HYPOTHESIS – THE BASIC PLANK OF A SOCIAL RESEARCH

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As is commonly believed, the task of a social researcher is to explain the basic interrelationship amongst strategic facts through theory. The discerning researcher has to extricate the strategic variables out of a mass of complex data. However, a researcher should not proceed with an absolutely blank mind, for research has to be a planned voyage and just not a blind groping in the dark. The researcher has to start with something, even if, that something is the proverbial scratch. He starts with an hypothesis built on the basis of extant knowledge, own experience or other's experience, intelligent guess, or careful hunch. An hypothesis is a set of facts assumed to be true for the purpose of investigation. During the course of investigations, a researcher gathers elaborate but nonetheless relevant data, contrives instruments and tests the hypothesis.

The hypothesis or hypotheses may be essential for the following reasons: -

1. It gives a starting point to the research project.
2. The hypothesis gives a direction to the research project without which it would probably float like a rudderless ship.
3. It delimits the ramifications of research without which it would probably be an omnibus generality or a welter of irrelevancies.

Although proceeding with an hypothesis may have the aforesaid clear advantages, it, by no means, implies that a research project is not feasible without an hypothesis. In fact, a great many researches of exceptional quality have been consummated without any formal hypothesis. Robert and Helen completed their celebrated Middle Town without formulating any formal hypothesis, whatever. They being gifted with researcher's open mind, compiled a mass of relevant data and expounded meaningful inter – relationships. An hypothesis, after all, conditions the researcher's mind who, more often than not, unwillingly develops a sort of attachment towards it. Want any hypothesis, it is suggested may only free the researcher from foreone conclusions and endow him with an open mind. Great discoveries in the annals, it is pointed out, have been made by chance or pleasant accident described as serendipity. One needs only to have an alert receptive mind so that nothing eludes him as casual, for the casual may in effect be crucial.

Granting that the hypothesis may not be indispensable & the probability of a discovery may always be there, he plans the course of his work. Even though a discovery may not always be planned, the spadework behind it has to be carefully planned and charted out. The hypothesis may be useful only to plan the course of research work.

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The gravest danger which may turn the strength that a hypothesis is into a handicap pertains to the researcher's vulnerability to develop some sort of vested interest into the hypothesis. A researcher may subconsciously be attached to the hypothesis. A researcher has to scrupulously shun being a prisoner of hypothesis. He is to hold very lightly to hypothesis and not closely cling to it. The job of a researcher is not to prove by hook or crook, that the hypothesis, he proceeded with is accurate. The hypotheses are but tentative or provisional conclusions. A researcher has to apply cold reason to verify which of the following possibilities holds good: -

A. The assumed set of conclusions may be wholly wrong.

B. The hypothesis may be partly right and partly wrong.

C. The hypothesis may be, as far as it goes, right but may reflect only half truth.

D. The hypothesis may be right but in a way different from the one assumed.

A researcher has to diagnose his own mind, his own process of thinking: he has not to be attached even to himself. "The world wants you to prove, you are right, I want you to prove you are wrong", thus goes the wise man's counsel to the researcher. While weighing the possibilities, the researcher can scarcely afford to ignore the possibility that whatever he assumed may turn wholly awry. New facts unearthed, like God, may dispose what the researcher, a mortal, proposes in the hypothesis. An astute researcher first acts like a sleuth to prosecute his own facts. He then shakes off his attachment to his own case and acts like a judge to ascertain the truth.

The hypothesis should, as far as possible, be simple and, at the same time, close to reality. As early as the 14th century, an English philosopher, the William of Occam, stressed the need for simplicity of an hypothesis. A search for realistic causes is necessary; the realistic may not necessarily be complicated or abstract. Many a times, pedantic researchers evince the tendency to reject the simple as superficial and mistake the complicated as the deep truth. The fact is, many a time the real causes of a phenomenon may be pretty simple rather than complicated. The need for simplicity stressed by William has been referred to as the Occam's razor.

John Stuart Mill, the 19th century philosopher economist suggested two simple methods to test a hypothesis in his "System of Logic": -

1. Method of agreement: The interrelationship between two variables may be set up in terms of the correspondence between the changes in them. The hypothesis that the level of delinquency depends on the level of poverty may be tested by finding out the positive corelation between the two variables.

2. Negative canon of agreement: The hypothesis may be tested, to take the example cited above, by studying whether no poverty or less poverty is necessarily followed by no crime or less crime. Although Mill's method of testing the hypothesis reflects over – simplification, they certainly equip a researcher with a clarity of approach.

John Gauttung has enumerated a few important characteristics of a working hypothesis: generality, complexity, testability, predictability and tenability. Robert Bales listed a few pertinent questions to be asked as to hypothesis before adoption.

1. Are the terms of the hypothesis specific so that the concepts and the variables may be distinguished in concrete situations?
2. Is the posited relationship capable of being verified or nullified by empirical investigations?
3. Is their any prior evidence as to the accuracy or falsity of the posited relationship?
4. Can an appropriate study design be devised?
5. Are the variables in the posited relationship context – bound or they can be applied to other inter – action situations?
6. Are the generalisations in the posited relationship culture – bound (for example to America, Europe) or they pertain to other environments too?
7. Are certain variables amenable to change during the course of observations, if yes, have they been enumerated?
8. Is the posited relationship a part of some theoretical system?
9. Is the hypothesis sufficiently precise and articulate to enable one to make prediction?

Hypotheses in social researches have been classified by Goode and Hatt from the stand – point of the level of abstraction into two broad types:-

1. Empirical uniformities or common sense propositions.
2. Complex ideal hypothesis.

Sometimes, common propositions or commonly known axioms may be treated as hypothesis, to be tested by the researcher, which may add new facts by his assiduous investigations and thus proffer wider perspective to the knowledge of interrelationship. Doubts have been expressed as to the efficacy of adopting common propositions or lay person's beliefs as hypothesis by a dedicated researcher. What is the use, it is asked, in treating hack and trite beliefs as hypothesis?

The reality may, however, be that what everyone knows is not knowledge but falsehood. It is a part of the obligation of researcher towards society to expose the falsehood conventionally accepted by the community as the truth owing to subtle and systematic propaganda of vested interest. Again, common men's beliefs even though true are seldom founded on scientific investigations; it is the lot of the researcher to offer scientific foundations, if any, to the common propositions.

In social researches, the hypothesis, may assume the form of complex & intricate inter – relationships amongst multiple variables. The dynamics of interrelationship presupposes the existence of more than two variables: the hypothesis adopted by a social researcher may be a complex interrelationship assumed to be tested.

Whatever the form of an hypothesis, a social research does not merely mean building an hypothesis and then demolishing or confirming it but to travel much beyond in quest for truth.