

# Understanding Social Forces through Individual Lives

*Case Study As a Research Method*

by

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*This article tries to discuss the strengths of the case study approach as a research method and suggests some basic guidelines on how to conduct a case study. The author has made very effective use of this method in Kerala. One of her best known works is "Profiles in Female Poverty". (See Manushi No. 10).*

## **Choice of Research Methods**

RESEARCH methods differ, depending on what one wants to study. What we decide to look at and why, decides the kind of research method or methods we use. Broadly, one can make a distinction between the survey method and the case study method. Though both of these methods use the field work technique they differ from each other in many



ways. (The field is where one's respondents live.) While surveys cover a large number of households and require several persons canvassing one or more questionnaires, case studies concentrate on only a few households which can be covered by a researcher singly or in a closely knit core team which consists of the principal researcher and one or two investigators, often hailing from the same locality/village as the

households that are chosen for study. Case studies I have handled do not consist of more than 30 households in a study. The smaller the number the better and more insightful is one's information. Let us now see what the major differences are in these two approaches, and why indepth case studies are better suited to study certain kinds of issues.

### **The Formation of Research Questions**

In large studies, where a good deal of information has to be collected from a large number of persons, research is generally organised in such a way that those who design the research, formulate the questions and do the analysis are not the same as those who actually collect the information. The former are usually senior people, whereas the latter are generally young, junior investigators, temporarily hired for the job. Not often is the interaction between these two groups of people very close. True, the research designer does go to the field not only for a pretest but also thereafter. Still this is not always sufficient to have a clear idea of the total field situation, as the field situation is likely to be divergent from one part to the other. For that matter, even several brief visits are inadequate for the purpose. Let us face it, the field situation changes not only from village to village but even from household to household. Young junior investigators seldom have the maturity or experience even to notice the differences between field situations, much less to adapt themselves to different situations. Nor do they often feel free to report the problems they face in the field for fear of being considered incompetent or losing their jobs.

In the case study method, the researcher and investigator often are the same person. The researcher/designer has, or can gather over time, very close first hand knowledge of the

field situation. Where necessary, the researcher takes the help of other knowledgeable persons from the same village or locality who act as informants. These people are fully conversant with the local practices and facts and the researcher can easily verify the information collected with such people.

### **On Survey Questionnaires**

Surveys have to use one or more structured questionnaires. This involves formulation of questions that are to be canvassed by the investigator with respondents. There are several aspects of this exercise which one has to bear in mind.

The questionnaires are usually long, running into several pages and contain a large number of questions. To give you an idea of what is involved, in four of the most recently conducted field studies in Kerala, each of the questionnaires used between 200 to 300 questions. A recent study contained 300 questions, answers to which were supposed to be collected by an investigator in one sitting from the respondent's household in a span of two and a half hours. This means an average time of two minutes per question, assuming an uninterrupted session with a respondent in which he or she can give the investigator undivided attention. Where answers to questions require recall and/or reflection and when the normal attention span, on the basis of experience, is only half an hour, will the quality of answers not be affected if the session extends beyond half an hour?

Of course, the time factor in asking questions and eliciting responses assumes importance when one moves from simple matters like names, ages and relationships to questions seeking brief explanations of complicated behavioural decisions. Sometimes, the questions themselves are not framed well enough for the

respondents to understand their meaning clearly. One will have to grant that over the years the technique of framing survey questions has improved considerably. Still, however simple and straightforward a question may be, when it seeks to probe a decision that cannot be explained in a few words or in a short time, the average respondent's answer is likely to be incomplete, if not altogether inaccurate. The more complicated a matter, the less complete will the answer of the respondent be. Then there are questions which can be quite sensitive, particularly when they relate to matters concerning intimate human relationships. In surveys on demographic behavior most investigators themselves are embarrassed to ask such questions, particularly when the investigator is of one sex and the respondent of the opposite sex. In such a situation, investigators have a tendency to run over these questions in as brief a manner as possible. Naturally, the response thus obtained would suffer.

Furthermore, to some questions there may be no clear cut answers. This problem arises because of the manner in which a question is composed. The investigator may be neither technically nor intellectually competent to judge or evaluate the response and try through supplementary questions to get a clearer response. Nor may there be enough time to make a reasonable attempt. He will usually fill in the most convenient fixed alternative, "other." This alternative rarely is fully documented or adequately analysed. The same sort of situation is likely to obtain where a respondent chooses consciously to be evasive.

