

**AS Sociology For AQA**  
**[2nd Edition]**



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## Unit 2: Sociological Methods

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# 1. The distinction between primary and secondary data, and between quantitative and qualitative data.

## Sociological Research: Introduction

The idea we floated in the Introductory Chapter (and which is implicit throughout the whole textbook) is that the knowledge produced by sociologists is both *different to* - and has greater *validity* than - “common sense” or “everyday” knowledge. This claim is based on the idea that sociological knowledge is not just the expression of someone’s *opinion*; rather it represents data that has been *systematically* collected, analysed and interpreted through a research process. The key difference between sociological and common-sense knowledge, therefore, is that with the former some attempt has been made to verify (or check) its accuracy. If this is a crucial difference between the two types of knowledge it follows that we need to explore the sociological research process in more detail and, in this respect, we can initially note that it has two main components:

**1. Research Methods:** These are the various ways sociologists collect data – some you may be familiar with (such as questionnaires) and others you may never have heard of before (such as Creative Visual methods).



**2. Methodology:** The ability to collect data systematically, although a *necessary* part of the research process, isn’t the full story. The decision to use certain methods (but not others) or collect certain types of data (but not others) is surrounded by **beliefs** – and these involve, for example, ideas about the nature of the social world, the ability of different research methods to study that world and the capacity for different types of data to capture and accurately reflect that world. In other words, sociological research and data collection is *always* surrounded by

*methodological questions* that have to be posed and answered by the researcher.

Although the distinction between **methods** (*what* you do) and **methodology** (*why* you do it) is in some ways a forced or artificial one – collecting data (using a research method) would be a fairly pointless exercise if the reasons for such collection (methodology) weren’t clear to us - it is nonetheless a useful one for our current purpose, for a couple of reasons:

Firstly, it allows us to ease our way into the study of the sociological research process by looking. Initially, at some basic concepts (such as the distinction between *primary* and *secondary* data) and then by outlining and evaluating a range of possible data sources and research methods.

Secondly, once we’ve familiarised ourselves with these ideas we can move up a gear to consider a range of *methodological questions* (such as outlining two different types of research methodology – **Positivism** and **Interpretivism**) and looking at the research process more systematically (in terms of different explanations about the organisation of sociological research). In the final section of this Chapter we can examine a range of *practical, theoretical* and *ethical* considerations that surround the research process as a whole – from choosing a topic, through choice of method to the overall conduct of the research process.

## Sociological Methods: Observations

In this Section we can introduce and examine some “basic research concepts”, the general understanding of which will help you come to terms with the various aspects of the research process introduced and examined throughout the remainder of the Chapter. In this respect we can begin to think about the information sociologists collect as belonging to one of two basic types:

**1. Primary data** involves information collected *personally* by a sociologist - who, therefore, knows exactly how the data was collected, by whom and for what purpose (you don’t, for example, have to trust other people collected their data accurately). As we will see, sociologists use a range of research methods (such as questionnaires, interviews and observational studies) as *sources* of primary data.

**2. Secondary data** involves information *not* personally collected by the researcher, but used by them in their

research. Sources of secondary data include newspaper articles, books, magazines, personal documents (such as letters and diaries), official documents (such as government reports and statistics) and even the research of other sociologists. In turn, each of the above can be further subdivided into either of two types:

**1. Quantitative data** represents an attempt to *quantify behaviour* - to express it *statistically* or *numerically*. For example, we could count the number of people in the UK who wear glasses (which is probably not that useful unless you happen to manufacture spectacles) or the number of people who commit crimes each year (which is probably a little more useful, in the general scheme of things). Quantitative data is usually expressed in one of three main ways. As a:

- **Number:** For example, the number of people who live in poverty.
- **Percentage** (the number of people **per 100** in a population). For example, 30% of voters in Britain regularly vote Conservative.
- **Rate** (sociologically, this is defined as the number of people **per 1000** in a population). For example, if the birth rate in Britain is 1 (it's not, by the way) this means for every 1000 people in a population, one baby is born each year.

Although "raw numbers" can be useful (for example, knowing the number of children who will be starting school in 10 years time allows the government to plan for the number of people who will need to be trained to teach them), data is often expressed as a **rate** or **percentage** because it allows:

**Comparisons** *between* and *within* groups and societies. For example, when comparing levels of unemployment between Britain and America, expressing unemployment as a simple or *raw* number wouldn't tell us very much, since the population of America is roughly 5 times that of Britain. Expressing unemployment as a *percentage* or *rate* allows us to compare "**like with like**", in the sense we're taking into account the fact one society has substantially more people than the other (so we might expect the larger society to, *numerically*, have more people unemployed - even though their unemployment *rates* might be broadly similar).

#### Module Link

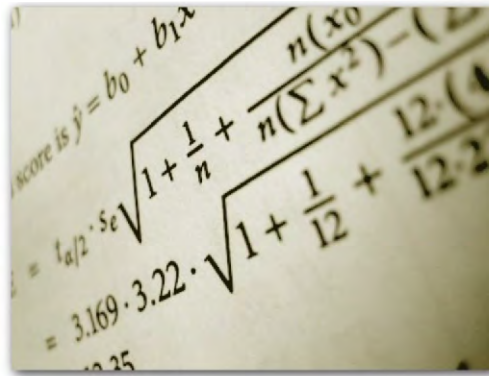
#### Education

Statistical data about a range of things – from gender differences in the choice of A-level subjects / degrees, through educational achievement to the ethnic backgrounds of those excluded from school – are routinely collected and produced by the government.

**2. Qualitative data**, on the other hand, tries to capture something of the *quality* of people's behaviour (what they *feel*, for example, about a sociologist asking them if they wear glasses). Such data, therefore, says

something about how people *experience* the social world; it's also used to understand the:

**Meanings** people give to their own behaviour and that of others. **Boyle** (1977), for example, studied a juvenile gang from the viewpoint of its members while **Goffman** (1961) tried to understand the experiences of patients in an American mental institution. Both, in their different ways, were trying to capture and express the *quality* of people's behaviour, albeit in different situations.



An example of some Very Complicated Statistics. Be Afraid. Be Very Afraid...

Although these distinctions are important – and necessary to understand - research methods, as we've suggested don't simply involve thinking about **data types** (qualitative and quantitative) and **sources** (primary and secondary); we also need to think about our **reasons** for choosing particular types and sources in our research - something that involves considering sociological **methodology**.

### Methodological Concepts

For the moment there are *four* main methodological concepts we need to initially outline:

**1. Data Reliability** relates to the "nuts-and-bolts" of actually doing research; in other words, it mainly refers to the methods of data collection we use (such as interviews) and, more specifically, to the *consistency* of the data we collect. Data reliability is important because it suggests we can *check* the data we get from our research by **repeating** that research to see if we get the same, or very similar results (we may have to allow for possible individual changes over time). If a researcher, for example, needs to know someone's age this is something that will change over time, depending on the gap between two surveys. In general, therefore, we can say data is *reliable* if similar results are gained by different researchers (or the same researcher at different times) asking the same questions to similar people.

True  
True  
True  
True  
True  
True  
True  
True  
True  
True

The ability to replicate research results is a good indication of data reliability.

A simple (in the sense of not being particularly realistic – it's just for explanatory purposes) example here might be a researcher trying to *cross-check* the reliability of a response within a questionnaire by asking the same question in a different way:

- How old are you?
- When were you born?

If they get two different answers, it's likely the data is *unreliable*.

**2. Data Validity** refers to the extent to which data gives an accurate measurement or description of whatever it is the researcher is trying to measure or describe. Data, it could be argued, is only useful if it actually *measures* or *describes* what it claims to be measuring or describing. For example, if we were interested in the extent of crime in our society, we could use *official crime statistics* (a *secondary* data source published by the government). We would need to be aware, however, that the validity of these statistics may be limited since they only record *reported* crimes - and people may not report the fact they have been a victim (for many possible reasons - such as a fear of reprisal from the criminal or the belief the police will not be able to trace the perpetrator, to name but two).

#### Module Link

#### Crime and Deviance

Notwithstanding the fact that we have to be careful about the validity of official crime statistics they still represent an important source of data about crime in our society. We should also note that not all crimes are underreported in our society. Car theft statistics, for example, have a high level of validity because insurance companies insist on the theft being reported to the police. Murder statistics – for rather different reasons (it's actually quite difficult, so we've been told, to dispose completely of a human body) also tend towards high validity.

This example also raises questions relating to:

**3. Representativeness:** Whatever type of data we use (primary or secondary, quantitative or qualitative), an important question to always consider is the extent to which the data accurately *represents* what it claims to represent - something we can think about in two basic ways:

**Data** representativeness refers to the idea that any information we collect through our research is sufficiently comprehensive to accurately represent whatever the research claims to represent. Using the crime statistics example introduced above it can be argued these statistics are *unrepresentative* of all crimes committed in our society; anything we say, therefore, about "crime" in our society on the basis of this data source needs to be *qualified* by saying that some types of criminal behaviour may not be fully represented in the statistics.

**Group** representativeness refers to the use of **samples** (explained in more detail in Section 4 of this Chapter) in our research. In basic terms, if we're researching a small group (of students, for example) and, on the basis

of this research, want to be able to say something about *all students*, we need to ensure that the characteristics of the group we study (our *sample*) **exactly match** those of the larger group. For example, if the gender distribution of *all students* is in the ratio 1:1 (for every male student there is 1 female student – this isn't the case, but it does illustrate the basic point) then the *same* must be true of our sample if it is to be representative. In other words, we can use one, small, group to *represent* a much larger group - an idea that leads to the related concept of:

**4. Generalisation:** If data can be *generalised* it means information we collect about a relatively small group (the *sample group*) can be applied to larger groups who share the same general characteristics as the sample. In other words, if the sample group is representative of the larger group anything we discover about the former can be generalised to the latter. The usefulness of these two concepts - representativeness and generalisation - will become clearer when we consider them in more detail in the context of *sampling techniques* (Section 4).

### Sociological Methods: Explanations

The different data types we've just identified each have their different **advantages** and **disadvantages**.

#### Primary Data

The ability to generate this type of data has some clear **advantages** for the sociologist:

**Data Control:** Because the researcher is responsible for collecting data they have complete control over such areas as how much data is collected, how and from whom it's collected and so forth.

**Reliability, validity and representativeness:** Simply because you can exercise some measure of control over how data is collected doesn't, of course, guarantee its reliability, validity or representativeness - a badly designed piece of research can be unreliable, invalid and unrepresentative. However, it's much easier for the researcher to consider and control these concepts when they design and carry out the research themselves.

This type of data also has a few potential **disadvantages:**

**Resources:** Primary data collection can be:

- **Time-consuming** - to design, construct and carry-out. If the group being studied is large and involves something like interviewing each group member individually this is going to take a great deal of time and resources.

- **Expensive** - as in the above example, the cost of a researcher's time (amongst other things) may be a factor in the design of the research.



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**Access:** Having designed a piece of primary research, you need access to the people you want to study – and your plan to interview the 10 richest people in the UK, for example, may come to nothing if they refuse to be interviewed.

**Availability:** Sometimes it's just *impossible* to collect primary data. In the above instance, for example, it's impossible because the people you want to research do not make themselves available to you. In another (admittedly more extreme) example, if you wanted to research why people commit suicide this would be difficult because your potential subjects refuse to answer your questions because they're *dead*. In this case, one way around the problem of availability is to use *secondary data*. **Durkheim** (1897), for example, used **official statistics** to test whether suicide rates varied within and between societies. By so doing, he argued social factors, such as religious belief, were significant in the explanation of why people took their own life. This leads us neatly to consider:

### Secondary Data

In terms of **advantages** we can note the following:

**Resources:** Because secondary data already exists (someone else has done the work of collecting it) there are advantages in terms of *time* and *money* – collecting primary data on national crime or unemployment statistics, for example, would be a potentially daunting task. In some instances, *access* to data is much easier, although the researcher does, of course, have to rely on the availability / existence of such data.



#### Module Link

#### Education

Secondary data – in the form of official statistics – are useful for tracking a range of educational issues on a national (and international) basis, from levels of absence, through examination results to class sizes at primary and secondary level. A useful source of secondary data here is something like **Social Trends**, a digest of official government statistics published annually on a wide range of topics (family life, work, education and so forth).

**Reliability:** Some (but not all) forms of secondary data can be highly reliable – *official statistics* (those produced by the UK government, for example) are a good case in point – for a couple of reasons:

1. They are collected regularly and consistently in the same way from the same sources. Educational statistics, for example, are regularly collated by the **Office for National Statistics** from a variety of government sources and surveys.
2. They generally measure the same things each time they are collected so that any **comparisons** made between different years are comparing "like with like". For example, official statistics measuring educational achievement at GCSE consistently use the same

## Sociological Methods

definition of achievement (grades A\* - C). This isn't to say, of course, that definitions do not change over time; at A-level, for example, the current (2007) pass grades (A - E) will change in 2008 to A\* - E pass grades.

However, if the researcher is made aware of a definitional change (as is normally the case with official statistics) it is possible to adjust the research to take account of this potential threat to reliability.

**Validity:** Again, while it's not always easy to make generalisations, some forms of secondary data (*biographies* and *personal documents* such as *diaries* for example) provide

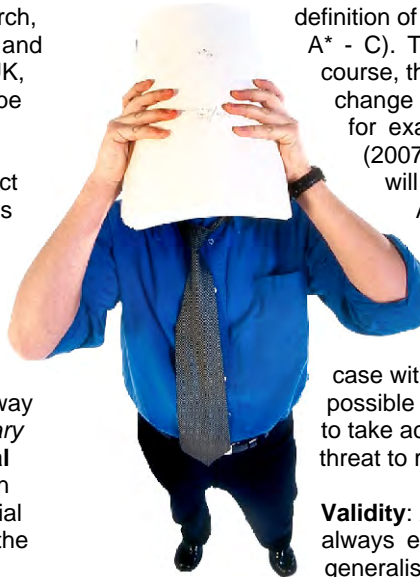
highly valid data because they give detailed insights into people's thoughts and behaviour – something that may be especially important and / or useful in circumstances where individuals are dead or have written contemporary accounts of historical events. Although it may, in some circumstances, be possible to generate primary data from such people (presupposing they are still alive...) validity may be lowered if the researcher is asking people to remember events that happened many years previous to the interview.

**Representativeness:** Where data is produced on a national level, by the government for example, there is normally a high level of representativeness because the level of **resources** (such as funding, number of researchers and so forth) available to governments means that large samples can be constructed. The **Census** (a **questionnaire** distributed to every household in the UK every 10 years), for example, is a *highly representative* sample of the UK population (its *reliability* is also high because it must, by law, be completed by every recipient).

In terms of some **disadvantages** of secondary data, however, we can suggest:

**Data Control:** This may be difficult because secondary data is not always produced with the needs of sociologists in mind. The data's creator will have their own reasons for producing it and these may not coincide with sociological concerns, interests and agendas. The way governments, for example, measure **social class** may be different to sociological ways of measuring class.

**Reliability:** The range and variety of secondary data available to the researcher makes generalisations about reliability difficult – some sources, such as official statistics, may be reliable whereas others, such as a diary or newspaper article may be potentially unreliable. In this instance to access the reliability of secondary data we always need to keep in mind questions like



Surprising as it may seem, not everyone welcomes being studied by sociologists...



who produced it, how it was produced and the reasons for its production.

**Validity and Representativeness:** An important consideration with secondary data is the extent to which it simply represents the viewpoint of one individual or a much wider range of views. Newspaper articles, for example, can be the personal, unsupported and unrepresentative view of a single journalist. Similarly, historical documents may reflect the views of particular social classes (because it was generally the upper classes in Britain who, until quite recently perhaps, recorded their particular view of the world). Conversely, the only surviving record of something may provide a valid insight into that event, but without supporting evidence (a question of *reliability*) we can't be certain of either its validity or *representativeness*. In addition, the *authenticity* (has the data been faked?) and *credibility* (who produced it and for what reasons?) of secondary data may be difficult to check.

As with *reliability*, the range and scope of secondary data makes it difficult to generalise about its validity – some forms (such as eyewitness descriptions of an event) may have greater validity than official statistics that simply focus on quantifying something.

**Quantitative Data**

This type of data has a number of distinct **advantages** for sociological researchers:

**Quantification:** The ability to express relationships *statistically* can be advantageous if the researcher doesn't particularly need or want to explore the *reasons* for people's behaviour. For example, if you simply need to know the *number* of murders committed each year or the *number* of students absent from the classroom in any given month then quantitative data satisfies this purpose more than adequately.

**Social changes:** Following from the above, quantitative data gives us an easy, manageable, way of tracking *social changes* over time. For example, statistics on

educational achievement over the past 25 years can show us changes in relative levels of achievement between different genders, ethnic groups and social classes.

**Module Link**

**Education**

Changes in the relative levels of educational achievement are explored in the Section **"Differential educational achievement of social groups"**

**Comparisons:** Similarly, if we want to compare differences between two or more things, (such as middle-class and working-class family size within our society), quantitative data makes this relatively easy. Alternatively, *cross-cultural* comparisons (crime rates in different countries, for example) are similarly made possible through the use of quantitative data. In addition:

**"Before" and "after" studies** are a further type of comparison we can make using quantitative data. For example, we could examine, using statistical data, the effect changes in the law have had on patterns of divorce in our society by quantifying the number of divorces *before* and *after* a change in the divorce law.

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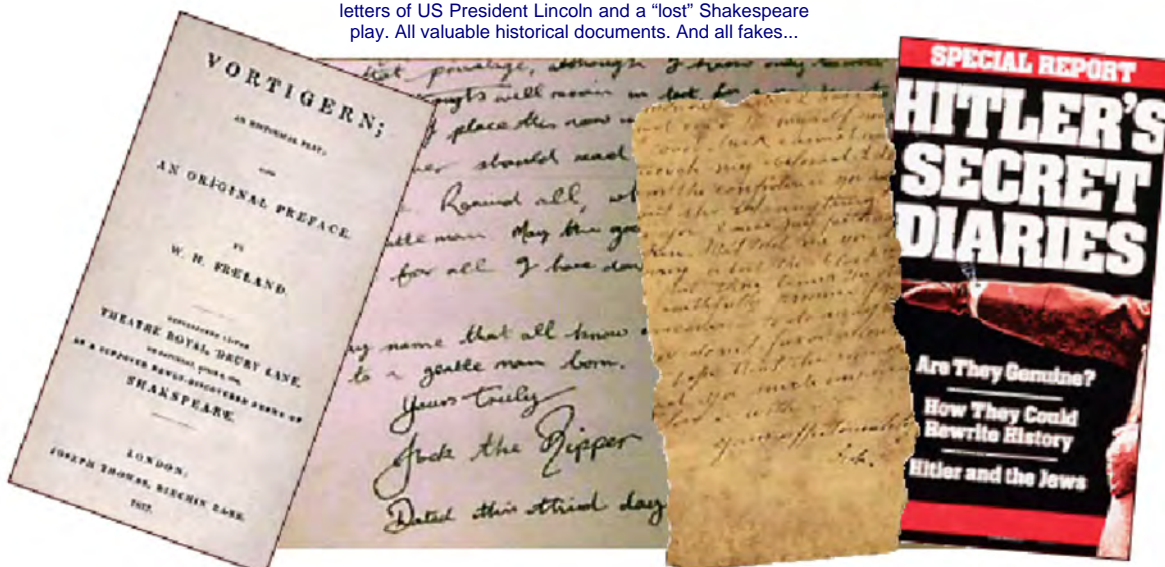
**Families and Households**

The relationship between divorce and legal change is explored in more-detail in the Section **"Changing patterns of marriage, cohabitation, separation, divorce, child-bearing and the life-course"**.

**Reliability:** As a general rule, quantitative data tends to be more reliable than qualitative data because it's easier to *replicate* (repeat) the collection of such data. This is because *standardised questions* (questions that don't change) can be asked to different groups (or the same group at different times).

**Enabling studies:** Although we have, for the sake of clarity, discussed quantitative and qualitative data

The diaries of Jack the Ripper and Adolf Hitler, the love letters of US President Lincoln and a "lost" Shakespeare play. All valuable historical documents. And all fakes...



separately (as if the two are mutually exclusive) there are occasions when a researcher may want to combine the two types of data. This may, for example, involve collecting statistics about educational achievement or the number of people who visit their doctor each year alongside qualitative data that seeks to explore the satisfaction levels of pupils or patients.

Alternatively, quantitative data is sometimes collected as a *prelude* to qualitative research. For example, a researcher looking at reasons for school truancy in their locality may firstly carry-out a quantitative analysis to discover whether or not pupils are actually absent from the classroom. In this respect a quantitative *enabling study* can be used to establish whether or not there is anything for the researcher to qualitatively investigate...



Quantitative data does, of course, have **disadvantages**, a couple of which involve:

**Validity:** This type of data can't be easily used to explore issues in any great *depth*; as we've suggested,

knowing the number of thefts in our society doesn't tell us anything about *why* people commit steal. Similarly, the knowledge that working class boys have lower levels of educational achievement than middle class girls doesn't tell us anything about the possible reasons for this situation (although it may, as we've suggested, **enable** the sociologist to identify a sociological problem to research).

**Meanings:** Related to the above, quantitative data isn't designed to tell sociologists much - if anything - about how people *interpret* and *understand* social behaviour. For example while it might be possible to quantify "the *fear of crime*" (counting the percentage of people who fear being a victim, for example), quantitative data tells us nothing about *why* people may be fearful of victimisation.

### Qualitative Data



In terms of **advantages** we can note:

**Validity:** Because this type of data encourages *depth* and *detail* (in an interview, for example, people may be

encouraged to talk at great length about themselves and their beliefs) we are more likely to gain a *complete picture* of whatever we are researching or measuring.

**Meanings:** Qualitative data allows sociologists to explore the meanings people give to events and behaviour. While we can represent divorce statistically, for example, qualitative data allows us to explore how people feel and react to this situation. The same, of course, is true for areas like education and health.

In sign language this gesture means "I can smell something disgusting on my fingers". Possibly.

**Imposition:** If your research objective is to *understand* the *meaning* of people's behaviour, it follows you must allow people the scope to talk freely about that behaviour. If a researcher *imposes* their interpretation on a situation (by asking direct, quantifiable, questions for example) then data *validity* will be affected because you are restricting people's ability to talk at length and in depth about what they believe. Qualitative data may avoid this type of problem (although it may create a different kind of *imposition problem* which we'll examine in more detail when we consider different research methods).

Some **disadvantages** of qualitative data we can note are:



**Reliability:** Qualitative research is, by its very nature, difficult (if not impossible) to **replicate** (think, for example, about how difficult it would be to exactly repeat even a very recent conversation you've had with somebody). In addition, with something like *historical* data we may have no reliable way of knowing if our data source is *representative* of anything more than the views of a single individual.

