles of sample selection — (i) **Stratification** (in a **statistical**, not sociological, sense): all relevant sub-groups (rural/urban, class, caste, gender, age, religion etc.) must be recognised and represented; (ii) **Randomisation**: the actual person/household/village chosen must be by pure chance (lottery, dice, random number tables, computer-generated random numbers) so every member of the population has an equal probability of selection (NCERT §IV, pp. 95–96).
- **Margin of error / sampling error** is unavoidable in surveys — it arises **not** from researcher mistakes but because a small sample stands for a large population. Researchers must specify sample size, design, and margin of error so readers can judge reliability (NCERT §IV, p. 97).
- **Census of India** is conducted every ten years and includes every household — the world's largest such exercise (China, with a larger population, does not conduct a regular census). The **National Statistical Organisation (NSO)** (earlier NSSO) conducts annual sample surveys on family expenditure, employment etc., and a quinquennial survey of about 1.2 lakh households / 6 lakh persons — roughly 0.06% of the population (NCERT Box, p. 95).
- **Weaknesses of the survey:** wide but shallow coverage; no in-depth information; difficult to ensure all investigators ask complicated questions in exactly the same way; depends on a tightly structured inflexible questionnaire; sensitive/personal questions cannot be answered truthfully between strangers in a brief encounter; **non-sampling errors** (errors due to faulty design or implementation) are hard to foresee (NCERT §IV, pp. 98–99).
- **Aggregate (macro) variables** like the **juvenile sex ratio** (girls per 1,000 boys in the 0–6 age group) become visible only through census or large-scale survey — individual families cannot reveal the systemic problem; this is one of the unique strengths of survey method (NCERT Box, p. 98).
- **Interview** = a guided conversation between researcher and respondent — occupies the middle ground between a structured survey questionnaire and the open-ended

interactions of participant observation. **Chief advantage: flexibility** of format — questions can be re-phrased, re-ordered, extended, postponed or skipped during the conversation, depending on respondent's responses (NCERT §IV, pp. 99–100).

- **Weaknesses of interview:** the same flexibility makes it vulnerable to mood changes of respondent or lapses of concentration of interviewer; unstable, unpredictable; recording equipment can make respondents uneasy; heavily dependent on rapport and trust between two strangers (NCERT §IV, p. 100).
- Interview is often used as a **supplement** to participant observation (long conversations with key informants) or to surveys (intensive interviews adding depth to survey findings), illustrating triangulation in practice (NCERT §IV, p. 100).

2.2 Definitions to memorise

Term	Definition	Page
Census	A comprehensive survey covering every single member of a population	101
Genealogy	An extended family tree outlining familial relations across generations	101
Non-sampling Error	Errors in survey results due to mistakes in the design or application of methods	101
Population (statistical)	The larger body of persons, villages, households etc. from which a sample is drawn	101
Probability	The likelihood or odds of an event occurring (in the statistical sense)	101
Questionnaire	A written list of questions to be asked in a survey or interview	101
Randomisation	Ensuring that an event (e.g. selection in a sample) depends purely on chance	101
Reflexivity	The researcher's ability to observe and analyse oneself	101
Sample	A subset or selection (usually small) drawn from and representing a larger population	101
Sampling Error	Unavoidable margin of error because the survey is based on a small sample, not the entire population	101
Stratification (statistical)	Subdivision of a population into distinct groups based on relevant criteria (gender, location, religion, age)	101
Triangulation	Use of multiple methods on the same research problem from different vantage points	86
Principal informant	Key person(s) on whom the anthropologist mostly depends for information; acts as the researcher's teacher	89
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Term	Definition	Page
Participant observation / Field work	Method by which the researcher learns about a society by living among the people for an extended period	
Reflexivity (self-)	Continuous self-examination by the researcher to look at her own work through the eyes of others	83
Objective	Unbiased, based on facts alone	83
Subjective	Based on individual values and preferences	83
Multi-paradigmatic science	A science in which competing, mutually incompatible schools of thought coexist	85
Insider's view	Lived experience, opinions and feelings of the people being studied	82
Outsider's view	Observable behaviour and external description	82
Dialogic format	Research write-up in which the researched also speak in their own words	94
Interview	Guided conversation between researcher and respondent	99
Investigator	Field staff/research assistant who collects survey data	94
Respondent	Person who answers questions in a survey or interview	94
Field notes / diary	Daily record of observations and reflections kept by the field worker	89

2.3 Diagrams / processes to remember

- **Genealogy chart** (p. 87) — extended family tree built by asking the head of household about siblings and cousins in his/her generation, then parents' generation, then grandparents', cross-checked with other relatives to detect inconsistencies.
- **Sample-selection flow** (illustrated through the rural-village example, p. 96): list all villages with population → define "small" and "large" → eliminate "medium" → stratify into small/large lists → randomly select 10 from each by drawing lots → study sample → generalise back to population. Two stratification + randomisation principles operate sequentially.
- **Juvenile sex-ratio table** (p. 98) — girls per 1,000 boys in 0–6 age group for India and selected states across Census 1991, 2001 and 2011: e.g. India 945 → 927 → 914; Punjab 875 → 798 → 846 (the worst-ranked large state). Demonstrates the unique macro insight surveys provide.
- **Methods classification grid** to revise (p. 85): quantitative ↔ qualitative; observable ↔ meaning-based; primary ↔ secondary data; micro ↔ macro — survey is macro, interview and participant observation are micro.
- **Trobriand fieldwork box** (p. 88) — Malinowski's tent in the village; daily diary; one-and-a-half years; financed by Australian government; "enemy alien" status converted into the founding moment of modern anthropology.