Let me illustrate the points I have made above with the sort of questions which were raised in the course of a survey of close to 700 returned migrants for a UN sponsored study. A question was asked about how the

migrant himself and his family adjusted to separation. The respondent was asked: What were the effects on marital and family relations? Was the adjustment very good/good/bad/very bad? Did migration of one spouse lead to:

- 1) greater sharing of responsibility by both spouses
- 2) strengthening of family bonds
- 3) loss of affection between spouse and respondent and children
- 4) infidelity or other marital problems caused by separation
- 5) breakdown of family relations

Implied in this question is a judgement with regard to what constitutes adjustment to separation, given the fact that separation has manifold dimensions, and then what type of adjustment is good or bad. Moreover, the respondent (in this case he was invariably male) had to speak not only for himself but also for other members of his household, male and female. Still, on the basis of the answers to the above questions, the study concludes that "the members of the households of migrants adjusted admirably well to the separations." Then there was a question on the infidelity of the wife during the husband's absence. You can imagine the problems this question would pose both for the interviewer and the respondent.

I also had to study the same question in the context of families of migrants working abroad, and spent a whole year with just 10 families trying to understand how they were adjusting to the new situation.

In the case study method the accent is on conversation and not on question-answer interactions between the investigator and the respondent. This distinction is important, because it is a conversation, or really a series of conversations between two persons who have gotten to know and trust each other, not between two strangers.

There is reason to believe that such conversations become increasingly free and unguarded over time and as a result, give the researcher a better and clearer view of things and matters he or she has set out to investigate.

In doing case studies one never takes an answer to a question as final. One raises the same question in several different ways, if not on the same day then on subsequent visits. Since one has more time on hand, one has the opportunity to reformulate one's questions as one gains insight into the lifestyle and thinking of one's respondent. Moreover, there is scope to check and recheck information given by one's informants. One does not have to accept everything that the



respondent says or the others say about the respondent at face value. One can verify things for oneself by actual observation.

Where the respondent does not have an immediate answer to a question or has not thought about the problem sufficiently, he or she can be, and is, given time to reflect and arrive at an answer.

### **Identifying with the Respondent**

The strength of the micro studies is that they help the researcher gain good understanding of the

respondent's situation in its totality. Thus, the fact that a respondent has two sons can easily be verified but information regarding why he or she decided to have only two sons, how that decision was arrived at, and the process which the respondent went through to arrive at the decision will take time to get at.

In order to understand these processes one has virtually to get under the skin of the respondent. One can understand the reasons behind a particular decision as one learns to put oneself in the shoes of one's respondent. This is how one gains understanding and insight. The opportunity that the case study method offers the researchers to establish rapport with their respondents is an extremely valuable asset that is built over time. It is this rapport with respondents that enables a researcher to say with confidence how and why respondents would react in different situations.

### **The Intuition Factor**

Of course, any researcher's judgement depends on his/her sensitivity. It requires a keen sense of observation and intuition. It is not only what a respondent articulates in words that matters but also what a researcher makes of the respondent's expression, pauses and other gestures in reactions to various situations that arise from day to day.



How these various observations are ordered and related and how rigour is brought into their analysis

and interpretation are matters which depend altogether on the researcher's abilities. No doubt this is valid, regardless of whether one is dealing with information collected through surveys or case studies. However, the chances of getting quality information are better with case studies, particularly when behavioural questions are being studied.

### **The 'How' of Case Studies**

How does one approach a case study? What are the things to avoid and what kind of resistance should one expect? What are the kinds of preliminary preparations necessary? I shall try to explain the steps involved in doing case studies on the basis of my experience.

In all my research efforts in recent years, I have used the case study approach to understand issues concerning women in low income households. I have found the case study approach not only very useful to understand issues concerning poverty and women but also very revealing. The three studies that I would like to share with you are indepth studies done on households: (a) belonging to working women in the unorganised sector (b) in three villages selected for a fishery development project (c) belonging to migrant workers to the Middle East. The studies vary not only in the size of the sample, but also in the mix of techniques and methodologies used, except that in all these studies an attempt was made to study issues relating to women. The purpose of these studies varied: in one it was to study issues around women and work, in the second the impact of technical change on women and in the third the impact of male migration on families left behind. Two of the studies have used only micro approaches, whereas in the third study I combined micro with macro work and made use of historical demography. While micro efforts

involved in-depth case studies, the macro efforts included a census as well as a survey. For historical demography I used baptismal records from the churches located in the villages I studied. What I mean by macro here refers to the study of villages as distinct from the study of households. In no study have I handled more than 30 households per study. What follows are the major points which emerge from my experience of conducting these studies.