**Data Overload:** Qualitative research tends to produce masses of data, much of which will be largely *irrelevant* in terms of achieving the research objective. With something like an interview, the problem of how to *interpret* or represent the data may also occur. Do you as a researcher report *everything* someone says or do you edit the data (and risk *imposing* your interpretation on the information)? A similar, if slightly different, problem is presented by observational forms of research – these too produce masses of data, the relevance of which has to be interpreted by the researcher (and may involve making difficult decisions about what to include or exclude as part of the research analysis).

**Comparisons:** Qualitative data makes *measuring* and comparing behaviour very difficult, mainly because the data can't be easily *standardised*. It's very difficult, for example, to ensure that you're comparing "like with like"; if you were interviewing people about their attitudes to something like fear or crime how difficult would it be to ensure that everyone in your sample thinks about (interprets) "fear" in the same way?

### Reliability

**Data Reliability** is an important research consideration since, if data is *unreliable*, any conclusions we draw from it are going to be fairly limited (if not useless). For example, if I attempt to draw conclusions about the state of education in Britain on the basis of a couple of interviews I conducted "down the pub" with whoever happened to be present at the time, it's probable such data will

not be very reliable as a guide to what is actually happening in the educational system. In





general terms, therefore, data reliability is affected by such things as:

**Bias:** Are there opportunities for the researcher (consciously or unconsciously) to distort the data collection process?

**Standardisation:** Is everyone in the group you are researching asked the same questions in the same way? If they're not, how easy would it be to check data reliability by repeating this research?

**Consistency:** Will, for example, the same question asked of the same person in similar circumstances, produce the same answer?

**Replication:** If another sociologist attempted to repeat my "down the pub" research would similar results be achieved? If not, then my research would not be very reliable...

#### Tried and Tested

- (a) Explain what is meant by the term "primary data" (2 marks).
- (b) Suggest two reasons why sociologists might want to collect quantitative rather than qualitative data (4 marks).
- (c) Suggest two reasons why sociologists might use quantitative data (4 marks).
- (d) Examine the problems sociologists may find when considering the reliability and validity of their research. (20 marks).

#### Validity

**Data Validity** is a useful concept because it reminds us to think about the *accuracy* – or otherwise – of different data types (primary, secondary, qualitative and quantitative). While some forms of data (such as official statistics) may be reliable, their validity may be questionable for two reasons:

**Representativeness:** They may not apply to everyone in a particular group. In the UK, for example, "unemployment statistics" only represent those who are registered for unemployment benefit with the government - not everyone who doesn't have a job.

**Depth:** They may lack the depth and detail required to accurately represent the views of a particular individual or group (and so measure what they aim – or claim - to measure).

In both these respects, therefore, when evaluating the validity of a particular research method, data type or data source we need to always keep in mind the question of whether these actually measure what they claim to be measuring; if they do (however, limited their scope may be), then they are valid. If they don't then validity is likely to be both compromised and low.

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Durkheim, Emile (1951: first published 1897) "Suicide: A Study In Sociology": The Free Press

Goffman, Erving (1968: first published 1961) "Asylums": Penguin.

**2. Sources of data, including questionnaires, interviews, participant and non-participant observation, experiments, documents, and official statistics; the strengths and limitations of these sources.**

**Sources of Data: Introduction**

Having outlined some basic methodological concepts we can begin our examination of the research process in earnest by relating these ideas to the various ways sociologists go about collecting data. Specifically we can outline and examine the different **primary and secondary, quantitative and qualitative** research methods and data sources used by sociologists.

**1. Primary Quantitative Research Methods**

In this particular category we can identify a range of different research methods and sources of data:

**Social Surveys: Observations**

A *survey*, according to **Lawson and Garrod** (2003) is: "The systematic collection of information about a given population" which could, of course, involve using any number of different research methods. However, for our purposes, we can think about surveys as involving the large-scale collection of data using a **questionnaire** (or some variation thereof, such as a **structured interview** – see below) . This, in basic terms, is a list of written questions normally completed in one of two ways:

- **Privately** (with the researcher not present): This is normally called a **postal questionnaire** (even though it may not necessarily be posted - how confusing is that?). In this instance, **respondents** (the *subjects* of the research or people who *respond* to the researcher's questions) give their answers to the questionnaire without any verbal guidance from the researcher.

- **Publicly** (in the presence of the researcher): This is normally called a **structured interview** and respondents usually answer a researcher's questions verbally.

In this respect, the same set of questions could serve equally as a *postal questionnaire* or a *structured interview* - the main difference between the two techniques, therefore, is how they are *administered*. This being the case, we can look at some of the *shared* aspects of this method before considering some different *strengths* and *limitations*.

**Questionnaires** are generally used to ask two types of question:

**1. Closed** (sometimes called *closed-ended* or *pre-coded questions*). This type involves the researcher providing a set of answers from which the respondent can choose one (or sometimes more) that best represents their situation, feelings, beliefs and so forth (hence the idea of questions being *pre-coded* - the researcher limits the responses that can be given). A (very) simple example of a closed question is one that asks the respondent to choose between two options:

**Do you attend a secondary school?**

		<b>Code</b>
Yes	<input type="checkbox"/>	1
No	<input type="checkbox"/>	2

(When using this type of question it's useful to add a third option - "*Don't Know*" - just to catch those respondents who have no opinion either way).

**Variations** on this basic theme can be a bit more adventurous. For example, the respondent could be allowed the (limited) opportunity to fill-in an answer.

**Which subject do you like to study the most?**

		<b>Code</b>
English	<input type="checkbox"/>	4
History	<input type="checkbox"/>	5
Other [please specify] -----		6

The inclusion of an "Other" option is often useful because it avoids the need for very long lists (in this instance, a list of curriculum subjects) - and it also means the respondent can add something the researcher may not have considered.

Alternatively, a researcher could measure *attitudes* towards something, as in the following example:



Please indicate the extent to which you agree / disagree with the following statement:

"Sociology is the best subject I have ever studied".

<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Agree strongly	Agree	Neither agree nor disagree	Disagree	Disagree strongly

There are further variations on the *closed question* theme (but you probably get the picture) but their defining characteristic is that they allow respondents little, if any, scope to develop an answer beyond the categories (pre)selected by the researcher. This, as you might expect, means that answers are relatively easy to express **statistically** – hence such questions are used extensively to collect **quantitative data**.

**2. Open** (or *open-ended*) questions are different in that the researcher doesn't provide a set answer from which to choose. Rather, the respondent is given the scope to answer "in their own words". A simple example of an *open question* might be something like: "What do you like about sociology that you don't like about psychology?"

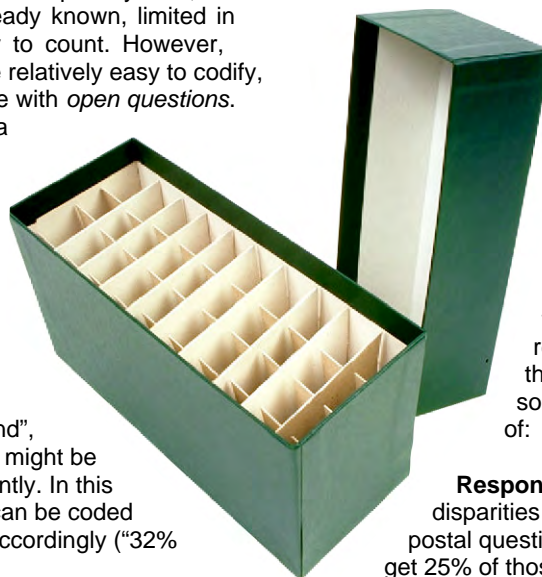
This type of question can probe a little deeper into a respondent's opinions and produces a (limited) form of **qualitative data** (although the main objective with open questions in a questionnaire is usually to *quantify* responses in some way). Questionnaires can, of course, happily contain a mix of open and closed questions.

### General Characteristics

We can think about some of the general characteristics of **questionnaires / structured interviews** in terms of things like:

**Coding and Quantification:** The use of *pre-coded questions* makes it much easier to quantify data, since the options available are already known, limited in number and (relatively) easy to count. However, although *closed questions* are relatively easy to codify, this is not necessarily the case with *open questions*. The researcher may receive a variety of responses, each of which has to be *categorised, coded and quantified*. In the previous "sociology / psychology" example, answers mentioning things like "interesting" and "thought-provoking" might be categorised and coded in one way, whereas answers mentioning "easy to understand", "simple to follow" and the like, might be categorised and coded differently. In this way, similar types of answer can be coded appropriately and quantified accordingly ("32%

Closed questions make quantification easier - making it possible to put people's responses into nice, neat and separate little boxes...

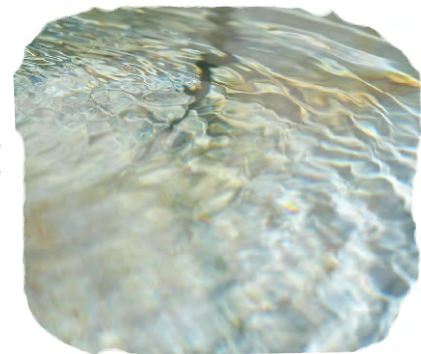


of respondents prefer sociology because it involves less work than psychology", for example).

**Depth and Scope:** One problem with closed questions, as we've suggested, is that they limit the detail, depth and type of answers a respondent can give - it would sometimes be useful to know *why* people believe one thing as opposed to another. Open questions go some way to solving this problem, although questionnaires / structured interviews rarely, if ever, go into as much depth as other types of survey method (such as *participant observation* - a method we'll consider in more detail in a moment).

**Ease of Completion:** A closed questionnaire is relatively quick and easy to complete. Open-ended questionnaires take more time and there's the danger (from the researcher's viewpoint) respondents will:

- Write-down the first thing that comes into their head in order to complete the questionnaire quickly (something that affects the **validity** of the research because, in such cases, it's unlikely the research will actually measure what it claims to measure)
- Not bother to complete the questionnaire at all, because it takes too much time and effort.



Closed questions: All the depth of a puddle?

**Structured interviews**, unlike postal questionnaires, avoid this particular problem because the researcher rather than the respondent actually writes down the answers to the questions – something related to the concept of:

**Response Rate:** There are wide disparities between the response rate of postal questionnaires (you may be lucky to get 25% of those you send-out returned) and structured interviews (where the response will always be around 100%). A researcher, therefore,

needs to be aware of the extent to which a poor response rate may affect the **representativeness** of their sample (by creating, in some way, a biased response).

### Questionnaires: Explanations

Focusing on the idea of a (postal) questionnaire for the moment, we can note the following **strengths** of this particular research method:



**Sampling:** Postal questionnaires are a useful survey method when the researcher needs to contact large numbers of people quickly, easily and efficiently. The respondents also do most of the *time-consuming work* by actually completing the questionnaire before returning it (or not, as the case may be...) to the researcher.

**Analysis:** Postal questionnaires are relatively quick and easy to code and interpret (in some instances, "interpretation" simply involves counting responses).

**Reliability:** A questionnaire is easy to **standardise**, which increases potential reliability because everyone answers exactly the same questions.

#### Interview / interviewer effect:

This type of effect occurs when, for various reasons (discussed in more detail below in relation to *structured interviews*), the relationship between the researcher and the respondent creates a situation that **biases** the responses the researcher receives. Postal questionnaires - because they involve no personal (face-to-face) contacts or social interaction between researcher and respondent - may avoid this potential source of bias.



**Validity:** Although questionnaires rarely have much depth, one area in which they may have greater validity than some alternative methods is in terms of *anonymity*. Because respondents may never meet the researcher, questionnaires can explore potentially embarrassing areas (such as sexuality or criminality) more easily than other methods. If people can anonymously admit to crimes they've committed, for example, they may be encouraged to answer questions more honestly than they would have done in the presence of a researcher; this, in turn, may lead to higher levels of validity as the respondent reveals more about themselves than they might have done if their identity was known to the researcher.

A postal questionnaire may increase the chances of getting more thoughtful, considered, responses.

This research method, as you might expect, does have a number of potential **limitations**:



**Anonymity:** This feature of questionnaires can work both ways - it may encourage honesty, but if someone other than the intended respondent completes the questionnaire then research *validity* and *representativeness* will be affected (although this will depend on the size of the sample to some extent - the smaller the sample, the more significant these factors may be).

**Reliability:** Because the researcher is not present it's impossible to know if a respondent has understood a question properly. The researcher also has to trust the questions asked *mean* the same thing to all respondents - if they don't, reliability will be affected. This problem can - to some extent - be avoided by conducting a **Pilot Study** - this involves *trailing* questions to eliminate possible sources of bias (for example, the questionnaire may be completed by a selection of respondents to check for misunderstood questions and so forth. The data collected from a Pilot Study would not normally be included in the full survey).

**Response Rates:** These, as we've noted, are notoriously **low** for postal questionnaires, which may mean a carefully designed sample becomes *unrepresentative* of a target population. Research validity may also be affected by a low response rate because it increases the chances of a **self-selected sample** (a sample that effectively chooses itself).

**Validity:** The questionnaire format makes it difficult to examine *complex* issues and opinions - even when open questions are used, the depth of answers tends to be more limited than with almost any other method. This may mean the researcher doesn't collect potentially significant and informative data about the people they're researching.

### Structured Interviews: Explanations

Keeping in mind that the main difference between a postal questionnaire and a structured interview is how they are *administered* we can note a couple of ways structured interviews differ in terms of their **strengths**:



**Reliability:** Because structured interviews involve face-to-face contact any issues surrounding the research can be identified and discussed between respondent and researcher. The interviewer can, for example, explain the objectives of the research and resolve any problems with understanding / answering questions. If a respondent is unable or unwilling to provide an answer, the researcher will be aware of the reasons for this and may be able to resolve them.

**Representativeness:** Structured interviews potentially avoid unrepresentative research caused by low response rates or self-selected samples.



This method has a few additional **limitations** not shared by postal questionnaires:

**Interview effect:** This relates to the idea that the *validity* of a respondent's answers may be lowered if they misinterpret (consciously or unconsciously) their *role*; for example, the respondent may view their role as one of trying to *please* or *encourage* the researcher – in effect, to provide the kind of answers they think the researcher “wants to hear” rather than answering questions honestly or accurately. This may not be done deliberately by the respondent (although with this type of research method *dishonesty* and *inaccuracy* are ever-present possibilities); rather, it may involve something like the:

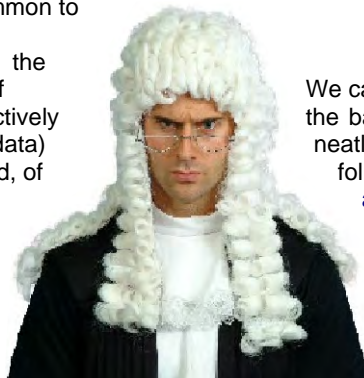
• **Halo effect** - a situation **Draper** (2006) describes as: “...uncontrolled novelty”. In other words, the novelty of being interviewed - and a desire to reward the interviewer for giving the respondent the chance to experience it - may result in unintentionally dishonest answers.



Not quite the Halo Effect Draper describes. Probably

**Interviewer effect:** This idea is related to the **interview effect** (and a slightly-different type of *halo effect* may operate here, whereby the respondent feels they want to personally please the interviewer), but is subtly different in that it refers to how the *relationship* between researcher and respondent may bias responses and lead to invalid data. An aggressive interviewer, for example, may intimidate a respondent into giving answers that don't really reflect their beliefs. On another level, *status* considerations (based on factors such as gender, age, class and ethnicity) may come into play - such as a situation where a female respondent may feel embarrassed about answering questions about her sexuality if these questions are asked by a male researcher.

**Imposition:** This limitation is common to both postal questionnaires and structured interviews and reflects the idea that by designing a “list of questions” a researcher has effectively decided (before collecting any data) what they consider important (and, of course, unimportant). The researcher, therefore, has *imposed* their definition of these things in advance of the interview and has effectively *pre-judged* what is and is not significant. For example, for



someone researching “Attitudes to Education”, the questions they *fail to ask* may be as (if not more) important to a respondent than the questions they *actually ask* - such as failing to ask if the respondent is “pro” or “anti” school. This type of “imposition effect” may affect research **validity** by placing *artificial limits* on the answers given by respondents.

### Experiments: Observations

Experimentation is another example of a *primary research method* – although not one that's particularly widely used in Sociology for reasons that will become clear. However, we can begin by noting experiments can be categorised in terms of two basic types:

**1. Laboratory:** This is a general name for an experiment where the researcher **controls the environment** in which the research takes place. The ability to do this is a feature of what are called **closed systems** - situations, such as in a science laboratory, where the research conditions can be *exactly* and *precisely* monitored and controlled.

**2. Natural (or Field)** – an experiment that *isn't* carried out under tightly-controlled conditions (sometimes called *opportunity experimentation* since the researcher takes advantage of a *naturally-occurring opportunity* to conduct the experiment). Such experiments are normally used in **open systems** (such as the social world) where the environment *cannot* be closely monitored or precisely controlled.

Having said this, it is possible for a researcher to deliberately construct a natural experiment and one of the most famous of these is probably **Zimbardo's** Stanford Prison Experiment (1971) that involved respondents acting-out the respective roles of prisoners and guards – with explosive and lasting results (**Zimbardo**, 1973).

#### Module Link

#### Research Methods

The **Stanford Prison Experiment** can probably be considered one of the most interesting pieces of social scientific research ever carried-out – and if you want to check-out the full story in all its gory detail have a look at: <http://www.prisonexp.org/>

### Back To Basics

We can build on the above by identifying some of the basic features of the experimental method, neatly encapsulated by **Giddens'** (2006) in the following terms: “An experiment can...be defined as an attempt, within artificial conditions established by an investigator, to test the influence of one or more variables upon others”. In this respect, therefore, experimentation involves two key ideas:

The sociologist as judge, jury and executioner?

**Control:** The research takes place in an environment that the researcher has the ability to control. In a **laboratory** setting, control of conditions is, of course, much easier than in a **natural / field** setting, but it's still possible, up to a point, to control the general conditions under which such experiments take place

**Variables:** These, in basic terms, represent something that may change (or *vary*) under different conditions.

We can bring these ideas together in the following example: In an imaginary (and oversimplified for the purpose of illustration) experiment we have two *variables*. The first we call "Variable C" and the second we call "Variable E". All we want to test is: if we change Variable C in some way, what change (if any) will we see in Variable E? If this is a bit confusing, consider this:

In our laboratory we have a plant and a means of controlling the heat. The plant is Variable E and the heat control is Variable C. What we want to know, by experimenting with changes in the level of heating (Variable C – the *cause*), is how will the plant (Variable E – the *effect*) change? For example, if we deprive the plant of heat what will happen?

This example highlights the importance of a *controlled environment* within a closed system. If we record changes in plant behaviour we need to be certain they were **caused** by changing the heating level. If we allow some *other variable* into the equation (such as changing the amount of *light* the plant receives) we can't be sure any recorded changes were due to changes in heat level. In a roundabout way, therefore, we've encountered some important ideas relating to experimentation that we need to briefly clarify. Firstly, in the above we've identified two types of **variable**:

**1. Dependent variables**, in any experiment, are the **effect** we want to measure. Changes in the behaviour of Variable E (otherwise known as a plant) were what we wanted to measure; hence, plant behaviour would, in this instance, be the *dependent variable* because any changes in behaviour depend on (or are **caused** by) something else – the:

**2. Independent variables** - the things a researcher **changes** in various ways in order to measure their possible *effect* on the dependent variable.

**Causality:** This can be expressed in terms of the idea two or more things (for example, heat and plant growth) are so closely related that when *one* changes the other also changes. If this happens *every time* we repeat our experiment we can claim to have established a *causal relationship* - a very powerful statement, mainly because it allows us to make **predictions** about future behaviour. As an aside, a causal relationship is, by definition, highly *reliable* (because every time we repeat the experimental process we get exactly the same result).

**Correlation:** This is an observation two or more things occur at the same time (for example, if we deprive a plant of heat it dies). This is a *weaker statement* than a causal statement because we can't be certain one thing *caused* another to happen - they may have happened at the same time by *accident* or through *chance*. We can illustrate the difference between **causality** and **correlation** using the following example: In 1989, the First-Class Cricket Averages for batting and bowling in England were as follows:

The **top ten batsmen** all had last names that were no longer than one syllable (Smith, Lamb, Jones...).

The **top ten bowlers**, on the other hand, all had last names that were two or more syllables long (Ambrose, Dilley, Foster...).

This is an example of a *correlation* for two reasons:

Firstly, there's no *logical relationship* between the ability to bat or bowl successfully and a person's name (would changing your name, for example, make you a better or worse batsman or bowler)?

Secondly, since it's not always easy or possible to prove or disprove something *logically* a better way would be to use some kind of *test* - in this instance, we could carry out a **comparative analysis** by examining the averages for previous years. If the relationship is *not repeated* (or *replicated*) we would know it was the product of *chance* (a **correlation** in other words). If it was repeated every year, this would suggest a **causal relationship** (and in case you're wondering, it was a *correlation* – there is not a causal relationship between a person's name and their ability to play cricket...).



The classic lab experiment - how will the liquid respond to being started at by a bunch of geeks and then threatened with a sharp, pointy, thing?

Although laboratory experiments are a powerful method used extensively in the *natural sciences* they're not, as we've noted, used much in sociological research (for reasons we'll examine in a moment). However:

**Natural experiments** are used occasionally and, for convenience, we can sub-divide this category into two types:

**1. Field experiments** are conducted outside the confines of a closed, controlled, environment. They take place, therefore, "in the field" (not literally, of course, because it would be a bit chilly in winter – and probably very muddy too) where people are studied in their *natural environment* (or as close to it as possible). The basic principles of field experiments are very similar to lab-type experiments - the objective being, as you will recall, to identify **dependent** and **independent** behavioural variables and manipulate (or change) them in some way to measure possible effects.

**2. Comparative experiments** involve comparing two or more *naturally occurring* situations to examine their similarities and differences. For example, two identical twins separated at birth and raised in different families (or perhaps, if you're very lucky, different societies) would provide an opportunity for a comparative experiment to test whether people's behaviour is the result of "nature" (their genetic inheritance which, in identical twins, would be the same) or "nurture" (the cultural environment in which they are raised).



true of each of the individual workers as well as of the group [as a whole]. Clearly the variables the experimenters manipulated were not the only...causes of productivity. One interpretation...was that the important effect here was the feeling of being studied". This possible change in people's behaviour as the result of "a feeling of being studied" leads us to note the possible effect of an:

**Artificial Environment:** A controlled experiment is, by definition, an *unusual* situation for people - does this mean they behave differently inside a laboratory to how they behave in society generally?

### Experiments: Explanations



As we've suggested experimentation isn't widely used as a research method by sociologists because it suffers (especially the laboratory type) from a range of **limitations** when applied to the study of human behaviour.

**Experimental Control:** A major *methodological* problem with both laboratory and field experiments is the difficulty involved in identifying and controlling all the possible influences (*variables*) that potentially affect people's behaviour.