- **Indian village studies box** (p. 92) — Karimpur (Wisers), Rampura (Srinivas), Shamirpet (Dube), eastern UP (Cornell) — four landmark sites students should be able to name.
- **Triangulation diagram** — same problem viewed from at least three methods (e.g. survey + interview + observation) to cross-validate.

2.4 Common confusions / NTA trap points

- **Statistical stratification vs sociological stratification** — NCERT explicitly warns these are different. Statistical = subdivision by gender, location, religion, age for sampling purposes. Sociological = hierarchical inequality between caste/class strata. NTA loves this trap (p. 95).
- **Sampling error vs non-sampling error** — sampling error is **unavoidable** and arises **because** the sample is smaller than the population; non-sampling error is due to faulty design or careless implementation, and is in principle avoidable (pp. 97, 99).
- **Census vs sample survey** — census covers every member; sample survey covers a representative subset. India still does a regular census; many developed countries (and even China) no longer do (Box, p. 95).
- **Who "invented" field work** — Malinowski did **not** invent it ("different versions had been tried out all over the world"); he **institutionalised** and **legitimised** it as the distinctive method of social anthropology (Box, p. 88).
- **Outdated objectivity** — the NCERT does not say objectivity is useless; it says the **old idea** of an already-achieved "disinterested" objectivity is outdated, and treats objectivity as an ongoing goal pursued through reflexivity, documentation and peer scrutiny (p. 85).
- **Micro vs macro methods** — survey is **macro**; interview and participant observation are **micro**. Some historical methods can also be macro (p. 85). NTA may flip these.
- **Reflexivity ≠ self-criticism alone** — it also includes documenting procedures, citing sources, and declaring social background. Just "self-doubt" is too narrow.
- **Interview is NOT the same as a survey** — the survey uses a structured, inflexible questionnaire; the interview is a flexible guided conversation. Surveys are macro, interviews micro.
- **Field notes vs field work** — field notes are the **record**, field work is the **activity**. Don't equate them.
- **The "child" analogy** for participant observation refers to **learning** (open, immersive, language-acquiring) — not literal childishness or naïveté.
- **NSO sample of 1.2 lakh households** ≈ 0.06% of population, not 6% or 0.6% — order-of-magnitude trap.

2.5 Thinkers / Theories

Thinker / Concept	Key Contribution	Page / Source
Bronislaw Malinowski	Institutionalised participant observation as the method of social anthropology; Trobriand Islands fieldwork (1914–1918)	Box p. 88
William Foote Whyte	Street Corner Society — 3½-year participant observation of an Italian-American street gang in Boston	§IV, p. 90
Michael Burawoy	Industrial ethnography — months as a machinist in a Chicago factory	§IV, p. 91
William & Charlotte Wiser	Behind Mud Walls — 5-year study of Karimpur village, UP	§IV, pp. 91–92
M.N. Srinivas	The Remembered Village — study of Rampura near Mysore; reconstructed after a 1970 Stanford fire destroyed his field notes	Box p. 92
S.C. Dube	Indian Village — study of Shamirpet near Secunderabad; multi-disciplinary project at Osmania University	§IV, p. 92
Cornell Village Study Project	American-led collaborative study of eastern UP villages, 1950s	§IV, p. 92
Reflexivity (concept)	Continuous self-examination by the researcher to overcome bias	§II, pp. 83–84
Multi-paradigmatic science	Sociology houses competing, incompatible schools of thought; redefines objectivity	§II, pp. 84–85
Triangulation	Using multiple methods on the same problem from different vantage points	§II, p. 86
Stratification + Randomisation	The twin pillars of sample selection — statistical stratification, then random pick	§IV, pp. 95–96
Sampling theory	Statistical foundation enabling generalisation from sample to population	§IV, p. 94
Census of India	Decennial enumeration of every household; world's largest such exercise	Box p. 95
National Statistical Organisation (NSO)	Conducts annual and quinquennial sample surveys on India's families, employment, expenditure	Box p. 95
Dialogic ethnography	Newer writing style in which the people studied speak in their own voice	§IV, p. 94



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Practice MCQs

PYQ Alignment

This chapter is one of the most reliably tested in CUET Sociology (Class XI) — definition-based MCQs on reflexivity, stratification (statistical sense), sampling error, and census/sample distinctions appear almost every year, and matching/assertion-reason questions on the three primary methods (survey, interview, participant observation) and on Malinowski / Indian village studies are recurring favourites in the 2023–2025 papers.



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