To begin with, the preliminary intellectual preparation for a case study, is no different from that of other research methods. You locate a problem, do the background reading and form your hypothesis. After this, it is also useful to have a basic questionnaire to collect all the factual details. Though for the main issues you want to study, you will not be administering a questionnaire as such, you should have the questions ready for each of the issues you want to probe. Only after this preliminary preparation is it advisable to enter the field.

### **Gaining Entry**

Once you are clear about your focus and the questions you want to raise, the next question is how to gain entry into a respondent's household? Can you just enter and knock on any door or should you be introduced? If so, who should introduce you? These are the most challenging tasks that will confront you.

Any situation or a household can be approached from two points, either from the top or bottom. A peasant household could be entered through the village headman or other peasants. Similarly, workers could be approached through the factory manager or through other workers. Particularly when there is a big class difference between the respondent and the investigator, which often is the case, researchers find it easier and

prefer to get their basic introduction through the most influential person. While this is an easy approach, it has its limitations, because the response you get will be different depending on your entry point.

My advice is that it is better to use an entry point that is either on the same level as the respondent or from a lower level. I initiated contact with each of the working women through her friends or her neighbours. If I had entered through their bosses, for example, the brick kiln owner, the landlord or the contractor, the women workers would have been scared of giving adverse comments on conditions of work and wages.

In order to enter from the same level, some preliminary groundwork will have to be done. This involves making friends in the neighbourhood or work site. Then you can choose a household you think you can establish a rapport with. I chose the construction worker, Devaki, only after I had made contact with several workers on her construction site. In the case of the choice of fishing and migrant households, I studied the whole neighbourhood before I chose particular households for the in-depth study.

I have always used research investigators from the same neighbourhoods which are being studied. Even though they may not be formally qualified, they can be very knowledgeable about the area and its people. This was just to be sure I was getting the correct information.

### **On the Question of Creating Trust**

Having entered the setting, the next task before the researcher is of creating trust in the respondents. In order to create a good rapport and build their trust, you have to understand their world and identify with their problems. Unless one learns to think and feel like the people one is studying, one cannot gain an

understanding and insight into their lives. Your aim should be virtually to get under the skin of the respondents or at least for some time to be able to put yourself in their shoes. Only then can you understand their thinking process and their feelings. This total identity with the respondent is very important for a successful case study.

The question is how does one build such an identity in such a short span of time? This can be done only if you know well the persons involved and constantly observe and hear what they do and say. Rapport grows with time spent among the community and with informal associations with the respondents. This is the only way of gaining the rich flood of complex and conflicting information one needs. If one learns to relate to them as people, listen to their problems and respect their worth as human beings, a long lasting relationship can be established. If such a relationship is built, one can always go back, even to do a resurvey. To do this daily during field work requires a great deal of personal involvement and commitment. Doing it well requires sensitivity, sociability, intuition and understanding. The field is really a testing ground for your skills. Once you are familiar with the setting and have already chosen your respondent/respondents, you are ready to visit the respondent in his or her house for your study. Once you arrive on your first house visit, and before you are ready to even start your questioning, you will have to be prepared to be subjected to an intensive interview. This is one of the major problems you are likely to face. I faced it in the beginning of my field work, when practically every one of my respondents would ask me two very pertinent questions:

- (1) How am I going to benefit by answering your questions?
- (2) If I am not going to benefit,

why is it important for you to understand my problems?

As we all know, there is very little that they personally stand to gain by our research. But the fact remains that we hope that eventually something useful will emerge from our research that will help other people in situations similar to that of those we are interviewing.

To tackle this situation you must be able to convey your purpose convincingly and honestly. Do not make false promises in your desperation. Frankly, this is easier said than done. For you to help them



understand and appreciate your purpose in interviewing them takes a great deal of patience. But it is a barrier you must cross in order to make any progress in your work. Only then will you be able to depend on honest, serious responses to your questions. Be patient and be prepared to be subjected to an interview by them. Unless you are prepared to answer their questions how can you expect them to answer yours?