**Awareness:** Because people are *conscious* of what is happening around them, this introduces an *uncontrolled independent variable* into any experiment; the fact of *knowing* they are part of an experiment, for example, may change someone's behaviour. This is frequently referred to as the:

- **Hawthorne Effect**, named after the studies by **Mayo** (1935) at the Hawthorne factory in Chicago. **Draper** (2006) describes this possible effect as being noted when: "A series of studies on the productivity of workers manipulated various conditions (pay, light levels, rest breaks etc.), but each change resulted, on average and over time, in productivity rising...This was



Now, if you could just pretend you haven't got this vacuum pump attached to your head sucking out your innermost thoughts and act naturally...

In addition, we can note a couple of further considerations:

**Ethical:** Do sociologists have the right to experiment on people, who may be unwitting (and unwilling) victims, in the name of "research"?

**Practical:** It's often the case that the kind of experiments sociologists would like to conduct (such as separating identical twins at birth, placing them in different social environments and observing their development) are *impractical* (and probably *unethical*, come to that).

Despite such problems, experiments do have certain **strengths** that can make them potentially valuable research tools. These include, by way of illustration:



**Reliability:** Laboratory experiments can be highly reliable; if the experimental conditions can be controlled and standardised the experiment can be easily replicated.

**Validity:** Experiments can be used to create powerful, highly valid, statements about people's behaviour *under certain conditions*. Through experimental methods, for example, it may be possible to establish **cause-and-effect** relationships in people's behaviour that make it possible to broadly predict how they will behave in the future.



**Assumptions:** Field experiments can be used to manipulate situations "in the real world" to understand the *assumptions* (norms and values for example) on which people base their everyday behaviour – as **Zimbardo's** Stanford Prison Experiment (1971) graphically demonstrated.

## 2. Primary Qualitative Research Methods.

This *general type* of data collection is sometimes called **ethnography** - the detailed study of any small group. Ethnographic forms of research try to understand the world from the point of view of the subject or participant in that world and we can outline a range of different *primary qualitative methods* used by this type of research.

### Focused Interviews: Observations

This involves the researcher setting up a situation (the interview) that allows the respondent to talk at length and in depth about a particular subject. The **focus** (or general topic) of the interview is decided by the researcher and there may also be particular areas they're interested in exploring - which is why this type of interview is sometimes called a **semi-structured interview**. It has a "structure" (in the sense of things the interviewer wants the respondent to focus on), but one that's not as rigid or tightly-controlled as a *questionnaire* or *structured interview* - there is, for example, no list of questions that *must* be asked and answered in a certain order or sequence - and different

respondents may be asked different questions on the same topic, depending on how the interview develops.

The objective here, as we've suggested, is to *understand* things from the respondent's viewpoint, rather than make generalisations about people's behaviour (although this may be possible in certain circumstances). *Open-ended questions* are frequently (if sparingly) used, some of which are created in advance of the interview and some of which arise naturally from whatever the respondent wants or decides to talk about. In this respect we can note a number of factors that can affect the conduct (and *validity*) of focused interviews:

**Personal demeanour:** A focused interview requires certain *skills* of the researcher – such as when to prompt for an answer and when to simply listen. Although such interviews are similar to conversations, they are *not* arguments - people are unlikely to open-up to a rude and aggressive interviewer. Similarly, how researchers present themselves (how they dress, how they talk, whether they appear interested, disinterested or - worse still - bored) can be



The Stanford Prison Experiment (Zimbardo, 1971). For the full story, go to <http://www.prisonexp.org/>. Now. I said go Now! Move your motherfreakin' ass when I tell you!

significant factors in the interview process; if a respondent starts to believe that the researcher isn't particularly interested in what they have to say this will impact on the overall *validity* of the research (as respondents try, for example, to shape their observations to (re)gain the researcher's interest or even restrict their answers in the belief that there's little point in developing extended observations)..

**Setting:** To get people to talk openly and at length it's important to build a *rapport* with the respondent - they should feel comfortable with the researcher, the interview and their surroundings; unlike a structured interview which can be conducted almost anywhere, focused interviews can't be easily conducted on street corners or in a noisy classroom.



**Trust:** Interviews may deal with matters of personal importance to respondents - one reason for using this technique is, after all, to explore "what people really believe" - and it's important respondents feel they are being taken seriously (whatever they may say or do). It's also important that the information should be considered *confidential* since people may be revealing highly personal information about themselves. Building trust between the researcher and the respondent may help to increase data validity on the basis that the researcher is more likely to gain a detailed and well-rounded picture of whatever they are researching.



develops with *more specific questions* being gradually introduced, if necessary, as the interview progresses. General questions are used to encourage respondents to talk and specific questions are used as-and-when required to refocus the interview.

The development of trust between researcher and respondent can be a crucial component of focused interviews.

**Interview schedule:** A "schedule" is a plan, developed by the researcher, that is used to specify and track the progress of the interview and although each interview schedule will be personal to the researcher they generally have the same basic structure:

- **Introduction:** Focused interview schedules often start with the *major topic* (or *focus*) and an initial, *open-ended*, question (for example, "Can you tell me about...") designed to get the respondent talking about the general topic.

- **Subsidiary questions:** The schedule may also include questions or topics the researcher wants to explore and these may or may not be asked, depending on how the interview develops. If these questions are used they may not be asked in the order they originally appeared on the schedule (unlike a structured interview, for example, which has a clear and rigid running order for questions).

- **Exploratory questions:** One interesting aspect of focused interviews is the fact that the schedule can be updated with questions that arose during the interview - some of which may have been suggested by the respondent and some of which may have occurred to the researcher during the course of the interview. These questions may or may not be used in subsequent focused interviews with different respondents - a development that will lower the *reliability* of the research (because it will be difficult to replicate) but potentially increase its validity.

One further thing we can note in this context is a general development around the basic theme of the focused interview, namely:

**Hierarchical Focusing** - a technique advocated by **Tomlinson (1989)**, whereby the researcher constructs an interview schedule that starts with the *most general question* and



The researcher may prepare a schedule to help them control the overall scope, direction and focus of the in interview.

**Focused Interviews: Explanations**

We can look at some **strengths** of focused interviews in the following terms:



**Pre-Judgment:** The problem of the researcher *pre-determining* what will or will not be discussed is largely (although not totally) avoided, since there are few, pre-set questions or topics.

**Prior Knowledge:** Since the interview allows the respondent to talk about the things that interest or concern them, it's possible for the interviewer to pick up ideas and information that had either not occurred to them or of which they had *no prior knowledge* or understanding. This new knowledge can, of course, be used to inform subsequent interviews with different respondents.

**Validity:** By allowing respondents to develop their ideas and opinions the researcher may be able to get at what someone "really means, thinks or believes". The focus on the things a respondent sees as important and interesting produces a much greater depth of information and this, in turn, potentially increases validity by making it more-likely that the research actually achieves what it set out to achieve.

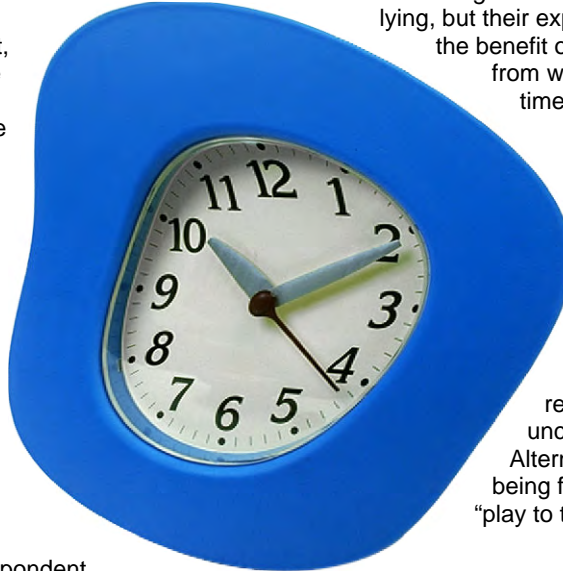
**Help and Guidance:** Within limits the face-to-face interaction of a focused interview allows the researcher to help and guide respondents - to explain, rephrase or clarify a question, for example - which may improve the overall validity of the responses.



Focused interviews, for all their undoubted uses, also have certain **limitations**:

**Information Overload:** Large amounts of data are produced (which needs to be interpreted by the researcher – always an important consideration in this type of research), much of which may not be directly relevant to the research hypothesis or question.

**Time-consuming:** Focused interviews are not only more time-consuming than questionnaires or structured interviews but, related to the above, the large amounts of information they produce has to be analysed and interpreted once the interview is complete. Given that this data will not necessarily be tightly-focused on a particular topic or question it may involve the researcher spending large amounts of time sifting through data that has little or no actual use for their research.



**Focus:** Because the respondent largely dictates the direction of the interview they may go in directions that are of little or no relevance to the research (although the researcher may not know - or be aware during the interview - whether the information being given is relevant or irrelevant in the greater scheme of their research). The researcher usually, however, has to make (skilled) decisions about when to ask questions that refocus the interview if it drifts away from the main research objectives.

**Generalisations:** The lack of *standardisation* in two main areas (the same questions are not necessarily put to different respondents and broadly similar questions may be phrased differently to different respondents) makes it difficult to generalise the results from a set of focused interviews.

**Skills:** This relates to both the skills required of a *researcher* (the ability to ask the right questions, to put respondents at ease and to think quickly about relevant question-opportunities as they arise during the interview) and a *respondent* – an *inarticulate* individual, for example, will lack the skills to talk openly and in detail about the research topic.

**Validity:** Although research validity may be **high** because of the depth and detail involved, any interview is, essentially, a *reconstruction*. Respondents are required to *remember* and *recount* events that happened in the past and this creates validity problems for both researcher and respondent. A researcher, for example, has no way of knowing if a respondent is lying – although a more likely problem is *imperfect recall*.

If you were asked to remember things that happened days, weeks or months ago, it's possible you would recall very little about what actually happened – and the things you *do* remember are likely to be the unusual, the exotic or the just plain memorable. In other words we tend to recall those things that were out of the ordinary which can, of course, defeat the research object somewhat.

An interview can also be a “second chance” to do something; in other words, given the time to *reflect*, the respondent “makes sense” of their behaviour by *rationalising* their actions. They are not consciously lying, but their explanation for their behaviour, with the benefit of hindsight, may be very different from what they actually felt or did at the time.

**Recording Information:** This is not necessarily a limitation (unless the researcher is trying to manually record everything - which may disrupt the flow of the interview) but *electronic recording* (such as a tape or video recorder) needs to be *unobtrusive*; if the respondent is too aware of being recorded it may make them nervous, uncooperative or self-conscious. Alternatively, of course, the knowledge of being filmed may make some respondents “play to the camera”.



Colin hadn't quite mastered the skills needed to put respondent's at their ease...

### Unstructured Interviews: Observations

Unstructured (or **non-focused**) interviews involve the researcher entering the interview with only a general idea or topic they want the respondent to "talk about"; the main objective, as with focused interviews, is to record a people's views about a particular topic by encouraging them to talk freely and openly about the things they feel are important. Unlike other types of interview, however, the researcher's contribution is deliberately *minimal*; they may provide *non-verbal cues* (nodding, smiling and so forth) to encourage people to talk, but the researcher's role is mainly to *observe* and *record* rather than to contribute.

The *non-participation* of the researcher is part of the technique, not just because they want to avoid influencing what's said, but also because *conversation norms* in our culture rarely tolerate silence (think about how embarrassing it is when you're having a conversation and neither of you can think of anything to say). The *silence of the researcher* encourages – in theory at least – the respondent to talk.

Conversation norms in our society tell us silence is embarrassing.



forthcoming since, if they aren't, it's difficult to use this method to produce data.

**Focus:** By intention the researcher has no control over the direction of the interview and the respondent may choose to talk about things of little or no immediate interest to the researcher; they may, for example, wander into areas of no relevance to the research topic (although the researcher would not necessarily know this at the time). In addition, large amounts of information are generated and this will involve some form of selection and interpretation process on the part of the researcher when the data is finally analysed – something that, like the interview process itself, is likely to be time-consuming.

**Reliability:** This tends, as you might expect, to be relatively **low**. The *unstandardised* format makes it impossible to exactly repeat the interview (even with the same respondent).

Unintentional bias can occur if a respondent is inarticulate or unwilling to open up; there may be a temptation to "lead the respondent" ("So what you mean is..."). In addition, the respondent may feel pressurised into "talking for the sake of talking" when the interviewer fails to

respond. In this situation it may come to pass that respondents say things they don't particularly believe, simply to "fill the silence".

### Unstructured Interviews: Explanations



Unstructured interviews, although similar to their focused counterparts, have a couple of distinct **strengths**:

**Validity:** The minimal intervention of the researcher - the respondent leads and the researcher follows - means the data collected reflects the interests of the respondent and, consequently, is more likely to be an accurate – and detailed - expression of their beliefs (at least in theory – this isn't necessarily always the case).

**No pre-judgements:** The main objective of this method is to *describe* reality as the respondent sees it so they, rather than the researcher, decides what is and what is not significant information.

The drawbacks of this technique are again similar to those for focused interviews but we can note some additional **limitations**:

**Skills:** Unfocused interviews require researcher patience and skill since the temptation may be to try to converse with the respondent when the objective is simply to listen and record. The respondent must, as we've suggested, be articulate (able to express themselves clearly and understandably) and



### Interview Bias

Before we leave interviews (in all their different shapes and sizes) and as a prelude to discussing *observational methods*, we can identify and examine a couple of general problems of bias:

**Unintentional Bias** involves a variety of things a careful researcher can *avoid* doing. Focused and unstructured interviews, for example, place demands on the skills and expertise of the researcher and an unskilled interviewer can easily bias the interview process (thereby generating *invalid data*). Unintentional bias can range from things like tone of voice and general demeanour (does the interviewer appear interested?) to the ability (or otherwise) to organise the interview - to ensure recording devices are not intrusive and distracting, for example.

**Inherent Bias**, on the other hand, involves things critics say *cannot* be avoided. Thus, the potential problems of bias we've noted so far have been basically *technical* (problems the researcher can resolve), but an idea that suggests interviews are *fundamentally flawed* is the:

**Interview effect:** Any process of interaction (such as the relationship between doctor and patient or teacher and student) represents a situation in which **status**

considerations. When, for example, a teacher interacts with their students certain unstated *status rules* exist between them (such as when the teacher takes the register students are expected to respond in a particular way). These rules involve people knowing and accepting their *relative status positions* and interviews, as an interaction process, are subject to such rules.

**Cohen and Taylor** (1977), for example, have argued one form of **interview effect** happens when, through the act of asking people, a series of subtle and subtle *status manipulations* into play, the outcome of which is that respondents effectively tell the researcher what they believe the latter would like to hear. Status differences come into play because the respondent considers the researcher to be "in charge" (just as a patient expects the same of their doctor) and, consequently, is looking to both *defer* to the researcher and, in some senses, *please* them through their co-operation.

Interviews, according to this argument, cannot get at "the truth"

Status differences in everyday life are significant and important to us - but does this mean interviews are inherently biased?

because, like any social interaction, they involve what **Goffman** (1959) has argued is a three-point process:

**Negotiation** – both researcher and respondent make decisions about how much or how little to reveal in the interview. In the case of the latter, of course, these decisions can be crucial in terms of research *validity*.

**Impression Management** - the way each participant in the interview attempts to manage the impression they give of themselves to each other. In the case of the researcher, for example, this might involve a range of demeanours (friendly, curt, efficient and so forth) designed to give the respondents certain impressions about the research and their role in it. In the respondent's case impression management may involve things like trying to appear "helpful" or, in the opposite case, trying not to give anything away.

**Manipulation:** This may, for example, involve the interviewer attempting to push the respondent into a position where they feel able to reveal "the truth" about themselves (or at least as close to "the truth" as it's possible to get). On the other hand, as **Read** (1979) discovered, it's possible for respondents to manipulate the researcher for their own ends – in this instance members of the gangs who took part in the **Great Train Robbery** (1963) together concocted a story about their involvement and subsequent behaviour that they claimed was "the true story" behind the robbery.

If we agree with the logic of the interview effect, we must seek another method that allows sociologists to

collect data in as *natural* a way as possible - we need, therefore, to *observe* people and their behaviour.

### Observation: Observations

The research methods we've considered so far all have one major thing in common, namely that the researcher is collecting data on the basis of what people say they believe or do. These methods, in their different ways therefore, all rely on people revealing or remembering accurate details about their behaviour - which does, of course, raise questions about their general validity. What is missing here is the ability to observe people as they actually go about their everyday lives - watching them in their "natural setting", as it were. This section, therefore, focuses on a couple of different types of observational method:

#### 1. Non-participant observation

involves observing behaviour *from a distance*. The researcher doesn't become personally involved in what they're studying since, if they are not involved, their presence can't influence the behaviour of those being watched. The technical term for this "social distance" is *objectivity* - the ability to remain detached, aloof or personally separate from the people you're

researching. There are a couple of important dimensions to objectivity (*personal* and *methodological*) but for now we can view it as *not interacting* with the people being studied.

An experiment can be an example of *non-participant observation* since researcher involvement is limited to setting-up a situation (the experiment) and then observing people's behaviour. Alternatively, a sociologist interested in the social psychology of crowd behaviour might simply observe and record behaviour witnessed at a football match or a pop concert. The theoretical rationale for this technique is the idea that by observing people without their necessarily knowing we get an insight into the way they "actually behave" as they go about their everyday lives. **Yule** (1986), for example, successfully used this technique when she wanted to discover how mothers treated their children in public places.

Most people's first impression of Simon was that he was a little young to be running his own multinational corporation...



**2. Participant Observation:** This type of research stresses the need for the researcher to involve themselves in the behaviour they're observing and we normally identify two main types of participant observation:

**Covert** observation: Although, like non-participant observation, this research method involves observing people's behaviour a further dimension is added by the fact that the researcher actually *participates* in the behaviour they're studying (rather than just observing "from a distance"). The *covert* aspect, therefore, is that the people being observed are unaware they're being observed and so will, in theory, behave much as they normally behave. An example here might be a researcher joining and studying a group without informing them they're being studied and, as far as the group are aware, the researcher has simply joined (or been admitted) to participate in the usual activities of that group. This method, as you might expect, demands certain skills of the researcher since they must balance the roles of researcher and participant while keeping



Donald's covert participant observation of his local police force raised immediate suspicions when he turned up for work on his first day.

the former role secret from other group members. In addition, by participating fully in a group, the sociologist may potentially become involved in various forms of *unethical*, personally distasteful or criminal behaviour.

**Overt** observation, on the other hand, involves participating in and observing the behaviour of people who *know* they are being studied. The researcher joins the group *openly*, telling its members about the research being undertaken (its purpose, scope and so forth) and they carry out research with the *permission* and *co-operation* of the group.

### Subjective Sociology

Participant observation is sometimes called *subjective sociology* because the researcher aims to understand the social world from the subject's viewpoint - it involves "getting to know" the people being studied by entering and participating in their world. The researcher, therefore, puts themselves "in the shoes" of the respondent in an attempt to experience events in a way they are experienced by the people being studied. The technical term for this - suggested by **Weber** (1922) - is *verstehen* (literally, "to understand"). Another way of expressing this is to use **Mead's** (1934) contention that the researcher should exploit their ability to *take the part of the other* in order to understand how people experience the social world. To put this another way if a researcher can "put themselves in someone else's shoes" they can experience the world from the viewpoint of the people

they are studying. **Parker** (1974), for example, argues that the reason for doing this is that: "...by visiting the deviants in prison, borstal and other 'human zoos' or by cornering them in classrooms to answer questionnaires, the sociologist misses meeting them as people in their normal society".

### Observation: Explanations

Considered as a *general research method* (we'll look at the specific strengths and limitations of covert and overt participant observation in a moment) participant observation has a number of **strengths**:



**Flexibility:** The researcher, because they're not pre-judging issues (in terms of what they consider to be important / unimportant) can react to events, follow leads, and develop research avenues that may not have occurred to them before becoming involved with a group.

**Validity:** This method, because of the depth of involvement with people's behaviour, has the potential to produce highly valid data that tells us a great deal about the lives of the people being studied.

**Understanding (empathy):** By their participation and experience in the group, the researcher can understand, *first-hand*, the influences on people's behaviour, something that has two distinct - and possibly unique - advantages. Firstly, this general method provides a depth of understanding and insight that can't be achieved by any other research method. Secondly, it means that by "taking the part of the other" the researcher can bring their sociological knowledge and understanding to bear on the analysis of the behaviour they are actually *experiencing*.

In terms of **limitations**, however, we can note things like:



**Skills and commitment** are required from the researcher - such as the ability to fit-into the group or communicate with members on their level and in their terms. Since this research is also likely to be **time-consuming** - not simply in terms of setting-up the observation and participating in the behaviour (which may take weeks or months) but also in analysing and interpreting the data produced by the research - participant observation requires massive *personal* and *organisational* commitments on the part of the researcher.

**Generalisation:** Participant observation is normally restricted to small-scale, intensive, studies carried out over a long period and the group being studied is unlikely to be *representative* of any other group. It would be difficult, in this respect, for a researcher to *generalise* their findings from one group to the next.

**Reliability:** Two general reliability issues are raised by this type of research. Firstly, the research can never be *replicated*. Although it might be possible to revisit a group, the research could never be exactly repeated. Secondly, we have to take it on *trust* that the researcher saw and did the things they claimed to see and do. This isn't to say a researcher would deliberately lie or falsify their research (something that could potentially occur with any piece of research); rather it's to note that it may be difficult for a researcher to accurately capture every single aspect of the behaviour going on around them in which they may – or may not – be directly involved.

Although these are strengths and limitations relating to the general method, its two basic forms are sufficiently different to warrant separate consideration.

### Overt Participant Observation



We can note some distinctive **strengths** of the ability to enter a group with the knowledge and co-operation of its members:

**Recording data** is relatively easy because the group knows and understands the role of the researcher and they can ask questions, take notes, etc. with the permission of the people involved.

**Access** to all levels is important if research is being done on a group that has a *hierarchical structure* (a large company, for example, where the researcher would have access to both the "shop floor" and the boardroom or a school where there would be access to all classrooms).

**Going Native:** Overt participant observation makes it easier to *separate* the roles of participant and observer and reduces the chances of the researcher becoming so involved in a group they stop observing and simply become a participant (in other words, they "go native").



A couple of significant **limitations** to this method need, however, to be noted:

**The Observer Effect:** A major criticism here is that the observer's presence changes the way the group – and individuals within that group - behaves in some unknown way. The question here, therefore, is that of the extent to which people who *know* they're being studied change (consciously or subconsciously) the way they normally behave.

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The "**Hawthorne Effect**" we identified earlier in relation to experiments is another form of observer effect.

**Under involvement:** If the researcher doesn't fully participate in the group, their "involvement" may not be deep enough to experience the world from the



Overt participant observation not only makes it easier to record data "in the field" (or...err...office) but it's also possible to ask questions, seek clarifications and so forth without arousing suspicion.

viewpoint of the people being studied. Depth of involvement may also, of course, be limited by *ethical* considerations - not participating in the crimes committed by a criminal gang, for example – that may affect the extent to which the researcher is truly capturing how people "normally behave".

