

Sociology Factsheet



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Number 05

Choice of Research Method

How do sociologists decide which method to use in their research? There are a lot of factors and also many decisions that must be made.

Primary and secondary data.

If a sociologists 'discovers' the information (or *data*) by doing their own investigation this produces **primary data**.

If the sociologist uses existing information to carry out their investigation this produces **secondary data**.

Quantitative and qualitative data.

If the information is expressed in numerical form (such as figures or percentages) this is called **quantitative data**.

If the information records peoples thoughts, feelings, opinions, actions etc but it is not in numerical form it is called **qualitative data**.

Quick test (answers at back)

1. A sociologist interviews people about their family life. Is this primary or secondary data s/he is collecting?
2. Studying crime statistics for different areas of London. Which type of data is being used?
3. One third of marriages end in divorce. Quantitative or qualitative data?

Possible research options

If they are conducting primary research basically a sociologist has the choice of the following:

- Questionnaires
- Interviews
- Observations

With secondary research there are many possible sources including;

- Government statistics
- Letters, diaries etc.
- Historical documents
- Media content
- Other sociological studies.

Exam Hint:

For all of the methods above you will need to know the **advantages and disadvantages of each**. In your revision it is a good idea to get a plain postcard for each method and use your notes and textbook to make a list of advantages on one side and disadvantages on the other. You can carry these cards around and read them when you have a spare 5/10 minutes such as on a bus.

Choice of method

It is generally accepted that three types of considerations influence the method a sociologist will select;

1. Practical
2. Ethical
3. Theoretical

An easy way to remember these is to take the first letter of each, this spells **PET**.

1. Practical considerations

This refers to factors which make certain methods more or less easy for the sociologist to adopt. There are a number of these.

1. **TIME and MONEY**. If both of these are in short supply the researcher might decide to use existing material or do a brief questionnaire. Conducting interviews or carrying out observations are both likely to take quite a long time and cost a lot.
2. **PERSONAL FACTORS**. Some researchers might find interviewing easy, others might be good at handling a lot of statistics gained from questionnaires. Sometimes a sociologist might find it easy to fit into a group to observe them whilst others would not.
3. **SUBJECT MATTER**. Some topics are best matched with some methods. For example wanting to study class differences in health might best be done by looking at government statistics. Wanting to understand the internal workings of a gang might mean participant observation would be the best method.

Exercise (answers at end)

Try to think of a subject matter which would be best suited to the following methods. Give a reason for your answer.

1. Interviews
2. Government statistics
3. Historical records
4. Observations

2. Ethical considerations

This refers to the rights and wrongs of various research methods. Here are just some ethical considerations which sociologists need to consider.

1. In **participant observation**, people may not act normally if they know they are being observed. Therefore is it right to lie to people so that they are unaware that they are being studied?
2. If conducting an **interview**, should the sociologist continue even if the participant is showing signs of hurt or distress?
3. In a **questionnaire**, is it right to restrict an answer to Yes/No if the participant would like to give a more detailed answer?
4. If in the course of research a sociologist uncovers illegal activity should s/he report this?

Exam Hint:

If you are also studying Psychology you should know quite a bit about research ethics. It is quite acceptable to use this knowledge to answer a Sociology question. Indeed you can use knowledge from any subject, **provided it is relevant to the question you are answering**.

3. Theoretical considerations

In this case the choice of method is often influenced by the perspective the sociologist operates within.

Positivists try to make their studies as scientific as possible. So they prefer methods which allow the researcher to remain detached from the study and which produce statistical data (**quantitative data**). They are likely to use government statistics or conduct questionnaires.

Interpretivists want to get in depth and detailed knowledge of their topic. They are more likely to use observation or conduct in depth interviews (**qualitative data**).

Some sociologists are concerned with **reliability**. This refers to the ability to repeat and check a study. It is easier to repeat a questionnaire than a piece of observation.

Others are more concerned about **validity**. This means if the research produces a true-to-life account of what they are studying. Some argue observation is best for this.

Methodological pluralism

This rather grand title simply refers to the fact that sociologists often use more than one method in their study (e.g. use a questionnaire & interviews). They do this for a number of reasons:

1. To get a fuller picture of the situation;
2. To produce both statistical and in depth data (both quantitative & qualitative data);
3. To cross check the findings from one method by using another.

If a sociologist had limitless time, money and skill s/he would probably always use a variety of methods.

Table 1 Famous studies with a brief explanation of why they used the method they did

Study	Method	Reasons
Durkheim: 'Le Suicide'	A systematic study of the official suicide statistics of a number of European countries (quantitative data).	He wanted to be as scientific as possible. He wanted to establish patterns and trends. He wasn't interested in individual motives.
Oakley: 'The Sociology of Housework'	A series of in depth interviews with a number of women (qualitative data).	She wanted to understand how women felt about the experience of doing household tasks. She wanted to allow women to answer at length so she did not use a questionnaire. Time and money meant she could only study a small number.
Patrick: 'A Glasgow Gang Observed'	An in depth participant observation study (qualitative data).	He wanted to really find out how the gang members saw their lives and situation. It was unlikely that they would take part in interviews or complete questionnaires. He had to conceal his purpose and identity so the gang would act naturally.
Barker: 'The Making of a Moonie'	Methodological pluralism involving questionnaires, interviews, observation and analysis of media reports (quantitative & qualitative data).	She wanted statistical data but also to gain an in depth understanding of the religious group. She could compare what people said in interviews with how they behaved when she observed them. She wanted to compare media representations of the group with her own observations of them.

Sample Exam Questions

1. Distinguish between primary and secondary data. (4 marks)
2. Identify and briefly explain two ethical issues a sociologist might encounter when doing research. (8 marks)
3. Using examples where appropriate, examine the factors which influence a sociologist's choice of research method(s). (20 marks)

Answers to quick test

1. Interviews produce primary data as the sociologist is finding out the information for themselves.
2. Crime statistics already exist before the sociologist comes to study them so they are secondary data.
3. This is quantitative data as it is expressed in numerical form.

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Answers to exercise

1. Interviews: topics where the sociologist wanted some depth of understanding and also sensitive areas where people might take a while to express their feelings. A good example would be **domestic violence**. When Dobash and Dobash studied this they used in depth interviews to allow participants to 'open up'.
2. Government statistics: topics where the sociologist wants to identify trends. Many areas of family life such as **divorce rates**, **size of household** etc. can be studied by using government figures.
3. Historical records: fairly obviously studies of the past! An example was Laslett's study of **family structure in pre-industrial time**. He had no alternative but to seek out historical records of births, deaths and marriages.
4. Observations: used in many contexts. A good example is **gender bias in the classroom**. Stanworth observed differences in how teachers treated males and females. If she had interviewed the teachers it is unlikely they would have admitted (or even known about) this difference in treatment.