Another important situation that you have to be prepared for is that the moment you go to a house, your

presence itself may attract so much attention in the neighbourhood that you could have some 10 to 20 persons-children, women and men (in that order, in terms of numbers) following you. In such a situation you may feel that you are playing the role of the Pied Piper of Hamelin. People follow you out of curiosity, and want to be helpful. In such a situation, it is very difficult to get answers from the respondent alone, or ask him or her any personal questions. You can direct a question to the respondent, but there will be several others ready to speak on his /her behalf. Whose answer do you take? The best thing you can do is to use the situation to identify knowledgeable informants from others. Patience and tact are essential to evade overtalkative



informants and direct the conversation to make the best use of the time to help communicative individuals speak meaningfully. Articulate and knowledgeable people from the neighbourhood are always valuable assets on whom you can build for insightful information, so use the situation to your advantage.

But as your presence becomes familiar, your novelty will wear out and the crowd will start ignoring you. Wait for such an opportunity for delicate or personal questions. Though privacy of conversation is unheard of in these houses, there are many matters people in the poorest of houses will not like to discuss

except in utmost confidence. So you have to watch out for such an occasion.

You must be prepared to encounter any kind of reception when you enter a respondent's house. I had to face all kinds of situations, from total acceptance to total indifference or rejection. Even on subsequent occasions, after you have broken the ice, one has to be prepared for any situation. So much depends on what happens once you leave the scene. Any rumour about you is enough to freeze the respondents.

### **Timing and Recording**

You cannot make an appointment and ask your respondent to be free for you at a particular time. So you have to be flexible. It is better to keep the fact in mind that you are obliged to them for sharing their thoughts and making time and space available for you in their lives. We have to remember that whatever be the class differences among our respondents, the interviewer is always an intruder prying into the private lives of people. While the rich are scared that you may get to know more about their affluence than they would wish you to know, the poor are embarrassed that you may expose their poverty.

Not only do you have to be sure that you have the complete confidence and trust of the respondent, you must also see to it that there is a free flow of conversation. The moment you start recording or take up a pencil or paper, it inhibits the free flow of conversation. To use a cassette recorder or a gadget would be worse in a poor neighbourhood. The best way of tackling the situation initially is through the use of a local informant or two from the neighbourhood who could go over the conversation with you which you could write down in your room. With more familiarity with the situation you could use a wider network of people like neighbours, friends and relatives of principal

respondents. Not only are low income households well informed about each other but one can easily double check all information given and gain valuable insights by this method. Ideally it would be good if you take no notes in front of the respondents but come back and write later at night. When you write, the atmosphere you create must be evocative of the situation and the spoken word placed in the correct context.

### **Neutrality**

Theoretically, you are supposed to be a totally impartial observer. Field workers are supposed to avoid taking sides and avoid getting too involved with the respondents. The fact that you are close to some and not to others itself causes a great deal of jealousy in indepth household studies. In a, highly deprived setting even attention is a valued asset. In a dull, drab existence any event is of some excitement. The households you visit regularly are looked upon with envy and create a lot of jealousy over a period of time. One must be able to carry along all the others who are not immediately involved in the study.

The text book recommendation is not to get too involved. However, it is very difficult not to be. Low income households are constantly moving from one crisis to another. In such a

situation it is impossible to be totally indifferent. When the agricultural worker's roof collapsed, I had to do my bit. It was heartbreaking to see her suffer. When the water authorities sealed off the water flow to the squatter, one had to do something. I think this is the least the field worker can do. It is very difficult to keep a detached relationship. Though the demands made on the investigator can be overwhelming when he or she identifies with the problems of the community, I would not worry too much about it. The field situation has a logic of its own and it is difficult for an observer who is constantly in and out and with more resources, to be aloof and totally clinical. That would be nothing short of sheer callousness.

To conclude, we have to approach case studies with a single-minded desire to present a true picture and, if possible, an explanation of social life. There is no doubt that the case study is one method through which we can ascertain truth. It can help us in breaking through the outer crust of events to discover those hidden social forces which we are trying to understand. A true picture can be presented if we only allow for a long period of absorption and intense preoccupation with the lives we are studying. Though there are no hard and fast rules for getting the material, the broad outline and focus is clear. □