### Covert Participant Observation

This research method also has its own particular **strengths**:



**Access:** Covert observation may be the only way to study people who would not normally allow themselves to be studied, for a range of reasons – from their behaviour being illegal or deviant, through "secretive organisations" who want to preserve their anonymity to groups and organisations (such as religious or environmentalist groups) who may distrust the motives of sociological researchers. **Ray** (1987), for example, in his study of groups of Australian environmentalists, argued: "The study was covert to minimize defensiveness on the part of those studied and to avoid breakdowns in co-operation". Similarly, **Lofland and Stark** (1965) used a covert approach to study the behaviour of a secretive religious sect since this was the only way to gain access to the group.

**Level of Participation** is, of course, very high - the researcher may live with the people they are (secretly) studying and, in consequence, this method produces massively detailed and insightful data (observed and personally experienced) about people's behaviour.

**Validity:** Personal experience means the researcher gains valuable insights into the meanings, motivations and relationships within a group that explain *why* people behave in certain ways. The ability to “experience things from the point-of-view of those involved”, coupled with the sociological insights a researcher brings to the role of “participant observer” means the researcher may be able to make sense of certain forms of behaviour even in situations where other group members may not fully



understand - or be able to articulate - the reasons for their behaviour. In addition, when a researcher analyses behaviour "from the outside, looking in" it can be difficult to explain why people would want to behave in ways we may find distasteful, disgusting or perverse - covert observation goes some way to resolving this problem by allowing the researcher to understand the meaning behind people's actions.

Dean's covert participation was giving him amazing new insights into why people committed crimes...

**The Observer Effect** problem is avoided because people are unaware they are being observed - their behaviour is, consequently, unaffected by the researcher's presence.

Having noted these undoubted strengths, the potential **limitations** of covert observation should not be overlooked. **Goffman** (1961), for example, in his classic covert study of an American mental institution identified *three major problems* for the covert participant observer:

**1. Getting In** to a group may involve problems of **entry** and **access** to all areas of the group:

**Entry:** Gaining covert entry to any group can be a potential problem, but some groups are more difficult to enter than others. By way of illustration we can note, for example, three areas of potential difficulty for the researcher:

• **Characteristics:** If the characteristics of the researcher (things like their age, gender, ethnicity and so forth) don't *match* those of the group they want to covertly study they won't be able to gain access the group. A man, for example, would find it difficult to secretly study a group of nuns.

• **Invitation:** Entry to some groups (such as *Freemasons*) is by invite only – the researcher can't just “turn up and participate”...

• **Qualifications:** Similarly, some groups have entry qualifications that would have to be met. To covertly study accountants or doctors, for example, the researcher would need to hold the qualifications required to practice these professions.

**Access:** Once inside the group a further potential problem can be encountered with groups that have a strong *hierarchical structure*; that is, a group divided into different levels – a school, for example, has a hierarchical structure in terms of students and teachers. A covert researcher posing as a student would not have access to places (such as a staffroom) that are reserved for teachers.

**2. Staying In:** Once inside, potential problems that may occur relate to:

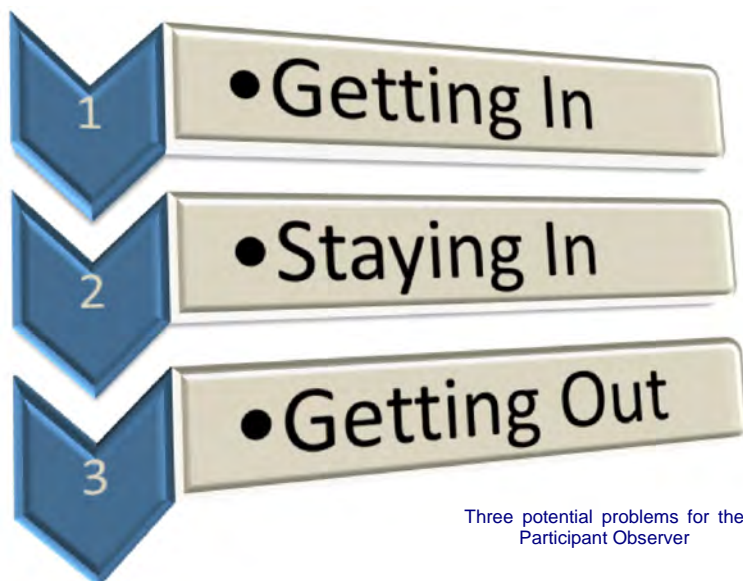
**Level of Participation:** A researcher has to quickly learn the culture and dynamics of a group if they are to participate fully. This may require a range of skills – from the ability to mix easily with “strangers”, through creating and maintaining a plausible and convincing “back story” (the covert observer must, in effect, “invent a past” for themselves that probably won't include telling the group they're a sociological researcher). to the ability to think quickly on their feet as and when required.

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**Parker** (1974), for example, had to make decisions about whether or not to participate in the criminal activities of the gang of youths he was secretly studying. To choose not to participate would have aroused suspicions that he wasn't who he claimed to be, while participation would raise certain ethical issues of the kind discussed in **Section 5**.

**Going Native:** It can be difficult to separate the roles of participant and observer, especially in situations where the researcher becomes well-integrated into the group they're studying. *Going native*, in this respect, refers to a range of behaviours that, in one way or another, may *compromise the integrity* of the research process. At one extreme, for example, there may occasionally be



Three potential problems for the Participant Observer

times when the researcher has to make a choice between being a participant, rather than an observer (participating in criminal activities, for example, if that's what the group decide to do). At the other, much more serious, extreme, there may be a situation in which the researcher becomes so well integrated into the group they cease to be an observer and effectively become a full participant. Such a situation, if and when it occurs, would raise serious doubts about the *reliability* and *validity* of the research.

**Exposure:** Pretending to be someone you're not carries with it the ever-present risk of being exposed as a "spy". The specific consequences of exposure will, of course, vary from group-to-group (the Women's Institute might write a letter of protest, for example, whereas a criminal gang may take things a little bit further...) but the general consequence is the *end* of any research.

Participating in a group raises a further methodological problem in the shape of:

Being exposed as a spy isn't a good thing (unless you fancy having to blast your way out of the Women's Institute Spring Fete).

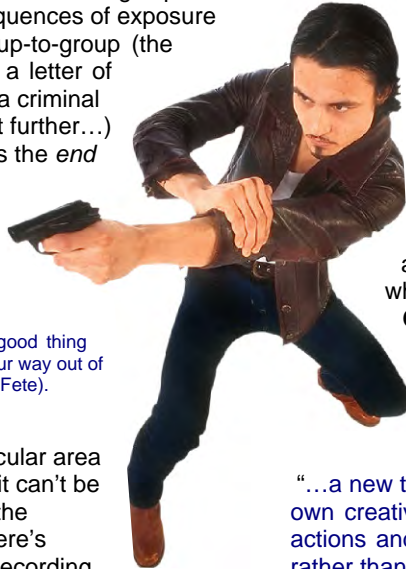
**Reliability:** Issues in this particular area abound with covert research - it can't be replicated, we have to trust the researcher's observations (there's nothing to back them up) and recording data is frequently difficult (the researcher can't take notes or record conversations openly, because to do so would risk exposure). **Goffman** (1961) tried to solve this problem by using a **field diary** to write up his observations at the end of every working day - although this does, of course, mean the researcher must remember things accurately and make decisions about what events were significant. Having said this, it's possible to use modern technology (miniature cameras and voice recorders etc.) to ensure data is accurately captured and recorded, but these not only risk exposure (how would a group respond if they discovered everything they did or said was being videoed or recorded?) but also raise **ethical** and **legal questions** about the extent to which it is permissible to secretly record people's behaviour in this way.

**3. Getting Out:** Potential problems here relate to the completion of the participant observation phase of the research and these range from possible difficulties in "suddenly" leaving a group - in some groups it may not, for example, be particularly easy to simply "stop participating" - to questions of:



**Ethics:** Problems here range from the effect of leaving a group who may have grown to trust and depend on the researcher, to questions about whether covert observation as a research method exploits people; does, for example, a researcher have the right to secretly spy on people (as **Parker** (1974) puts it, do we have the right to "pretend to be one of them") or effectively use people for their own particular ends?

### Visual (Creative) Methods: Observations



All of the methods we've looked at so far rely, to varying degrees, on spoken language - either in terms of people recounting their thoughts and experiences in words or through descriptive observational analyses by sociologists. However, a different approach to data generation and collection is one that focuses on visual *methods*, pioneered by academics such as **Gauntlett** (examples of whose research you can find on-line at the **Centre for Creative Media Research's Artlab** project: <http://www.artlab.org.uk>) who describes the general rationale for "creative visual research methodology" in terms of it being:

"...a new type of research in which media consumers' own creativity, reflexivity [ability to reflect on one's actions and ideas] and knowingness is harnessed, rather than ignored. In these studies, individuals are asked to produce media or visual material themselves, as a way of exploring their relationship with particular issues or dimensions of media. Examples...include research where children made videos to consider their relationship with the environment; where young men designed covers for imaginary men's magazines, enabling an exploration of contemporary masculinities; and where people drew pictures of celebrities as part of an examination of their aspirations and identifications with stars".

#### Module Link

#### Mass Media

Although much of Artlab's research has focused on how people use and relate to the mass media the general techniques are applicable to a range of further applications (in terms of areas like **culture and identity**, for example) and how people understand and interact with their general environment (both physical and social).

The basic technique here is deceptively simple; respondents are required to visualise behaviour, through the use of drawings, videos and the like; instead of asking people questions or observing them, the researcher asks the respondent to "do or create something", the analysis of which (by both the researcher *and* the respondent) gives an insight into people's ideas, interests, perspectives and concerns. The rationale for this method, according to **Gauntlett**, is

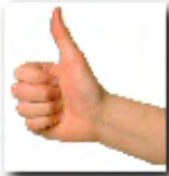
On occasions the level of participation may be so intense it will be difficult to simply leave the group...



## AS Sociology For AQA

that putting feelings, emotions and beliefs into *words* is often difficult for people; **visualisations**, on the other hand, make it easier for both respondent and researcher because a drawing, series of photographs or a video is something concrete on which to base further analysis (which may involve using more traditional research techniques such as questionnaires or interviews).

### Visual (Creative) Methods: Explanations



We can identify some of the **strengths** of this research method in the following terms:

**Involvement:** The respondent is an *active participant* (rather than just a *passive audience*) in the research process. This method - unlike many others - involves the researcher and the researched working (creatively) together to produce data.

**Agenda-setting:** Visual methods, whether they be drawing, creating videos or whatever, allow respondents to *set their own agenda*, in the sense they can create whatever they want to create - whatever they believe best represents their ideas or beliefs.

**Process:** Creating data in this way gives researchers first-hand experience of the process by which people make sense of their lives - in terms, for example, of how they see themselves (their **identity**) and their relationship to others.

**Reflective:** These methods encourage (and arguably demand) that respondents *reflect* on the "questions" they're being asked. In other words, they avoid the problem - prevalent in methods like questionnaires or interviews - of respondents having to *reconstruct* answers to questions.

All good things, however, have their **limitations**:

**Organisation:** Visual methods require a great deal of organisation - and time - on the part of the researcher and the researched. The creation of a video record / presentation, for example, is a **time-intensive** process that also requires **access** to hardware (cameras...), software (editing suites...) and **skills** (how do you splice two images into a static background?).

**Interpretation:** The *meaning* of data may be difficult to interpret. Although respondents can be asked to explain their work a sociological context is still required from the researcher and this may mean reading things into the data that were never considered by the respondent. Where researcher and respondent work very closely, for example, there is always the problem of a form of "*interviewer effect*" whereby what is being

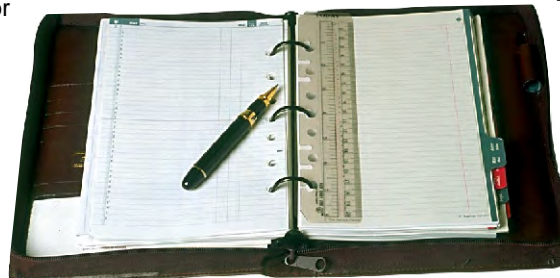
## Sociological Methods

captured is less a representation of the respondent's beliefs and more a reflection of what the respondent believes the researcher would like...

### Tried and Tested

- Explain what is meant by the term "observer effect" (2 marks).
- Suggest **two** factors that might influence the sociologist's choice of primary research method (4 marks).
- Suggest **two** reasons why sociologists might use structured interviews (4 marks).
- Examine the problems sociologists may find when using participant observation in their research (20 marks).

### Secondary Sources: Introduction



This type of source - using data that already exists - is extensively used by sociologists for a couple of reasons:

**Practical:** Secondary sources represent a substantial saving of time, money and effort for the researcher. It may be *unnecessary* or *impractical* to create some forms of data

(using primary methods) when such data already exists. In Britain, for example, the government collects and freely distributes a huge amount of **statistical** data each year. For the price of a book, a visit to a public library or an Internet connection, the researcher has immediate access to data that would cost an enormous amount of **money**, **time** and **effort** to collect personally.

**Methodological:** Secondary source data may be a necessity if **historical** and / or **comparative** research is being carried out. **Aries** (1962), for example, used data (such as paintings and documents) going back hundreds of years to support his idea that *childhood* was a relatively recent invention. **Durkheim** (1897) on the other hand used *comparative* data (*suicide statistics* from different countries) to test his theory that suicide had social, as opposed to psychological or biological, causes.



Having duly noted these general reasons, in this section we're going to outline and evaluate secondary sources under two broad categories, namely:

**1. Content Analysis** as a way of analysing secondary data sources (such as historical and contemporary documents).

**2. Official statistics** as a secondary data source.

### Content Analysis

Content analysis is a popular method for analysing, in particular, the *mass media* (the technique involves using *statistical* analysis to do things like categorise and count the frequency of people's behaviour) but its status as a secondary method / source of data is a somewhat ambiguous one in the sense that we could equally have categorised it as a *primary* research method (mainly because it involves the researcher personally collecting data). However, we've chosen to categorise it as a *secondary source of data* because, as with official statistics, the researcher is effectively categorising and analysing data that already exists, albeit in a form that is subtly different to other types of secondary data. Whether or not you agree with this classification is, of course, up to you, but it does perhaps serve to illustrate a general problem with classification systems in that not everything in the social world is likely to fit neatly into our predefined categories.

Be that as it may, content analysis involves the study of *texts* (which for our purpose refers to data sources such as television, written documents and the like - a *text* is just a general term referring to data and is not restricted to written material) and in this respect we can examine, in turn, examples of both **quantitative** and **qualitative** content analysis.

### Quantitative Analysis: Observations

We can illustrate the idea of quantitative forms of content analysis through two broad examples:

**Television programmes:** Analysing a programme such as *EastEnders* might involve the researcher creating two basic *categories* (men and women) and then counting the number of minutes each gender appears on screen. A more complex analysis might involve the use of categories like *location* (where each character is seen - for example, in the pub as a customer or an employee; in their own home, etc.) or *activity* (what each character does - are they always portrayed "at work" or "at home", a combination of both and so forth?). Such analyses build up a picture of the **patterns of behaviour** that underlie (and are usually

hidden from view) the social interaction portrayed on screen.

**Newspapers:** This might involve counting the number of column inches given to activities that focus, for example, on men as opposed to women - or counting the number of times men and women are pictured. A more complex analysis might involve analysing data in terms of the *prominence* given to different stories featuring men and women.

As we've suggested, therefore, *quantitative* content analysis is mainly concerned with the statistical categorisation of behaviour and its main "tool of the trade" is a:

**Content analysis grid** - a chart developed and used to collect statistical data systematically when an analysis is being carried out. A very simple content analysis grid designed to analyse the behaviour of characters in a television programme might look something like:

Character	Gender	Age	Place and Purpose	On Screen (seconds)
Jo Banks	F	37	Pub (employee)	15
Tom Ward	M	56	Pub (customer)	43
Jo Banks	F	37	Home (playing with children)	84

An analysis of this type can tell us something about the behaviour of a character (Jo Banks, for example, has two main roles - mother and employee). Although this is a simple example, content analysis can be complex and wide-ranging. **Meehan's** (1983) study of American television for example, used this method to identify and analyse the stereotypical roles played by female characters in soap-operas (she discovered, for example, that women in soaps played a maximum of ten different types of role - "the Good Wife", "the Bitch" and so forth). More recently, **Harwood** (1997) used content analysis to demonstrate that television viewers generally prefer to watch characters of their own age.

As these examples demonstrate, questions about whether content analysis is a *primary* or *secondary* method are perfectly valid but, as we've argued, it's included here as a **secondary source** for the same sort of reasons that something like a newspaper, book or film is a secondary source; the data we analyse through content analysis already exists - it has been produced by something other than the activities of the researcher and would, therefore, exist without the intervention of the researcher.

Whether or not you accept this rationale is, perhaps, a reflection of your methodological preconceptions and beliefs (but since we're writing this textbook it's staying in the secondary sources section...).

## Quantitative Analysis: Explanations



This type of content analysis has a number of **strengths**:

**Themes and patterns** to behaviour that may not be apparent to a reader, viewer or general consumer can be uncovered through relatively simple quantification. *Recurrent themes* (such as women being associated with housework) in complex forms of social interaction can also be identified using this method. **Hogenraad** (2003), for example, developed a computer-based content analysis program to search historical accounts of war to identify key recurring themes that signify the lead up to conflict (something that, if nothing else, suggests that political leaders down the generations have been nothing if not entirely predictable – formerly in deeds but now, it seems, in words also).

Similarly, **Miller and Riechert** (1994) developed the idea of **concept mapping**, which involves using computer technology to identify and describe “themes or categories of content in large bodies of text”. In this respect **Page** (2005) characterises concept mapping as an application in which “...a number of keywords are grouped into phrases that can indicate the subjectivity of the media item”. In other words computer technology can be used to analyse a vast number of different texts (such as newspaper articles going back over many decades or large numbers of contemporary articles from around the world) to search for key words or phrases that indicate the use of similar ideas.

**Reliability:** The use of a *standardised framework* (the *grid*) means data can be *replicated* and checked fairly easily (although there are limits - see below - to the reliability of this technique).

## Module Link

## Mass Media

**Page** (2005), for example, was interested in understanding how the media portrayed the concept of global warming – as something that was naturally occurring (the result of climate variability) or as something created by human behaviour – and suggested that by identifying and tracking the way these different ideas (and their variations) were used it would be possible to create a **concept map** that demonstrated the ideological thinking of media both in different countries and on a worldwide basis (in other words whether “the media” described global warming as having “natural” or “social” causes). This, in turn, would tell us a great deal about how people generally understood the concept and causes of something like global warming in terms of the information they received through media sources.

Quantitative content analysis has a couple of **limitations** we can note:



**Reasons:** Although content analysis can uncover themes it doesn't tell us much about *how* audiences receive, understand, accept or ignore such themes (in technical terms, media *decoding* - how people make sense of (*decode*) the messages pushed by the media). Assuming the patterns identified through content analysis aren't just a product of the classification system used, we need some other way of making sense of their significance, both in terms of academic research and their possible effects on an audience.

**Reliability:** Content analysis involves making *judgements* about the categorisation of behaviour - the researcher decides the categories that will - and will not - be used for their analysis. In addition, the researcher must *judge* which behaviours fit which categories - can all observed behaviour be put neatly into a particular

category (or does behaviour that cuts across different categories merit its own category)? In other words, would different researchers, studying the same behaviour, categorise it in the same way?

## Qualitative Analysis: Observations

One of the interesting features of content analysis is that it can also be used in a more *qualitative* way:

**Conceptual** (or **Thematic**) analysis focuses on the *concepts* or *themes* that underlie television programmes, news reports, magazine and newspaper articles and the like. In this respect such analysis can be considered an *extension* of the quantitative form of content analysis. **Philo and Berry** (2004), for example, identified a number of recurring themes in news reports of the Israeli - Palestinian conflict, such as language differences when referring to similar forms of behaviour (Palestinians were frequently classed as “terrorists” while Israeli settlers were called “extremists” or “vigilantes”).

## Module Link

## Mass Media

As with the idea of **concept mapping** one objective of this type of analysis is to identify the ways *language* is used to make *ideological* points through the media. If it can be shown, for example, that a particular concept or theme repeatedly occurs in the media this knowledge can be used to explore the possible effects this repeated characterisation has on people's beliefs.



Computer technology is increasingly used by sociologists for large-scale data analysis.

**Relational (or Textual)** analysis examines the way texts encourage the reader to see something in a particular way by relating one idea to something different. **Hall** (1980) refers to this as a **preferred reading** of a text - the way text is constructed (how language, pictures and illustrations are used, for example) "tells" the audience how to interpret the information presented (without appearing to do so). An example here might be the way sport is presented in British popular newspapers. A brief glance through the sports pages, for example, might lead you to think sport is mainly a male activity.

**Documentary Sources**

Keeping the above in mind, therefore, we can move on to outline and examine:

**Documents** as sources of secondary data. In our society there are a large number of such sources available to sociologists and classifying them in any meaningful way is difficult. However, for our purposes, we can think about different types and sources of documentary evidence in the following way:



Probably not the sociologist's first port of call for reliable and valid documentary data...

*contemporary* documentary data. Some newspapers (not *The Daily Star* or *Sunday Sport*, obviously) carry reports, analysis and comment on relatively up-to-date social research.

The *Internet* is also an increasingly useful source of secondary data, through the development of search engines such as

Google ([www.google.com](http://www.google.com))

**Cost:** The researcher gets access to data that could cost an enormous amount of **money, time** and **effort** to collect personally.

Type	Official	Organisational	Individual
<b>Possible Sources</b>	Government agencies and departments.	Private companies, political Think Tanks.	Personal documents created by individuals.
<b>Historical And Current</b>	Official Reports. Court reports. Academic studies.	Newspapers (local / national); film; magazines; books; Church records. Academic studies; Company Reports.	Letters; Autobiographies; diaries; Biographies; oral histories.

In the above table we've identified a number of different documentary *types* and *sources* and also suggested documents can be both *historical* and *current (contemporary)* – although this is more for our organisational convenience, in terms of outlining different document *strengths* and limitations, than any hard, fast and meaningful categorisation.

**Qualitative Analysis: Explanations**



Documentary sources have a number of distinct **strengths**:

**Comparison:** *Historical* documents can be used for comparative purposes - contrasting how people lived in the past with how we live

now is useful, for example, in terms of tracking and understanding *social change*. Historical analysis is also useful for demonstrating the *diversity* of people's behaviour - things we now take-for-granted may have been seen differently in the past (and vice versa).

**Availability:** Documents can provide secondary data in situations where it's not possible to collect primary data (about things that happened in the past, for example). Documents about family life, education, crime and so forth may be the only available source of evidence. The media, on the other hand, can be a useful source of

**Validity:** There are two aspects we can note here:

Firstly, documentary evidence may provide qualitative data of great depth and detail. Diaries, for example, (such as those of Samuel **Pepys** - who recorded life in England during the mid 1700s - or Anne **Frank**, who recorded her life in hiding from the Nazi's during World War 2) provide extensive, valuable and possibly unique details and insights about people and their daily lives.

Secondly, we can sometimes *compare* accounts *across time* to test the validity of current accounts of social behaviour. We can, for example, compare accounts of family and working lives between the past and the present to understand the continuities and changes in social behaviour.

**Module Link**      **Crime and Deviance**

**Pearson** (1983) used media accounts going back over 100 years to demonstrate that "hooligan" or "yobbish" behaviour is neither a unique nor recent phenomenon in our society. **Pearson's** documentary insights can also be used to cast a sociological light on areas such as **moral panics** and **deviancy amplification**.

**Meaning:** Documents can, for our purpose, have two levels of meaning - a **literal** meaning (what they *actually say*) and a **metaphorical** meaning (what they

tell us about the hopes, fears, beliefs etc. of whoever produced them). Newspaper articles, for example, may frequently tell us more about the *writers* of such articles and how they see social problems (the *metaphorical* dimension) than for what they actually say about whatever is being written about (the *literal* dimension).

To illustrate this idea, have a look at the following extracts and think about the kind of picture of *family life* we get from reading these accounts:

1. "Save our Children from the Collapse of Family Life": M. Bennis.

"Family life is collapsing and responsible parents can no longer afford children...And lack of parental control and guidance lies behind many of today's pressing social problems, said...Sir Keith Joseph. Part of the background to crime, to drug addiction, to low motivation at school, to poor job prospects and to the transmission of all these problems to the next generation comes from inadequate parenting...the way to destroy a society is to destroy its children".

2. "An Inquiry into the Extent and Causes of Juvenile Depravity": T. Beggs.

"The withdrawal of women from the care of her offspring and domestic duties is an unnatural arrangement and a stain on society. Young children are left at home with inadequate parental control - to play at will and to commit all kinds of criminal act. Ignorant of cooking and sewing, unacquainted with the things needed to promote the comfort and welfare of a home... sexually promiscuous and ignorant...social evils are aggravated by the independence of the young of both sexes".

The first extract was written in **1990** and the second (which has been edited slightly to bring the language a little more up-to-date) in **1849**. Although both describe "family life", as seen through the eyes of their respective authors, both cannot logically be valid accounts; **Bennis**, for example, implicitly contrasts a "disorganised present" with an "organised past" – yet the family life "in the past" to which he refers is characterised by **Beggs** as being full of "social evils"...

Despite their uses, documents have **limitations** we need to understand:

**Reliability:** Aside from the usual points about our ability to replicate qualitative data, documents have reliability problems in that they may be *incomplete*, *inaccurate* or *partial* (biased towards one viewpoint - as we've just seen in the two extracts describing family life as the writers saw it).

**Representativeness:** When using documentary sources we need to know, for example, if they are simply one individual's view (such as a diary or a newspaper article) or whether they are representative



of a range of views. Even in the latter case (such as an official government report) it is rare for documents to have high levels of representativeness – something that makes them difficult (if not impossible) to use as the basis for **generalisations**. Returning to the extracts on family life once more (they took a long time to find so we're determined to get our money's worth from them) it's doubtful that these articles (and many like them that appear in the media each day) are representative of anything more than the individual writers or relatively small groups of people with a particular ideological axe to grind...

**Authenticity:** With secondary documentary data there may be uncertainty over its source. Paper documents can be *forged* and we need to know whether they are originals or copies (which may have been changed by other authors). With electronic documents from the Internet, similar considerations apply.



**Credibility:** We don't always know who created a document or why they created it. In other words, we can't always be sure if the document is a credible source; for example, did the author have first-hand experience of the things they describe or are they simply repeating something "second or third hand"?

**Data Control:** Finally, we need to consider how each of the above ideas connects to (and affects) the others when evaluating secondary sources. When considering data *authenticity* we would have to consider its *credibility* as a source, how *representative* it is and the *purpose* for which it was originally produced. With primary sources the researcher has control over these things. When dealing with secondary sources, however, it is not always so easy to ensure the data is reliable, authentic and / or representative.

**Official Statistics: Observations**

We can complete this section by looking at this major source of secondary *quantitative* data. It's useful to note, by the way, that the ideas relating to *official* statistics in this section can also be applied to other forms of statistical data. In Britain, the two main sources of official statistical data are:

- **Government departments** (such as the Department for Children, Schools and Families) and
- **Government agencies** (such as the police).

Governments produce *demographic data* (information about the behaviour of individuals and groups) for a

couple of reasons: to **inform policy-making** (how many teachers will be needed in 10 years time, for example) and for **information / accountability purposes** (for example, how much is spent on defence or schooling each year). In Britain, major sources of official statistical data are “*Social Trends*”, “*Regional Trends*” and “*The Annual Abstract of Statistics*” - all published by **HMSO** and available on the Internet through the **Office for National Statistics** ([www.statistics.gov.uk](http://www.statistics.gov.uk)).

**Official Statistics: Explanations**



Statistics have a number of significant **strengths** in terms of their usefulness for sociological analysis:

**Availability:** They may be the only available source in a particular sociological area. This is especially true where the researcher is carrying-out *historical* or *cross-cultural* analyses (such as **Durkheim's** (1897) class study of suicide). **Bakewell** (1999) also outlines the significance of official statistics as a data source (both on a national and international level) in his discussion of refugee statistics. As he argues: “Statistics matter as they are a fundamental determinant of the allocation of resources. In any refugee crisis, estimating the number of people involved is one of the first steps in determining the nature and size of any external intervention. Not only are they concerned with the allocation of humanitarian aid but the size of the refugee crisis will also determine the level of political and possibly military resources applied to cope with the situation.”.

**Cost:** The researcher does not have to spend **money, time** and **effort** collecting data because it already exists.

**Trends:** Using statistical data drawn from different years it's possible to see how something has changed over time. For example, statistics on educational achievement can show changes in relative levels of achievement between boys and girls. Similarly, statistics can be used in “Before and After” studies, to track possible changes in behaviour. A recent example here might be the “Year 2000 problem” relating to fears computers would not be able to cope with date changes associated with the new millennium (see, for example, **Mueller**, 1999). In this instance it was possible to statistically track “computer problems” before and after the

turn of the millennium and conclusively demonstrate that the “Year 2000 problem” wasn't actually, after all the hype, a problem...

**Comparisons:** Statistics can be used for **inter-group comparisons** (for example, the examination of differences in middle-class and working-class family size), as well as *cross-cultural* comparisons (for example, a study of crime rates in different countries). Again, this kind of information may be too expensive and time-consuming for the sociologist to personally collect using primary research methods.

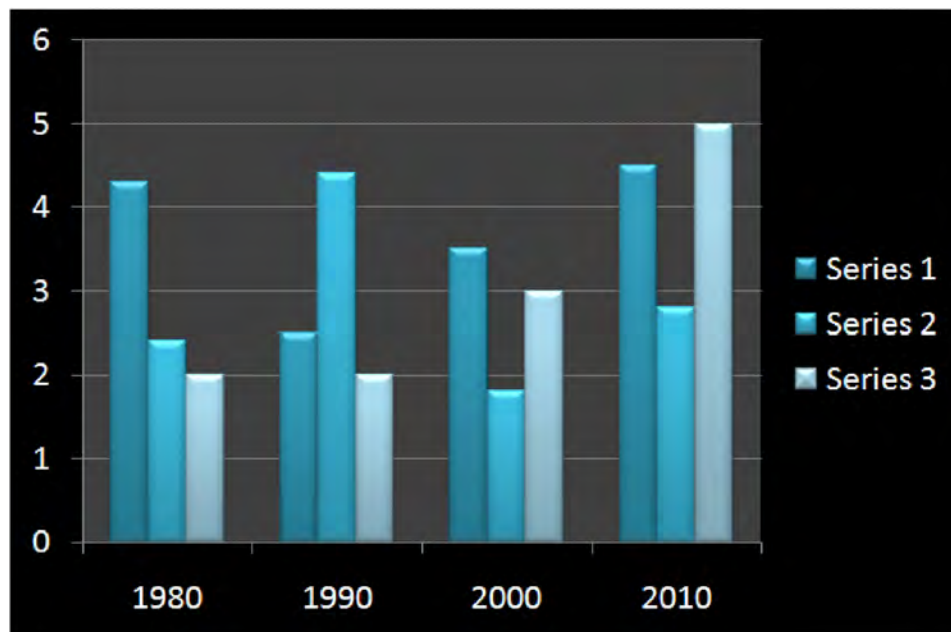
Despite their undoubted uses, the *uncritical* use of official statistics may involve a number of **limitations:**



**Definitions:** We've noted how definitions used by the creators of official statistics may not be the same as those used by the sociologist, but it's also important to note governments may *change the definition* of something over time (what counts as “car crime”, for example, or in **Bakewell's** (1999) analysis, how different governments define the concept of a “refugee” differently). These are not isolated examples (government definitions of unemployment, for example, have changed around 30 times over the past 25 years) and they all contribute to the creation of a potential **reliability** problem - to make reliable statistical comparisons the researcher must ensure they are comparing “like with like” – that the definition of “unemployment” 25 years ago, for example, is the same as the definition used today.

**Validity:** Official statistics, apart from not providing any great depth or detail, may have validity problems associated with what governments include (or exclude) from their published data. *Crime statistics* are an obvious case in point (many crimes go *unreported* and *unrecorded*) but official unemployment statistics also illustrate this point.

Statistical data can be used to track trends over time.



According to the **Office for National Statistics**, in 1992 there were 2.6 million people unemployed. In 2007, unemployment stood at 808,000. However, we can't simply conclude from this that around 1.8 million people have now found employment. Some, for example, will have died or reached retirement age, while a substantial number will have moved on to claim different benefits (such as incapacity benefit). In this respect, a validity problem is that official statistics may only give us a *partial picture of reality* - the researcher may have to work hard to complete the whole picture.

**Module Link****Crime and Deviance**

**Official statistics** are widely used in the study of crime because they can, if used with an awareness of associated **validity** problems, tell us a great deal about such things as the **class, age, gender, ethnic** and **regional** distribution of crime. They can also give us a benchmark against which to evaluate things like the risk of **victimisation** in different areas.

**Interpretation:** Although quantitative data is normally seen as more *objective* than qualitative data, as we've just seen the *significance* of any data has to be *interpreted* by the researcher - they have to decide what the data *means*. A statistical rise in levels of crime, for example, may be the result of a real rise, the outcome of a different way of defining and counting crime or it might result from the police targeting certain types of crime (and hence arresting more people than

**Tried and Tested**

(a) Explain what is meant by the term "content analysis grid" (2 marks).

(b) Suggest **two reasons** why sociologists might use official statistics in their research (4 marks).

(c) Suggest **two reasons** why sociologists might use documentary sources (4 marks).

(d) Examine the problems some sociologists may find when using secondary data in their research. (20 marks).

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### 3. The relationship between positivism, interpretivism and sociological methods; the nature of social facts.

#### Research Methodology: Introduction

One of the major themes we've noted and promoted at various points throughout the Modules covered in this text is the idea that the social world is something that can be viewed from a range of different vantage points and perspectives (from, in broad terms, *Structuralism* through to *Postmodernism* and all points in between). Where we stand, as sociologists, in terms of studying



While some sociologists prefer to take a broad, detached, view of social behaviour...

social behaviour is sociologically significant since the position we adopt when looking at social behaviour will affect what we look for, what we see and, of course, what we don't see. Put crudely for the sake of clarity, "Structuralist" sociologists aren't particularly interested in the micro-behaviour of individuals (they much prefer to focus their attention on large-scale features of human behaviour) while "Interactionists" see things the other way around – they are intensely interested in social-psychological analysis of small-scale bouts of human interaction and are rather indifferent to the kinds of "institutional level" analysis favoured by their Structuralist peers.

Although this is a very crude generalisation it illustrates the basic idea that "How you look at something affects what you see"; if you focus on the behaviour of individual human beings you lose sight of the "bigger picture" of large-scale human behaviour (and *vice versa* of course). This is not just true in terms of general sociological perspectives but also in terms of sociological research; beliefs about the nature of the social world impact on beliefs about how behaviour could - and perhaps more importantly *should* –

Others prefer to get up-close and personal...

be studied. This being the case, our outline and analysis of "sociological research" can be divided into two *inseparable* - you can't have one without the other - parts:

**1. Sociological Methodology:** The first part, as it were, relates to two main ideas:

Firstly, it refers to the idea that sociological research involves **systematic** ways of collecting and analysing data which, in turn, guarantees the idea that

**sociological knowledge** is *different* from (and, perhaps, *superior to* in some ways) "everyday" or **common sense knowledge**.

Although this general sociological principle is sound – research involves the systematic collection and analysis of data in a way that "common sense" does not – this doesn't necessarily mean that all sociologists collect data in the same way or for the same reason. On the contrary, in this section we can, for the sake of demonstration, outline *two basic types* of sociological **methodology**:

**Positivism** involves the idea that sociologists try to **test** their explanations (or "**theories**") about people's behaviour using a variety of research methods to collect data. The main objective from this position is the production of **objective knowledge** about human behaviour – in other words, knowledge

that is **true** regardless of whether or not people believe it to be true.

**Interpretivism**, on the other hand, focuses on the idea of trying to describe and understand social behaviour from the perspective of *those involved*. The aim here is not to "test theories", "prove / disprove" something or demonstrate some wider truth about human behaviour; rather it is to provide accounts of people's behaviour that focus on the **meanings** they give to the social world and their behaviour in that world.



Secondly, in a more specific sense methodology relates to the particular ways different groups of sociologists justify their use of different research methods and types of data and two crucial concepts we will encounter at various points in this particular area are those of **reliability** and **validity**.

**2. Sociological Methods:** The second part relates specifically to the various ways sociologists collect data (rather than, as with *methodology*, their *reasons* for collecting particular types of data in particular ways). As you will recall, we examined a range of research methods in the previous Section and these can be associated with the different sociological methodologies we're going to examine here.

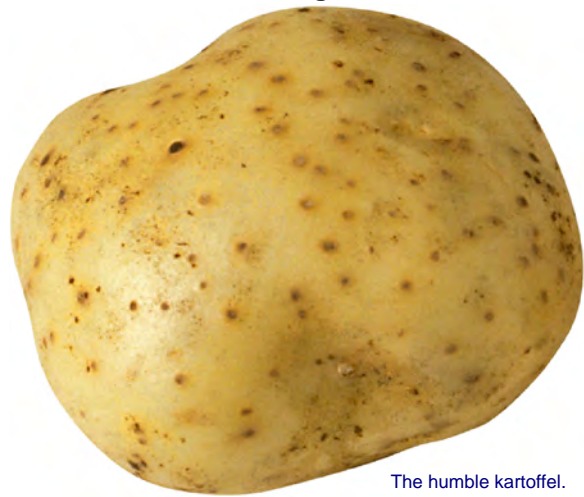
Speaking of which, we're going to outline and examine two types of methodology, namely **Positivism** and **Interpretivism** (sometimes called "*social constructionism*" because it generally focuses on the various ways individuals create (*construct*) the social world through their behaviour); there are other methodologies we could examine (**Realist**, **Feminist** and **Postmodernist**, for example) but since the main purpose here is to **illustrate debates** within Sociology over the general direction and purpose of social research an examination of these two methodologies should suffice for our purposes. In general terms, therefore, this Section examines at a *standard debate* within (*A-level*) Sociology over how knowledge about the social world can be *reliably* and *validly* generated.

### Positivism: Observations

"*Positivism*" literally means "*scientific*" – an observation that tells us something about the kinds of basic ideas found within this general methodology; **positivists**, for example, argue it's *possible* (and *desirable*) to study *social behaviour* in ways similar to those used by **natural scientists** (such as *Chemists* or *Physicists*) to study behaviour in the natural world. We can initially identify some elements of **positivist** thinking in the following way:

**Social Systems:** For positivists, a basic principle is that these consist of **structures** (which, as we have seen, can be considered in terms of *rules*). These structures exist *independently* of individuals because they represent behaviour at the *institutional* (or very large group) level of society. As individuals, we *experience* social structures as *forces* bearing down on us, pushing us to behave in certain ways and, in effect, shaping our individual behavioural choices.

An example of how an **institutional structure** works is to think about communication - in order to be part of our society we need to communicate with others and we do this using *language*, both verbal (words) and non-verbal (gestures). Thus, if we want to communicate



The humble kartoffel.



Tastes good in any language...

we are *forced* to use language (in the case of this textbook, English - although, admittedly, it might not always seem like it). As conscious, thinking, individuals we do have some measure of *choice* in this matter - I could, if I wanted, speak German to people (in theory at least. In reality my knowledge of this language extends to the word for "potato" - very useful in the context of buying vegetables, less than useful when trying to fill a car with petrol). However, our "freedom of choice" here is actually limited for two main reasons:

Firstly, if I want to "fit in" to social groups (such as those involving family members or work colleagues) there would be little point in my speaking German to them - they barely understand when I speak English, so using another language would be a recipe for total confusion.

Secondly, even if I do choose to speak German, this is still a *language* - it has a structure of rules (*grammar*) that have to be obeyed if people are to understand each other. In other words, although we do clearly have *some measure of choice* in our daily lives this choice is actually *constrained* by *social structures* (in this example the structure of –albeit

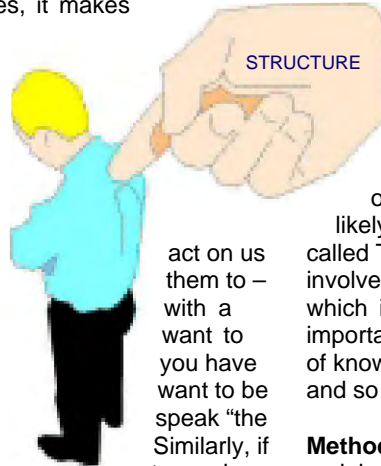


It can't be out of juice - I put 5lbs worth in...

different – languages). Thus, although we can choose which language to learn and speak two points are important here. Firstly, the *social context* in which language, for example, is used *determines* the

effectiveness of the social interaction process (if we choose, for example, to write this text in French it probably wouldn't sell many copies to English-speaking students). Secondly, as we've suggested, our "choices" here relate to exchanging one kind of structural context (the English language) for another (the French language).

**Actions:** If people's behaviour (*social action*) is shaped by *structural forces*, it makes sense to study these *causes* rather than their *effects* (in this case, the different choices people make) - which is what positivists aim to do. If you accept social systems work in this way, it follows structures are *real* and *objective*; that is, they whether or not we want an idea we can illustrate couple of examples: if you communicate with people to use language and if you understood you have to same kind of language". people (and societies) are they have to work in some way to produce the things that are needed - such as food and shelter on a basic level and cars and computers on a more abstract level - by people for survival.



act on us them to - with a want to you have want to be speak "the Similarly, if to survive,

Social structures, from this perspective, are considered to be **forces** and although these particular forces can't be seen, we can observe their *effect* on people - an idea similar to the "unseen forces" studied by Natural scientists (gravity, for example, is an unseen force whose *effect* we can observe) ; positivist sociologists argue we can study **social forces** in much the same sort of way natural scientists study *natural forces*.

**Reality:** If the forces shaping social behaviour really exist, it follows they can be *discovered* (in the same way natural scientists have gradually discovered the forces shaping physical behaviour). This can be done using similar methods to those used so successfully in sciences such as Physics - *systematic observations* that create highly *reliable* knowledge, organised and tested using a particular model of scientific research.

#### Module Link

#### Research Methods

An example of this is **Popper's Hypothetico-Deductive** model of research that is outlined and examined in relation to the process of research design (*Section 4* of this Chapter).

**Facts:** For positivists, knowledge consists of identifying facts about how and why people behave as they do and, eventually, making *connections* between different facts to produce **theories** that explain our behaviour. This is an important idea to note because it suggests that the purpose of scientific research (both social and natural) is two-fold:

- **Explanation:** Firstly is must *explain* something - such as why some children achieve more in our education

system than others - rather than simply *describe* a situation. In this example scientific research involves both identifying (*observing*) the fact of differences in educational achievement and, more importantly, *explaining* why these differences exist.

- **Hierarchy:** Secondly, it suggests knowledge is *exclusive*; if we can, for example, explain the reason for a particular type of behaviour (such as differential educational achievement being explained by differences in family incomes, social class background or whatever) we also, by definition, *exclude* a range of *alternative explanations*. In this respect, differential achievement is not, for example, caused by genetic differences in intelligence nor by the observation that boys called Wayne are less likely to achieve educational success than boys called Tarquin. Scientific research, therefore, implicitly involves the idea that some forms of knowledge (that which is factual, objective and so forth) are more important, significant and worthwhile than other forms of knowledge (such as those based on opinions, faith and so forth).

**Methods:** Quantitative methods are generally favoured, mainly because they allow for the collection of factual data in objective, personally detached, ways. As we've suggested, due prominence here is given to:

- **Personal Objectivity:** The researcher tries to avoid influencing the behaviour they are researching. In other words, the researcher "stands apart" from the behaviour they are recording and, in consequence, doesn't try to participate in that behaviour.

The researcher should have no emotional involvement with the people and behaviour they are researching.



• **Reliability:** Quantitative methods such as **questionnaires / structured interviews, experiments** or **comparative** and **observational studies** are perfectly acceptable methods for positivists because they offer higher levels of *reliability* than *qualitative* methods.

**Positivism: Explanations**

If we examine positivist ideas a little more closely, we can identify and develop a number of significant features of this methodology:

**Society:** For positivism, the social world is *similar* to the natural world in terms of the way it can be studied. This is because human behaviour is, in a sense, *determined by rules* developed within social groups. For example, the need to survive leads people to develop work groups and the need to socialise children leads people to develop family groups. As rules (*norms*) of behaviour are developed around these activities the behaviour of the individuals involved is subjected to certain types of *social pressure* – the pressure to behave in accordance with the dictates of group rules (*norms*).

**Structure:** Because societies are viewed as *social systems* - the requirements of which push people to behave in certain ways - it follows that people *experience* the social world as a **force** that exists over-and-above their individual ability to change or influence it. Just as we cannot, for example, escape the fact of gravity (even while flying in a plane, gravity still exerts a force), positivists argue we cannot escape social forces (such as those created by the development of roles, values and norms). While we may of course ignore them (choose to behave in ways that break norms) we can't ignore their *effects* – if we break norms we lay ourselves open to the possibility of **social sanctions**. In other words, when we break the rules (deliberately or accidentally) that others perceive to be right, just and normal we generally find that people try to do something to change our behaviour (to make us "obey the rules").

**Science:** The task of (social) science from this particular methodological viewpoint is to isolate, analyse and explain the **causes**

of human behaviour - and to understand how social forces shape behaviour we need to (*systematically*) study social groups rather than individuals. This follows for two main reasons:

Firstly, social pressures originate within and between social groups. It is only through the fact of group behaviour and membership that social forces are created.

Secondly it makes methodological sense to study the nature and origins of the forces that shape individual behaviours.

If these ideas are a little unclear, consider the following examples:

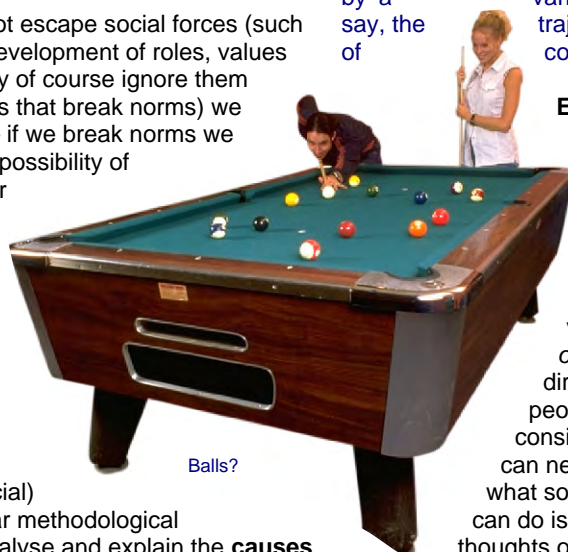
In the natural sciences, to explain why an apple, when it becomes detached from a tree, *always* falls to the ground (rather than floating away into the sky) the researcher doesn't look at the individual properties and attributes of the apple; rather this phenomenon is explained by the properties of gravity (the physical **law** that a larger body – in this instance the Earth – always attracts a smaller body). Similarly, to explain why people go to school, live in family groups or commit crimes we do not look at the properties of individuals; rather we look at the forces surrounding them that influence such behaviour. Thus, children "go to school" because they are propelled into that behaviour (by the actions of a government that creates and enforces this general rule).

**Harris** (2005) sums-up this general positivist position quite neatly when he argues: "Early social sciences...suggested that human behaviour could be understood as having been caused by a variety of external events, just as, say, the trajectory of a billiard ball is the result of complex combinations of forces".

**Evidence:** To *reliably* and *validly* study behaviour sociologists should use *empirical* methods; that is, methods involving the use of our *senses* (sight, for example). Evidence about social behaviour, in other words, can only be considered reliable and valid if it is capable of being *observed* and *tested*. Anything not directly observable (such as people's thoughts) cannot be considered valid knowledge (since we can never, of course, objectively know what someone is thinking. The best we can do is make *deductions* about people's thoughts on the basis of their actions).



Our membership of social groups - and the behavioural rules they develop - is a significant source of social pressure.



Balls?

**Objectivity:** Since this version of science is concerned only with what *is* - rather than what we might want something to be - scientists must be *personally objective* in their work (that is, they don't involve themselves in the behaviour being studied; this avoids biasing or influencing the data collection process). This in turn suggests that the kinds of research methods employed will be those where the researcher can "observe without participating"; in this respect the methods used should *not* depend on the *subjective interpretations* of a researcher and research should be capable of exact *replication*. If the social world has an *objective existence* - over and above human beliefs about it - reliable and valid knowledge can be discovered in the same way natural scientists discover knowledge (through such things as systematic observation, critical questioning and experimentation).

Before we move on to examine an alternative methodology (*Interpretivism*), we can summarise **positivist methodology** in terms of the following ideas:

1. The primary goal of social research is to **explain**, not *describe*, social phenomena.
2. "Science" involves the ability to discover the "general rules" (or **laws** if you prefer) that underpin all human behaviour. An example of a general rule might be something like the idea that all people require some kind of socialisation if they are to develop as "human individuals".
3. In order to discover these general behavioural rules the social scientist, like their natural scientific counterparts, must be both **personally objective** (their research must not be influenced by their values, beliefs, opinions and prejudices) and **systemically objective** (for example, the research methods used must be capable of producing objective data).  
If, in this respect, we can discover general behavioural rules it follows that the social world and the behaviour it involves have some form of **predictability**; that is, if our behaviour is based around certain identifiable rules it should, in principle, be possible to predict the various ways people will behave in particular situations.
4. Scientific research revolves around the ability to **quantify** and **measure** social behaviour. If something cannot be tested and measured it belongs to the realm of opinions, not facts.

The illusionist Derron Brown uses his knowledge and understanding of social rules and conventions to both influence and predict how people will behave in certain situations.



5. Factual data should be capable of replication; the greater our ability to replicate data the higher the level of research reliability that can be achieved.

## Module Link

## Crime and Deviance

For a deeper understanding of Positivist methodology – and its application – see the Section on the "**Sociological Issues Arising from the Study of Suicide**".

## Tried and Tested

- (a) Explain what is meant by the term "objectivity" (2 marks).
- (b) Suggest two reasons for the association between Positivism and quantitative research methods (4 marks).
- (c) Suggest two reasons why sociologists might use a Positivist methodology in their research (4 marks).

## Interpretivism: Observations

As we've suggested, positivist methodology represents one (albeit idealised) way of looking at the general research process and, for illustrative purposes at least, we can think about **Interpretivist methodology** as being the *mirror image* of Positivism – a notion that should help us come to terms with some of its basic ideas, beginning with the fundamental one of:

**Social Actions:** For Interpretivists, a basic principle that underpins the way they seek to examine and understand social behaviour is the observation that human beings have:

- **Consciousness** - we are aware of both ourselves (as unique individuals) and our relationship to others. This gives us the ability to:
- **Act** - to make, in other words, *conscious*, deliberate, **choices** about how to behave in different situations. This idea is crucial for Interpretivists because it makes us - and the world in which we live:
- **Unpredictable** - and if people are unpredictable it means we can't study behaviour in the way Positivists want to study it (for the deceptively simple reason that a fundamental assumption of Positivist methodology is that the social world – and by extension social behaviour – is broadly predictable).

We can understand these ideas a little more clearly in the following way:

If you slap me in the face, you have no way of knowing, in advance, how I'm going to react: I might cry (because you hurt me), but then again I might not (because my friends are watching and crying doesn't fit with my carefully-cultivated hard-man image); I may laugh at you (ha-ha); I might run away; I might tell my

dad who will go round your house and beat your dad up (for no better reason than the fact he can - my dad's a bit unpredictable); I might slap you back - in short, I might do any one of hundreds of different things. But the point here, of course, is that precisely *how* I react will depend on a potentially massive range of factors.

**Social Systems:** Part of the reason for believing that the social world is largely unpredictable (at least in the way Positivists conceive of predictability) is that for Interpretivists the social world consists of **meanings**. "Society", from this perspective, doesn't exist in an *objective*, observable, form; rather, it is *experienced subjectively* because we give it meaning by the ways we behave. In other words, we create and recreate a "sense of the social system" on a daily basis, minute-by-minute, piece-by-piece. For example, every time children go to school, they help to recreate the structure of education through the regularity of their behaviour, just as every time someone says "mum" or "dad" they help to recreate a sense of family. Similarly, every time you pinch something from Woolworths you help to recreate the criminal justice system (and you thought you were just showing off to your friends).

**Reality:** The *social* world is very different to the *natural* world, just as people (some people anyway) are very different to rocks. One might struggle, scream and beg if you try to throw it over a cliff while the other won't (we'll leave you to decide which is which). When we talk or think about society as *real* - as something *forcing* us to do things like go to school, work or live in family groups - what we are actually doing, according to Interpretivist thinking, is creating a convenient (*fictional*) scapegoat for our own behaviour - "society" doesn't make anyone do anything; only people can do that.

**Facts:** For Interpretivists, "facts" about behaviour can be established but these "facts" are always *context-bound*; that is, they will not apply to all people, at all times, in all situations. For example, if I steal something from Woolworths and get caught, it's a fact I will be labelled "a criminal"; if I don't get caught then it's a fact I'm seen as just another law-abiding citizen. The only difference here is not what I did, but how others *react* to what I did - and since, as we've suggested above, these reactions are themselves *context-dependent* it follows that in the greater scheme of things they will be largely unpredictable.

Module Link

Crime and Deviance

This example links into the Interactionist theory of Labelling.

**Methods:** These ideas have interesting consequences in terms of how we can study social behaviour since Interpretivist methodology argues that the best we can do is observe, **describe** and in some ways explain behaviour from the viewpoint of those involved (in terms of the meaning they give to such behaviour). In this respect there is no "*hierarchy of knowledge*" in the way positivist methodology suggests since, logically, one account of behaviour is just as reliable and valid as any other account (as Interpretivists might say, knowledge is always *relative* to the context in which it is produced).

Thus, whereas Positivist methodology is based on the *assumption* that the researcher has a *privileged position* in terms of what does or does not count as "knowledge", Interpretivist methodology suggests the reverse is true - the role of the researcher is to provide a platform from which those being observed can express their ideas, beliefs, feelings and so forth.



The researcher provides a platform from which people can express their view of the social world. Not this kind of platform. Obviously.

This methodological difference is, for example, evidenced in terms of methods and data types; positivist research frequently uses quantitative methods like questionnaires that involve questions decided by the researcher whereas Interpretivist research leans towards the collection of **qualitative** data and uses methods (such as **unstructured interviews** and **participant observation**) that allow for the collection of this type of data.

Spot The Difference



Rock band...

Band of rock...



Interpretivism: Explanations

We can identify and develop a number of significant ideas about this methodology. These include the following:

**Society:** The social world is produced and reproduced on a daily basis by people going about their lives. Things that hold true for now (this minute, today, next week...) in our society may not hold true in the future or in another society. In this respect, the social world has no objective features (or social structures) in the way these ideas are understood by Positivists. "Society" is simply experienced "as if" our behaviour were constrained by forces external to us - in effect social structures are considered to be little more than *elaborate fictions* we use to explain and justify our behaviour to both ourselves and others.

**Action:** On the basis of the above, the fact people actively (if not always deliberately) create their world means any attempt to establish *cause and effect* relationships is misguided (both in theory and in practice). If people's behaviour is conditioned by the way they personally interpret their world (and no two interpretations can ever be exactly the same), it follows logically that "simple" causal relationships cannot be *empirically* established - there are just too many possible variables involved in the social construction of behaviour.

**Meanings:** The social world is understood ("interpreted") by different people in different situations in different ways (something you interpret as a "problem", for example, may not be a problem to someone else). Everything in the social world, therefore, is **relative** to everything else; nothing can ever be wholly true and nothing can ever be wholly false; the best we can do is *describe reality* from the viewpoint of those who define it - the people involved in particular types of behaviour, whether that behaviour be asylum, school classroom, prison or whatever.

*Understanding* social behaviour, therefore, involves understanding how people (individually and collectively) experience and interpret their situation (the meanings people give to things, the beliefs they hold and so forth). Thus, the methods employed by a researcher (observation and interpretation) have to reflect the fact people consciously and unconsciously construct their own sense of social reality. The objective of Interpretivist research, therefore, can be summarised in the evocative phrase "The recovery of subjective meaning"; what the researcher is trying to do is understand *why* people chose to behave in a certain way in a certain situation by exploring their accounts of that behaviour.

Our behaviour can have many different meanings and interpretations - what, for example, is the meaning of this behaviour?



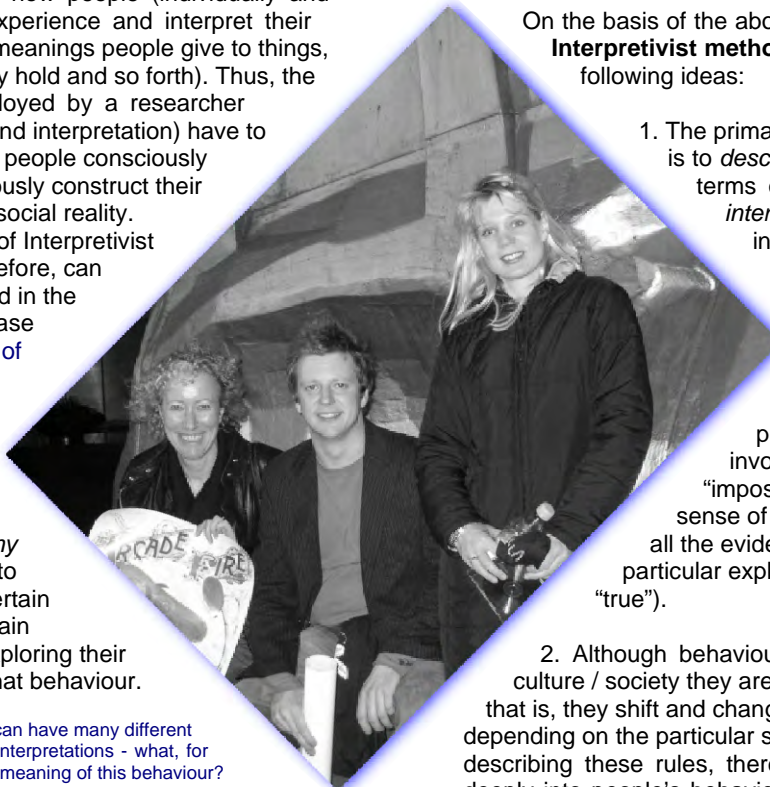
Producing and reproducing "education" by our everyday behaviour...

**Harris** (2005) captures these ideas when he notes that the Positivist use of "...terms like 'cause', 'law' or 'fact' could only be metaphors at best. Human beings were not like billiard balls because they had a level of consciousness that made them aware of the world in a unique way. They interpreted events impinging on them, and were able to define them linguistically in ways which permitted communication and discussion among themselves".

On the basis of the above, we can summarise **Interpretivist methodology** in terms of the following ideas:

1. The primary goal of social research is to *describe* social behaviour in terms of the *meanings* and *interpretations* of those involved. While this does, in a sense, involve some sort of explanation for people's behaviour, such explanations are "developed from within" - in terms of the perceptions of those involved - rather than "imposed from without" (in the sense of the researcher "weighing all the evidence" and deciding which particular explanation among many is "true").

2. Although behavioural rules exist in any culture / society they are invariably context-bound; that is, they shift and change in many subtle ways, depending on the particular situation. Uncovering and describing these rules, therefore, involves delving deeply into people's behaviour; it also involves the



researcher gaining an intimate understanding of the context within such rules are created – hence participant observation (a research method that involves the researcher becoming one of the group they are studying) is a method frequently associated with this methodology.

3. If participation is permissible (or even, as researchers such as **Humphries** (1970) have argued, *desirable* - the researcher gets a deeper insight into people's behaviour because they may, for a time, actually *become* the people they are studying) then it follows that the kind of "objective detachment" valued by Positivist sociologists is explicitly rejected by Interpretivists.

4. *Scientific research* revolves around the ability to capture and express the qualities of people's behaviour and while behaviour can certainly be quantified this is not the main – nor even a necessary - objective of sociological research.

5. While data reliability is, up to a point, important Interpretivists tend to place greater emphasis on data *validity* – partly because human behaviour is impossible to exactly replicate (so perfect reliability is impossible).

## Module Link

## Crime and Deviance

For a deeper understanding of Interpretivist methodology – and its application – see the Section on the "**Sociological Issues Arising from the Study of Suicide**".

## Tried and Tested

- Explain what is meant by the term "subjectivity" (2 marks).
- Suggest two reasons for the association between Interpretivism and qualitative methods (4 marks).
- Suggest two reasons why sociologists might use an Interpretivist methodology in their research (4 marks).
- Outline and explain the difference between Positivist and Interpretivist methodologies. (20 marks).

Before we move on to look at how these two methodologies relate specifically to the process of "doing sociological research" we can take the opportunity to firm-up a couple of the ideas we previously touched-upon about how it's possible to both see and study the social world in ways that are as **reliable** and **valid** as possible.

## The Nature of Social Facts: Observations

Thus far we've looked at a couple of different ways that sociologists look at and try to study the social world and in subsequent sections we'll outline and examine in greater detail the implications and actual mechanics of the research process (in terms research design). However, aside from the general idea that sociologists study "human" or "social" behaviour we haven't specifically addressed the question of what sociologists *actually* study in any systematic way – and this, of course (as you probably, deep down, have guessed) is what we need to do next. If we say, for the sake of argument, that what sociologists study is "human behaviour" this begs a couple of important questions:

Firstly, what is it about human behaviour that sociologists actually study?

Secondly, other academic disciplines (such as **psychology** and **biology**) study the exact same thing – so what is it about "sociological study and analysis" that is both unique and particularly different to psychological or biological analyses?

To answer these questions and, by extension, demonstrate something of the unique theoretical and practical insights offered by sociologists about the aforementioned human behaviour, we can turn to a very influential idea developed at the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century by the French sociologist Emile **Durkheim** (1895) when he argued that Sociology should concern itself with the study of **social facts** – an idea we can develop in a couple of ways:

## Just the Facts...

**1. The Individual and Society:** The differences between the **Positivist** and **Interpretivist** methodologies we've just examined reflect a general tension within Sociology (one that we've also touched upon when we outlined the difference between **Structuralist** and **Social Action** perspectives in the Introductory chapter) that revolve around the relationship between "the individual" and "society"; while some sociologists like to emphasise the significance of the former (in terms of human consciousness and the ability to make choices between competing behavioural options) and others emphasise the latter (in terms of the various ways our individual behaviours are pushed and shaped by social structures) both refer to the same **paradox**:

Although we are all unique biological individuals we can only actually "become individuals" when we are with others, living in social groups.

In other words, for people to "be individuals" they need to be involved with "other individuals". It is only through *social interaction* that the individual can both recognise and express their individuality; people, in other words, can only be "individuals" when they are in a *crowd* (which, we trust you'll agree, is an interesting *contradiction in terms*).



**2. Social forces:** One way of thinking about the relationship between the individual and society is to see society in terms of a **social force**; as something that acts on the individual to shape them in ways that both emphasise their individuality (through devices like family names, for example) and compel them to act in accordance with the wishes of others (such as through the learning of roles and norms). Just as we can't conceive of a society without individuals the reverse is also true – it is impossible for “the individual” to exist without some sense of their living “in society” – and this is where the concept of **social facts** comes into its own, in terms of **Durkheim's** argument that people don't just live *in society*; on the contrary, they are invariably a product of *society* for two main reasons:

Firstly every individual is born into an existing society and, by definition, a set of *cultural relationships* that involve ideas like laws, traditions, customs, values, behavioural norms and so forth.

Secondly “society” must exist *prior to* “the individual” in that, logically, people have to be **socialised** before they can take their place in society; as we have seen, for example, “unsocialised children” do not develop the kinds of behaviours (such as the norms appropriate to their age, gender and culture) that we associate with “being human”.

### The Force is Strong...

From this particular perspective, therefore, *social facts* are the **cultural forces** that mould and shape our individual behaviours and, as you might expect, they take a variety of forms, but an illustrative example in our society might be *the law* since we are all - whether we want to be or not and regardless of our ability to resist – subject to legal norms. “The Law”, for example, shapes our behaviour in at least two significant ways:

**Explicitly** in that if we break the law we lay ourselves open to a range of punishments, depending on the nature and persistence of our law-breaking.

**Implicitly** in the sense that even if we have *never* broken the law our behaviour is still being shaped and constrained by the fact of legal norms. We don't, for example, steal from others because we may believe such behaviour to be morally



Does the force of our social relationships compel us to act in accord with the wishes of others?

wrong or we may fear the consequences of being caught and so forth.

The law / legal system is a good example of two fundamental qualities possessed by social facts:

**1. Exteriority:** Social facts are **external** to, or *outside of*, the individual. That is, they exist over and above the ability of individual actors to change or influence their effect. A law against theft will remain in place and effect regardless of whether you believe there should be such a law.

**2. Constraint:** A further quality of social facts is that they act on the individual, controlling and constraining both how we think about - and act in - the social world (both *explicitly* and *implicitly*, as we've just suggested).

**Enfield** (2007) captures this idea quite neatly in the observation that through the influence of social facts “We become constrained in our freedom to act, even in the most casual, everyday settings”.

When **Durkheim** (1895) argued that we should “treat social facts as things” (as something substantial and powerful) he didn't mean they *were* things (like doors or cars) with a *physical substance*; only that we should study and observe them “as if” they were real things. When, for example, someone is “hit by the full force of the law” they are not literally struck by something, although they may, of course, suffer physical consequences (such as imprisonment) for breaking the law. There is, in this respect, no such *thing* as “the law” – but people nevertheless *act* in ways that give this *idea* (that some forms of behaviour are wrong and need to be punished) a physical effect. Whether or not I believe in the legitimacy of the law, if I steal a car I run the risk of suffering the consequences of my transgression. This tells us something further about the nature of social facts in that they are necessarily:



## AS Sociology For AQA

**Mental constructs:** That is, they exist as ideas that people obey (and at times disobey). As such, in order for social facts (such as traditions in the shape of celebrations of religious holidays) to affect our behaviour they must be based, according to (Functionalist) writers like **Durkheim** on:

**Shared values:** The power of social facts is maintained through the fact that enough people believe in something (or, at worst, even if they don't believe in it are powerless to prevent others believing it). This shared aspect of social facts is something that gives them existence over and above the individual since they represent an example of the:

**Collective will:** That is, the idea that if enough people believe in something it takes on a life of its own over and beyond the wills of individuals (even those who may initially have been responsible for its creation). One way the collective will is established, as we've suggested, is through:

**Socialisation** – both primary and secondary: Although socialisation is itself a social fact it is also the main *mechanism* every human society develops in order to propagate collective ideas about, for example, the individual and their role / place in society.

One final aspect of social facts we can note is that they have a nature that is invariably:

**Moral:** Social facts act on people in ways that define things like “good” and “bad” or “moral” and “immoral” behaviour; they are, in this respect, forces that define *appropriate and inappropriate behaviour*.

### Module Link

### Introduction

In this Chapter there are a number of examples of **social facts**; these include the aforementioned **socialisation** as well as **roles, norms, values** and so forth.

### The Nature of Social Facts: Explanations

Although few, if any, sociologists would have a problem with the idea that human behaviour is *shaped* in some way by the relationships that individuals enter into as part of their daily social interaction, the concept of a **social fact** involves something more than just thinking about *social forces* – and if this idea is a little unclear two points should help to clarify it:

Firstly, for sociologists (of whatever perspective or persuasion), whenever people enter into a relationship with others social forces are created that impact on the



Helping to celebrate someone's birthday is an expected part of the friendship role in our society...

## Sociological Methods

way they behave. A simple example here might be the way we use **norms** to control both our own behaviour and that of others; when we “make friends” with someone, for example, we confer on them a special, slightly different, **status** to that of, say, people we call “acquaintances” or “strangers”. In so doing we observe a range of norms that are part-and-parcel of the “friendship **role**” and whatever these may actually turn out to be (in different cultures and subcultures) if we want to “be friends” with someone we need to observe these norms.

Secondly, for some (Positivist) sociologists social facts are something

more than simple forces – they are “things” that take on a life of their own and are, in this respect, *external* to the individual in that we are individually powerless in the face of these facts. **Durkheim** (1895), for example, expressed what we might term this *harder-edged approach* when he argued “I am not obliged to speak French with my fellow-countrymen nor to use the legal currency, but I cannot possibly do otherwise ...”. However, other (Interpretivist) sociologists take a *softer-edged approach* by arguing that although social forces clearly “exist” they are *not* social facts in the way **Durkheim** has argued. While, for example, it would be *difficult* to live in a country and neither speak the language nor use the legal currency it would not be impossible – and the fact this possibility exists suggests, for Interactionists in particular, that we need to avoid applying the concept of social facts “as if” they somehow determine how people behave.

We have, in this respect, two basic positions on the “nature of social facts” that we can explore in the remainder of this Section – although as we do this it's important to keep two things in mind. Firstly that “Positivism” and “Interpretivism” are examples of sociological

...but just because it's expected doesn't mean we have to do it...



methodologies we've used in this particular context mainly for illustrative purposes – they represent, as we've outlined them here, idealised (and simplified) versions of the way some sociologists look at and study the social world. Secondly, although Positivism is frequently contrasted (especially in A-level textbooks and exams) with the "Anti-positivism" of Interpretivist methodology we need to keep in mind that there are both alternative methodologies available to sociologists and that differences of interpretation exist *within* both Positivism and Interpretivism.



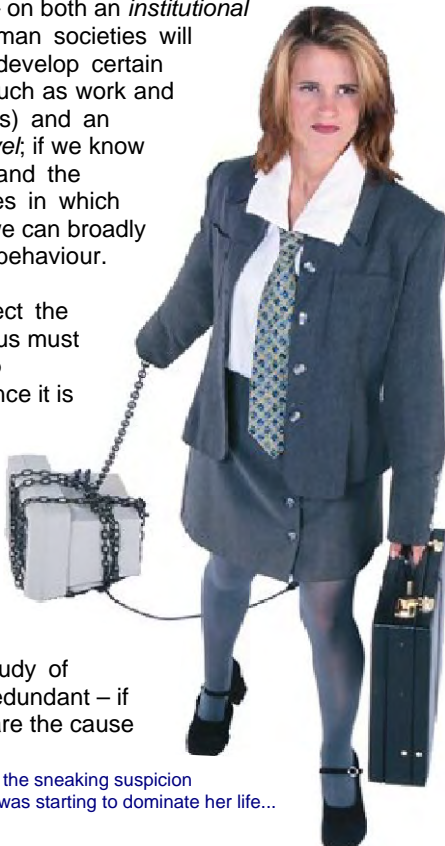
It's important to avoid the trap of seeing methodology in black-and-white terms ("Positivism Bad" / "Anti-positivism Good")

### Facts?

The concept of social facts fits neatly with Positivist methodology for a couple of reasons. Firstly, it represents a means of studying people in terms of their group – rather than individual – characteristics (since group memberships in effect determine individual behaviours) and, secondly, it gives the researcher the opportunity to study certain **objective features** of social behaviour. This follows for three main reasons:

- 1. Independence:** Social facts exist independently of the individual and are, therefore, objective factors that stand apart from the subjective wants, desires and wishes of individuals.
- 2. Causality:** Social facts represent causal factors in individual behaviour because they make people behave in certain ways.
- 3. Predictability:** Under the influence of social facts human behaviour becomes broadly predictable – on both an *institutional level* (all human societies will necessarily develop certain institutions such as work and family groups) and an *individual level*; if we know and understand the circumstances in which people live we can broadly predict their behaviour.

In this respect the research focus must be on group behaviour since it is through this that social facts arise. We can, therefore, study the effects of social facts in ways that make the study of individuals redundant – if social facts are the cause



Samantha had the sneaking suspicion that her work was starting to dominate her life...

of individual behaviour then it makes sense to study **causes** rather than **effects**.

**Harris** (2005) summarises this general position quite neatly when he observes: "It is clear that a number of implications spin off from this basic argument, certainly for methods. If human beings are responding to external events without necessarily being aware of them, social science becomes a matter of trying to uncover social events and social processes and measure their effects. The classic way to do this to study social patterns: if the rate of suicide rises in particular urban conditions...then there is something about those urban conditions which is predisposing people to suicide irrespective of their will...In modern social science, a whole range of research techniques has developed to try to indicate social patterns and then to explain them, classically using social surveys and statistical analysis."

### Or Fictions?

An Interpretivist methodological perspective, as you might expect, takes a very different view of both the concept of social facts and their relationship to the individual.

**Social constructions:** Like everything else in the social world "social facts" are the product of social interactions between conscious beings – people, in other words, who make choices about how to behave in certain situations. In some contexts the pressure to conform to certain norms may appear overwhelming (such as in the admittedly extreme context of someone pointing a gun at your head and threatening to shoot you unless you obey them) while in others the pressure is far less intense (you may apologise if you accidentally bump into someone in the street but you're under no great social pressure to do so). When we (deliberately or accidentally) break a norm there are *usually* consequences for our behaviour, some of which are extremely serious (driving a car on the wrong side of the road may lead to arrest and imprisonment) while others may be trivial – forgetting to send a friend a birthday card may mean, at worst, you have to apologise to them for your memory lapse.

The important point here is that while there are undoubtedly social forces acting on our behaviour the

## AS Sociology For AQA

pressures they create merely *influence*, rather than *determine*, our behavioural choices.

As **Giddens** (2006) puts it: “Although what Durkheim calls ‘social facts’ might constrain what we do, they do not *determine* what we do. I could choose to live without using money, should I be firmly resolved to do so, even if it might prove very difficult to eke out an existence from day to day. As human beings, we do make choices, and we do not simply passively respond to events around us.”. This “active quality” of human behaviour, therefore, leads Interpretivist methodology to stress three main ideas:

**1. Dependence:** The things Positivists refer to as “social facts” (laws, customs, norms, values, traditions, fashions and so forth) *do not* exist “independently” of the people who both create - and by their continued observance propagate - them. What on the face of things *appear* to be *objective* features of human behaviour are, on closer and more-detailed inspection, the outcomes of the *subjective* choices and behaviours of individual social actors going about their daily lives in a multitude of different ways.

**2. Causality:** If social facts are *not* objective features of human society it follows that it isn’t possible to study them in terms of their ability to *cause* people to behave in certain ways. Although we could, for example, argue that something like laws or norms are *necessary* features of social life it doesn’t follow that we can identify any particular legal or informal norm that actually determines individual behaviour. Questions of “causality” are interesting here because they capture something of the difference between Positivist and Interpretivist thinking. For Positivism human behaviour is seen in terms of it being an:



Is deviance a quality of what someone *does* (an attribute of the Object)?

• **Attribute of the Object:** That is, individual behaviour is explained by identifying the particular properties of the people being studied that make them different to other individuals. For example, if we were interested in explaining levels of differential achievement one way of doing this would be to identify the specific social characteristics (such as class or gender) possessed by “the academically successful” but not by the “academically unsuccessful”.

## Sociological Methods

For Interpretivism, on the other hand, human behaviour is seen in terms of it being an:

• **Attribute of Perception:** That is, the way behaviour is interpreted by others represents the “cause” of that behaviour - individual behaviour, therefore, is not a property of the people involved but rather of how others **react** to that behaviour. In the differential educational achievement example above, therefore, research from this perspective might focus on how children are “made to be different” in the educational system through the activities of teachers, politicians, employers and so forth.

**3. Unpredictability:** Human beings – because they have the capacity for independent thought – also have the capacity for unpredictability (at least at the individual level). If we cannot predict, with any great degree of precision or certainty how someone will behave in a particular social situation then it follows that social research should not be directed towards the pursuit of the impossible.

**Harris** (2005) suggests that using Interpretivist methodology “There is a need to somehow study human consciousness and how it works in particular individuals or groups...I say ‘somehow’ because studying human consciousness is almost by definition deeply difficult and paradoxical. It cannot be observed directly, for example, and must be studied through external manifestations such as words or actions. Similarly, if human consciousness is central to understanding, then the researcher must also be centrally engaged in interpretation and cannot pretend to be objectively describing events from the outside”.



Or a quality of how people *react* to what someone does (an attribute of Perception)?

### Tried and Tested

- Explain what is meant by the term “social fact” (2 marks).
- Suggest **two** attributes of social facts (4 marks).
- Identify and explain **two** reasons why some sociologists might reject the concept of a “social fact” (4 marks).
- Examine arguments for and against the idea that Sociology should be “the study of social facts” (20 marks).

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## 4. Quantitative and qualitative methods of research; their strengths and limitations; research design.

### Research Design: Introduction

In this Section we're going to focus on the idea of sociological research as a *systematic process* - as something carefully *planned* and *organised* by the researcher - because this idea reflects a couple of significant observations:

Firstly, sociological research involves a range of factors - from what to study, through collecting data to analysing and drawing conclusions from such data - that have to be addressed in a particular order. It would, for example, be extremely time consuming (and probably pointless) to start "collecting data" if we haven't initially decided on the subject of such activity. In other words we generally start to collect data once we've decided on what we want to study and how we want to study it - which gives a kind of logical flow and structure to the research process (and design).

Secondly, although any research process will have a basic design structure, this doesn't mean that important choices don't have to be made by the researcher - choices that will not only reflect their particular values and beliefs but will also produce very different forms of sociological research. A researcher, for example, must decide things like:

- What they are going to research (a potentially vast area).
- Their objectives for the research (are they trying to test a theory, describe a situation or whatever?).
- Who to study (whether this involves everyone in a particular group or just a selection (sample) of these people)?
- How to study them (what method or methods will be used in the research, for example)?

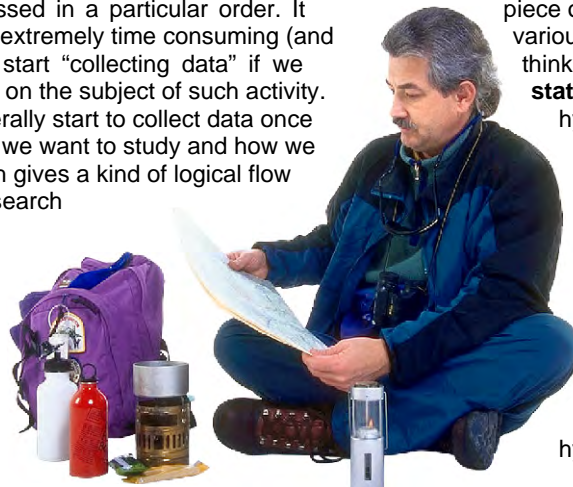
These questions / choices are an important and integral part of "doing sociological research" since how a researcher answers them will, as we've suggested, determine the direction and scope of their research - pushing it in one particular direction based on one set

of choices and a completely different direction if different choices are made...

### The Research Process: Observations

Before we look at the general design structure of sociological research we need to familiarise ourselves with three basic research ideas:

**1. Hypothesis:** For many (but not necessarily all) sociologists this is the starting-point for any piece of research and although there are various types we could use it's easiest to think of a hypothesis as a **question** or **statement** we want to answer. A hypothesis, therefore, has one very important characteristic; we should be able to **test** it (to discover if it's true or false) and, in the light of our previous work on methodology, it shouldn't be too surprising to learn that *Positivist* forms of research tend to make more use of hypotheses than their Interpretivist counterparts (although this isn't, of course, to say the later don't or can't use hypothesis testing as part of the research process).



Just as we use a map to plan the stages of our journey, a systematic design helps the sociologist plan the various stages of their research (Caption courtesy Tenuous Caption Corp.).

A hypothesis involves *testing* a possible relationship between two or more things. For example, imagine we're interested in researching "why do people steal?". As it stands, this question would be difficult to answer because it doesn't specify a relationship between "people" and "stealing" that can be tested. What we need to do, therefore, is create a hypothesis - along the lines of something like "Poverty makes people steal" - that can be tested.

**2. Research Question:** Not all sociologists, as we've just suggested, want to test their ideas using a hypothesis. Some begin with a research question that the sociologist wants to answer / discover something about by collecting evidence. Although not directly tested, a research question can be supported (or not as the case may be) through research. In this respect an example of a (not very useful) research question might be: "What are people's attitudes to stealing?". All we are trying to do, using this type of research question, is gather evidence on the views of people about a particular form of behaviour.

Although the use of a hypothesis / research question isn't mutually exclusive when doing sociological research (it's perfectly possible to test a hypothesis while, at the same time, answering certain research questions) it's often the case that the decision – as part of the research process – about which to use reflects different methodological preoccupations and approaches and, in consequence, leads the researcher into different *types* of research design (as we demonstrate below).

**3. Operationalisation:** Whether starting with a hypothesis or a research question the researcher will have to *define*, *test* or *measure* the various elements involved in their hypothesis / question - and this is where the concept of *operationalisation* comes into the equation. If you think about the "poverty" hypothesis we've just used, to test it the researcher would have to be clear about such questions as:

- How is "poverty" defined?
- How is "stealing" defined?
- How are "people" defined (not literally, in this case, but in terms of different groups, perhaps)?
- How can we test or measure the relationship between poverty and stealing (in other words, what *indicators* can we use to test this relationship)?

Our answers to these - and similar - questions will determine how we plan and organise our actual research and, in this respect, sociological research, at least for our current purposes, generally follows an overall design blueprint, such as the one set-out by **Oberg** (1999), that involves **four** distinct, but interconnected, stages:

**1. Planning** – the initial decision-making stage where the researcher decides the basic format of the research (what to research, how to research it and so forth).

**2. Information Gathering:** The data-collection stage where people are questioned, observed and so forth.

**3. Information Processing:** Once data has been successfully gathered its *meaning* has to be analysed and interpreted.

**4. Evaluation:** This normally involves both an:

- **Internal** analysis of the research process (was, for example, the hypothesis, addressed and tested properly? Was the data collection method appropriate? and so forth).
- **External** analysis whereby the researcher presents their conclusions to a wider public audience for their analysis and criticism.

**Process**

The above is a fairly general outline of the **research process** – one that only provides a very basic

indication about how research could / should be carried out. We can, however, develop this outline fairly easily to show a more-detailed representation of the research process – one that edges us nearer to developing a standardised **research design** that might look something like the following:



The research process involves thinking about how we can define, measure or test significant concepts.

**1. Identify** the research problem: This is the initial stage at which the sociologist decides things like:

- What topic to study (education? health? and so forth).
- What aspect to study (having decided on, for example, education, decisions have to be made about what exactly will be researched – "attitudes to education" or "differential achievement", for example)

**2. Review** past research: This may serve of number of purposes, depending on what the researcher wants to do:

- Generating ideas about what to study (or not to study)
- Replicating previous research.
- Avoiding errors made in previous research.
- Becoming more familiar with research on a topic.

• **G**enerate ideas

• **R**eplicate research

• **A**void errors

• **B**ecome familiar

Mnemonics (such as GRAB) can help you remember important ideas.

**3. Decide** on research **hypothesis / question:** This will set the basic theme for the research. For example, if a hypothesis is used it will have to be tested which, in turn, will involve research methods capable of being used for this purpose.

**4. Develop** a Research Framework: This will mean deciding on things like:

- Who or what will be studied.
- How they will be studied (in terms of research method or methods).
- Access issues, problems, solutions.
- Time frames and scales – will the research involve one-off observation, interviews, etc. or is it part of a long-term (**longitudinal**) study that will involve repeating the research at different times?
- Sample technique, size and frame (if necessary).

**5. Collect data:** The physical process of gathering information. This will be guided by the kind of issues we've just noted, but additional considerations here include thinking about the *choice of research methods* in terms of their:

- **Reliability:** How important is this in terms of the general objectives of the research?
- **Validity:** Is the research intended to be an in-depth study of behaviour or simply a quantitative analysis of a particular issue?
- **Representativeness:** Is the research a single study of a specific group (a case study) or:
- **Generalisation:** Are the research findings from the sample studied intended to be applied to a much wider general population?

**6. Analyse data:** Data, as **Foucault** (1970) argues, "can never speak for itself". In this respect information not only has to be *analysed* (bringing together and

categorising related ideas, for example) but also *interpreted* – what, in short, does the data and the overall research mean?

**7. Present** the completed research in terms of things like:

- **Findings** – what was actually discovered?
- **Conclusions** – about, for example, the hypothesis (has it been disproven, for example?).
- **Limitations** – which might include discussion of various research problems that may have impacted on the study.
- **Suggestions** for further research.

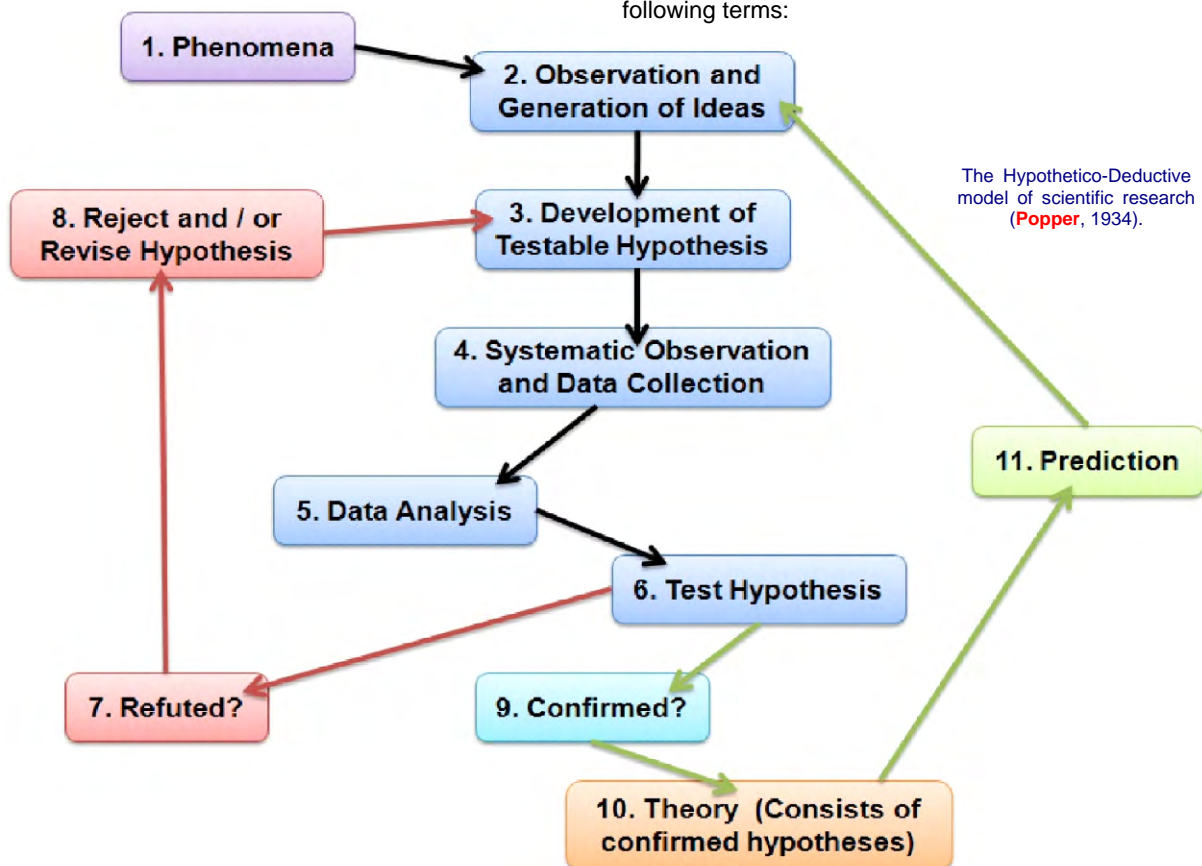
**The Research Process: Explanations**

So far we've outlined some important ideas and questions relating to sociological research design and we can develop these observations by looking a little more closely at two major forms of research design – one based around the development and testing of **hypotheses** (in general terms a **Positivist** type of research design) and the other based around the use of **research questions** (in broad terms an **Interactionist** research design).

**1. Positivism: Hypothesis-based research**

A classic example of how to organise this type of social research is one suggested by **Popper** (1934) which he called the:

**Hypothetico-Deductive Model** of scientific research, the basis of which we can generally outline in the following terms:



The Hypothetico-Deductive model of scientific research (Popper, 1934).



“**Hypothetico**” means “starting with a hypothesis” and for **Popper** the defining feature of a scientific research process is the ability to develop and clearly state **testable** hypotheses.

**Deduction** (or to give it its proper name, *deductive logic*) is a way of making authoritative statements (*proofs*) about what is *not known* by a thorough analysis of what *is known*. The ability to make *deductive statements* is a powerful tool because it's the basis for drawing logical conclusions about *specific events* from *general events*.

To simplify this idea, think about a fictional detective such as Inspector Morse. He solved crimes by *systematically* investigating a case, collecting and analysing facts and, on the basis of these facts, identifying the guilty party. This is an example of *deduction* because he proves something specific that was not initially known (the identity of a murderer) on the basis of general observations about things that were initially known (the facts of the case, the clues identified and so forth).

A **model** is a small-scale *representation* of something that helps clarify the relationship between the various elements involved by describing them in simplified or idealised terms. In this case, **Popper's** model suggests the various steps to follow in order to “do scientific research” and, as such, helps us to design the actual process itself.



“A model” is a small-scale representation of something (like, in this instance, a house).

We can briefly explain each of these “steps in the research process” in the following way:

**1. Phenomena:** With this particular design the research starts with the choice of something to study and we can use “education” for illustrative purposes. However, in order to actually do research we have to narrow our initial ideas down to something more specific.

**2. Observation and the generation of ideas:** The researcher starts to focus their initial interest in “education” into something manageable. For example, they might find inspiration in previously published research (they might, for example, want to **replicate** it), their own particular academic interests or they may simply pick-up a government contract to do a certain type of research on a particular topic (such as rates of truancy in secondary schools).



**3. Development of Testable Hypothesis:** This provides both a *focus* for the research and a clearly defined *objective* for data collection - the researcher is now effectively locked-into a *systematic design* for identifying, collecting and processing data. Before they can actually start to collect data, however, the researcher needs to *operationalise* the various concepts in the hypothesis that require definition, testing or measurement. For example, if our hypothesis was something like “Children who are bullied at school are more likely to truant than those who are not bullied” (not the world's greatest hypothesis, admittedly, but one that will serve for our current

purpose) the researcher would need to define concepts like “truancy” and “bullying” and measure the concept of “more likely”.

This, in a roundabout way, leads us to think about a problem faced by social scientists that is not generally faced by natural scientists, namely that many of the things we want to study and / or measure don't actually have a physical existence – we can't, for example, point to something called “bullying” and directly measure it (since it is simply a concept we use to label certain situations and actions – behaviour seen as “bullying” in one context may be seen differently in another). This problem can, however, be overcome by using *indicators* – things that *can* be measured. In this instance there may be a range of indicators of bullying we can define and subsequently measure.

A clearer example, perhaps, is provided by **Lindauer** (2005). In her review of research examining the educational properties of museums she noted that the question “Did the exhibition effectively communicate the main idea or message?” illustrates the idea of hypothesis testing within this type of research design. As she argues “The question...poses a *cause-and-effect relationship* - attending an exhibit will cause visitors to acquire particular knowledge or information” that can be measured and therefore tested (once the concept of “effectively communicate” has been operationalised and quantified).

**4. Systematic Observation and Data Collection:** The researcher starts to think about who they are going to



Life is full of choices...

research (their *sample*) and the research *method(s)* they will use.

Just as the overall research design involves making choices at every stage in the process, so too do choices need to be made relating to samples and research methods (we've previously identified a range of research method choices – from questionnaires to covert participant observation – and we'll examine some sampling choices in a moment). The idea of

“systematic observation” is important because it clearly reflects the nature of this type of design –everything, in terms of researcher effort, is effectively channelled towards testing the hypothesis; anything that deflects the researcher from this goal is a distraction, of no importance to the research and is to be ignored.

**5. Data Analysis:** This may take a couple of forms:

**a. Technical** involves things like:

- Checking to ensure sufficient data have been collected.
- Ensuring the sample used has remained representative.

**b. Interpretive** involves making decisions about the *meaning* of data collected. This might, for example, involve discarding “irrelevant” data, as well as more straightforward data analysis – something that may be simplified if, as is highly-likely with this type of design, quantitative data has been collected.

**6. Testing the Hypothesis:** This involves deciding - on the basis of the data analysis - whether or not the tested hypothesis has either been:

**7. Falsified:** If the hypothesis is false a decision has to be made about whether it should be totally rejected (**8**) or whether it can be revised and **re-tested** (a return to step 3).

**9. Confirmed.** If the hypothesis is confirmed it contributes to the final stage in the research process:

**10. Theory Development:** In everyday language, a *theory* normally means something that

has *not* been tested (“It works in theory, but not in practice”, for example). Sociologically, however, a theory consists of *confirmed hypotheses* that can then be used to predict (**11**) the behaviour originally observed (step 1).

In this instance, for example, our research might have shown that those who truant from school have a particular characteristic (or set of characteristics) that allow us to predict how children with those same characteristics will behave when they start secondary school.

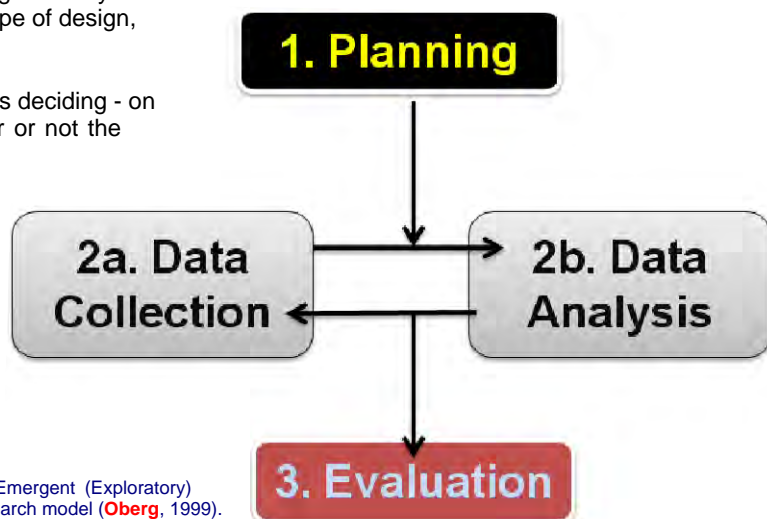
**2. Interpretivism: Emergent (Exploratory) Research**

Although the Hypothetico-deductive model describes an important way of doing research, by way of contrast (since not all sociologists believe the same things or do things in exactly the same way) we can look at an alternative “emergent (exploratory) research” model one, as we've suggested, that can be closely associated with Interpretivist methodology. In general, this type of model follows the same basic flow identified by **Oberg** (1999) – albeit with some significant design modifications - in that it involves:

**1. Planning:** A research issue is identified and a “research question” or “problem” takes shape. This may flow from background reading on the topic or the researcher may want to “come fresh” to the research to avoid being influenced by what others have said or written.

**2a. Information Gathering:** Although the general research process here is superficially similar to that proposed in **Popper's** Hypothetico-deductive model, major design differences are apparent in the way information is collected. For example, this type of research design is:

**Non-linear** – research is not a process that begins with a hypothesis and ends with it being confirmed or refuted. The objective is not to discover definitive answers to a question, issue or problem; rather, it is to explore issues from a variety of angles. Hence, the idea of this design being:



Emergent (Exploratory) research model (**Oberg**, 1999).

**Exploratory:** The objective is to explore whatever is being studied in all its facets - from the perspective and perception of the researcher to those of the people being researched.

**Holistic:** This approach involves collecting as much information as possible about whatever is being studied, for a couple of reasons. Firstly the researcher doesn't try to prejudge what is or is not significant at this stage in the research. Secondly, by casting the research net far and wide the researcher involves and co-opts those being studied into the research process; they may, for example, suggest ideas and issues to study that may not have originally occurred to the researcher.

**Goal-Free:** For **Lindauer** (2005) one significant aspect of exploratory research is that "...research designs are *goal-free as opposed to goals-based*". The latter is a defining feature of Positivist forms of research where the goal is to confirm or falsify a hypothesis. Interpretivist research design doesn't involve defining in advance what the objective of such research will be; rather, the researcher is free to explore whatever they – or the people they're studying - feel is important or interesting. As **Lindauer** notes these types of research designs are often "**iterative, meaning that they take shape as data collection and analysis proceed**".

**Evolutionary:** This relates to the two previous ideas in the sense that research is relatively open-ended – the researcher may, for example, simply follow the leads suggested by the people being studied. Rather than following a pre-determined path, therefore, research design is *fluid* – it can expand and develop as and how the research situation demands (digging deeper into some areas while disregarding others, for example). Thus, where the Hypothetico-deductive design framework is rigid, strong and directs the researcher, the reverse is true of exploratory designs – the design framework is flexible, loose and bends to take account of new research developments.

**Active:** Unlike "passive" research designs where the researcher has to carefully distance themselves from whatever is being researched in order to avoid biasing the research, this design generally encourages the *active participation* of the researcher. Researcher involvement with the people being studied is, consequently, high – they may, for example, live amongst the people being researched for months or even years in some (admittedly quite extreme) instances. **Whyte** (1943), for example, spent years living openly around the adolescent gang members he studied and **Ray** (1987) lived covertly for a time with a group of Australian environmentalists.

**2b. Information Processing:** Data is analysed, although the researcher is not interested in testing hypotheses. Rather, an attempt may be made to **categorise** the data in various ways or sift and sort it into some form of **descriptive** narrative (*story*). Generally, however, data analysis is, according to **Schultz et al** (1996) something that happens *throughout* the research process, rather than simply

being completed *after* data has been collected. This is significant for a couple of reasons:

Firstly this type of design involves a "*positive feedback loop*" between data collection and data analysis; in other words, when collected data is analysed (and with this type of design there is likely to be mountains of data) such analysis is used to inform further data collection – and further analysis (hence the idea of research "feeding back" into itself in a non-linear way).

Secondly one outcome of this process is that there is no requirement to collect data for the express purpose of proving or disproving something – data analysis, therefore, is both *descriptive* and *multi-faceted* (seen from different viewpoints – both that of the researcher and those of the researched).

**3. Evaluation:** *Conclusions* may be offered but it's more likely that the reader will



and Hypothetico-deductive models; the latter, by definition and design, involves the researcher making judgments (about what to research, what data to collect and, ultimately, the status – valid or invalid – of the research hypothesis). The former, however, can be characterised as:

**Non-judgemental:** The objective of the research is not to decide things like "truth" or "falsity", "validity" or "invalidity"; rather it is to illuminate a particular issue, question or problem by studying it from a multitude of possible viewpoints.

As **Schwandt** (2002) puts it, social research involves not so much a "problem to be solved...as a dilemma or mystery that requires interpretation and self-understanding".

#### Tried and Tested

- Explain what is meant by the term "operationalisation" (2 marks).
- Suggest **two** reasons why a sociologist might choose hypothesis-based research (4 marks).
- Identify and explain two differences between hypothesis-based and exploratory research (4 marks).

### The Research Process: Sampling

Having outlined examples of both the general research process and different sociological approaches to research design we can look a little more closely at specific examples of the choices available to sociologists when it comes to thinking about, firstly, **sampling** and secondly the strengths and limitations of **quantitative** and **qualitative research methods**.

### Sampling: Observations

The first thing you can do is identify and explain a few sampling related ideas.

**Target (or General) Population:** When starting a piece of research we always have in mind a group to study - our *target* or *general population*; in other words, they're everyone in the group we're going to research. Examples of target populations might be:

#### 1. A Small Group

The teachers in a small primary school, for example.

#### 2. A Large Group

Every secondary school teacher in England.

With the first group their behaviour might be relatively easy to research because the target population is small and exists in a clearly defined (and potentially accessible) area. Whether this research involves observing the group, asking them questions or participating in their behaviour, the *size* of the group makes it relatively easy to manage the research.

With the second group, however, things might be more difficult because its size and geographic distribution is going to make it hard (to say the least) to observe or question everyone personally. This, therefore, is where the concept of *sampling* comes into its own and we need to outline a few basic ideas relating to this concept:

A **sample** is a relatively small proportion of the people who belong to the target population. For example, in the case of secondary school teachers in England the researcher might choose 100 teachers and, by studying their behaviour, try to say something about the characteristics or behaviour of all teachers in the target population.

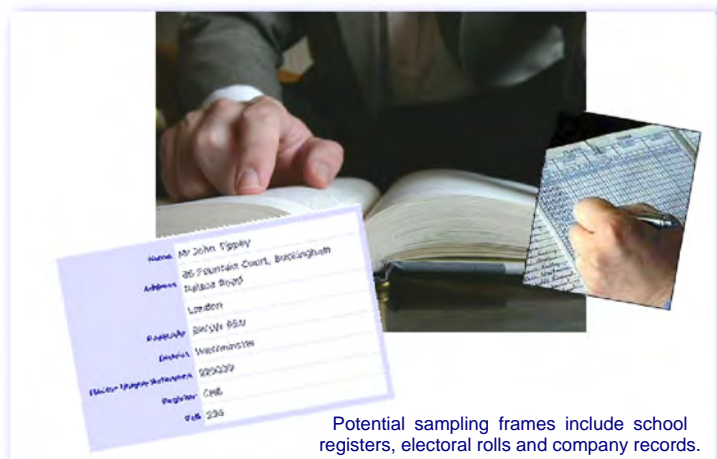
**Sample size:** Rather than think in terms of size (is a 90% sample too large or a 10% sample too small?) a more significant question is "how *representative* is the sample?":

**Representativeness:** This idea is more important than the size of your sample because it relates to the question of whether or not the characteristics of the people selected for the sample accurately reflect the characteristics of the target population. If the sample group is *representative* then anything discovered about them can also be applied to the target population - regardless of how many or how few people are in the sample.

**Generalisation** relates to the question of whether or not the things we discover about the people in our sample can also be applied to the people in our target population. If our sample is *representative* we can generalise the behaviour of this group to our target population - we can, in other words, make statements about a group we *haven't* studied (our target population) based on the behaviour of a group we *have* studied.

**Sampling Frame:** To construct a representative sample from which generalisations can be made researchers need some way of identifying everyone in their target population (a sampling frame) – examples of which might include:

- **Electoral Roll:** a list of everyone eligible to vote.
- **School Registers:** lists of children attending school.
- **Professional Membership Lists:** organisations such as the British Medical Association (BMA) keep a register of all doctors in Britain.
- **Company payrolls:** a list of all employees in a company.



For most types of sampling (there are important exceptions) a sampling frame is required for a couple of reasons:

1. If a researcher can't identify everyone in their target population their sample may not be representative because it will not accurately reflect the characteristics of the target population.
2. For a researcher to contact people in their sample (to interview them, for example) they will need to know who they are...

However, just because a sampling frame exists, it doesn't mean a researcher will automatically have access to it. It's possible access may be *denied* for:

- **Legal reasons:** A school, for example, may not give a researcher access to their registers.
- **Confidentiality:** A business organisation may not give a researcher access to their payroll records.
- **Secrecy:** Some groups (such as religious groups, political parties and criminal gangs) may, for whatever reason, not want to be studied.

**Sampling: Explanations**

As a general rule of thumb, researchers try to make their sample representative of the target population. However, there are times – for a variety of reasons - when they might choose *not* to draw a representative sample:

**Non-Representative**

For some types of research the sociologist might *not* want to make generalisations about a very large group based only on a sample of that group. They might, for example, simply be interested in the behaviour of *the group itself*, rather than what they may or may not represent. An example of this type of non-representative sampling is a:

**Case study:** The objective here is to study, in detail, the characteristics of a particular group (or case, as you might not be too surprised to learn). Although a case study is technically an example of a *research method* (see below), we can use it to illustrate how a non-representative sample might work. Thus, a case study might involve joining a gang of young women, living among a group of monks or studying the prescribing practices of doctors in a particular part of the country. The researcher is *not* particularly concerned about whether the group being studied is representative of all other, similar, groups. In effect, therefore, the sample in this type of research *is* the target population. This is a perfectly acceptable form of research - just as long as the researcher doesn't try to generalise their findings.

In other instances of non-representative sampling the researcher may want to create a representative sample but circumstances conspire against them and so they may choose (or be forced) to settle for something like:

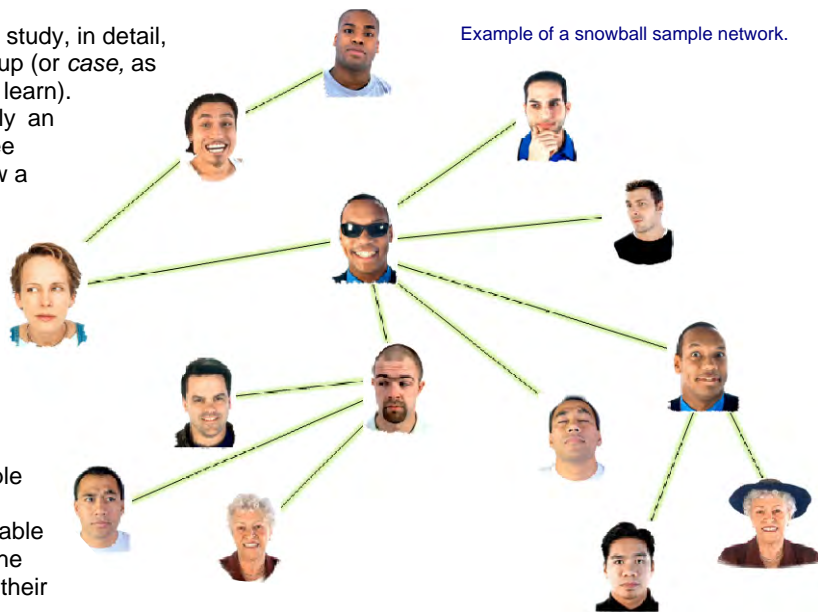
**Opportunity sampling:** This type has two main subdivisions:

1. **"Best opportunity"** samples involve deliberately choosing a sample to provide the *best possible opportunity* to show whatever you're testing is *true*. If

your research shows the hypothesis you're testing to be *false* for this group, there's a *high probability* it will be false for any other related groups. **Goldthorpe et al's** (1968) classic study used this technique to test the then currently fashionable argument (the **"Embourgeoisement Thesis"**) that the working classes in Britain were "becoming middle class". Their **best opportunity sample** consisted of highly paid car assembly workers who they chose to study on the basis that if *any* working class group was likely to show lifestyles indistinguishable from their middle class peers it would be this group of "affluent workers".

**2. Snowball samples:** So-called because, just as a snowball rolling downhill gets larger and larger as it picks-up more snow, a *snowball sample* picks up more and more people to include in the sample over time. A basic example of the technique for this type of sample might be as follows:

The researcher identifies someone in the target population who's willing to be part of their research. This person then suggests another 2 or 3 people (perhaps more) who they think are also willing to participate in the research. These people, in turn, suggest further possible participants until the researcher has a sample they can use for their research. Although this technique isn't going to produce a representative sample, it may be the best that can be achieved in certain situations. **Wallis** (1977), for example, used this technique to contact (ex-) members of the Church of Scientology when his request to interview current members was rejected by the Church authorities.



**Types of Sampling: Observations**

Although non-representative sampling can, as **Wallis** has shown, be a useful technique in some situations, the main focus of this section is on a range of techniques that generally aim to be **representative**:

**Simple Random Sampling:** One of the most basic (simple) forms of sampling is based on the *probability*

that the random selection of names from a **sampling frame** will produce a sample representative of a target population. One important characteristic here is that for it to be truly random *everyone* in the target population must have an *equal chance* of being chosen for the sample. A simple random sample, therefore, is similar to a *lottery*.

- Everyone in the target population is identified on a sampling frame.
- The sample is selected by randomly choosing names from the frame until the sample is complete.

For example, a 30% sample of a target population of 100 people would involve the random selection of 30 people.

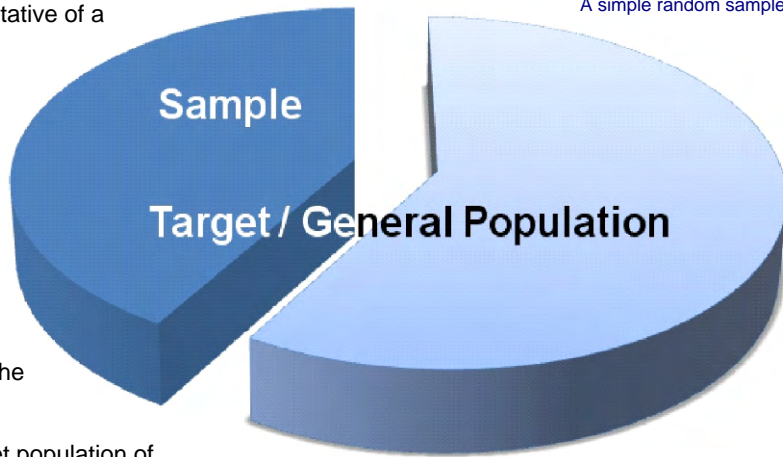
**Systematic Sampling:** A *variation* on the above - often used when the target population is very large - is to select names for your sample *systematically* by taking the sample *directly* from a sampling frame. For a 25% sample of a target population containing 100 names, a systematic sample would involve choosing every *fourth* name from your frame.

**Stratified Random Sampling:** A potential *problem* with samples created using simple random or systematic techniques arises if the target population is *not homogeneous* (that is, it doesn't consist of people who are roughly the same in terms of the characteristics important to the research). If the target population is *heterogeneous* (it consists, for example, of a range of smaller groups, the views of which are all important to your research) a *biased* sample can easily occur. This follows because these sampling techniques *may* under-represent some groups within the target population and over-represent

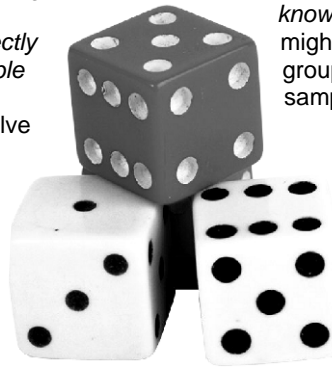
others.

**Stratified random sampling** is designed to avoid these problems while retaining the idea of selection based on *chance*. The technique here is to divide (or *stratify*) your target population into groups whose characteristics are *known* to the researcher (simple examples might be "males and females" or different age groups) and treat *each* group as a random sample in its own right.

For example, imagine a target population consists of 100 people, 80 females and 20 males and the researcher needs a 10% sample. To *exactly represent* the gender balance of the target population the researcher requires a sample of 8 females and 2 males – something that might be achieved by *chance* (using a simple random sample, for example), but it's easier to give chance a helping hand by splitting the target population into two groups - the 80 females and the 20 males - and then selecting 10% of each (8 females from the "female only group" and 2 males from the "male only" group). If we then *combine* the two samples we get a *final sample* that is representative of the target population in terms of the criteria (gender in this particular instance) the researcher has set for their study. By doing things in this way the researcher can also ensure that sample selection remains random.

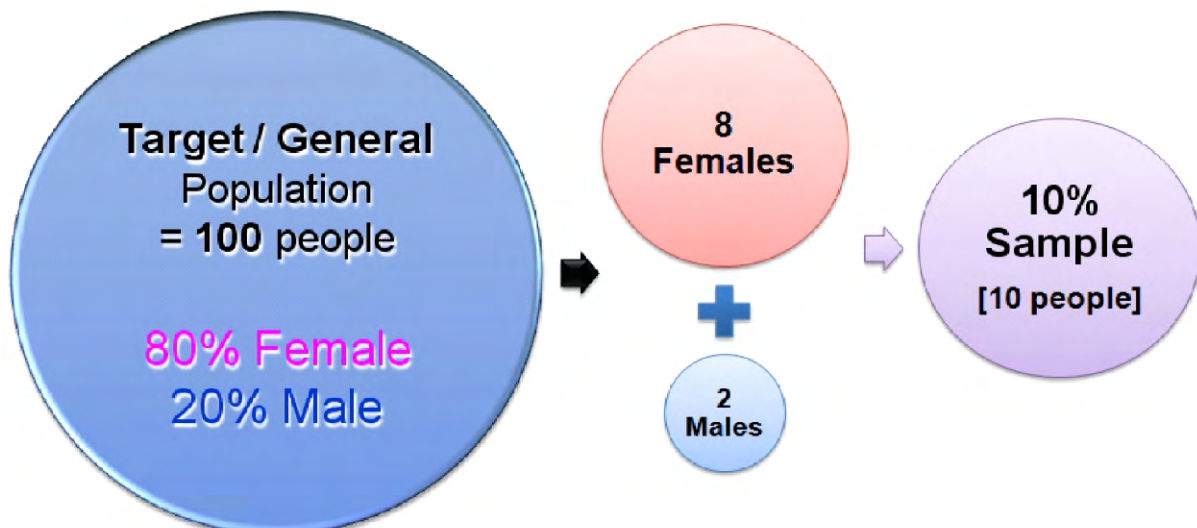


A simple random sample.



Random samples are based on chance distributions.

Stratified sampling:  
 Stratified Random: the selection of the sample is completely random.  
 Stratified Quota: Sample selection is not truly random.



**Stratified Quota Sampling:** The basic principles of this type of sampling are the *same* as for **stratified random sampling** (the division of the main sample into smaller samples on the basis of some known characteristics, such as age or gender). The main **difference**, using the previous “gender” example, is that when you select, for example, “8 females from the “female only group” these represent your “**quota**” – and once you’ve filled your *quota* for each group no further males or females can be selected for the sample. If this sounds a little unclear then an unlikely – but possible – scenario might be that when selecting the above sample the first 8 females and 2 males the researcher asks to be part of their sample agree to this request. This means that the remaining 72 females and 18 males who *weren’t asked* could *never* have been chosen. In other words, an important

Once the Quota for a category has been filled no more people can be included in the sample for that category.

**difference** between *stratified random* and *stratified quota* sampling is that the latter is *not truly random* in its sample selection (although it’s arguably “random enough” for most sampling purposes) because *not everyone* in the target population has an *equal chance* of being selected.

**Opportunity (“Snowball”) Sampling:** We looked earlier at the idea of *non-representative sampling* and mentioned briefly the idea of opportunity (or snowball) sampling. As we noted, it’s not always possible for a researcher to get hold of a *sampling frame* for a target population and they may know nothing about the characteristics of their target population (which rules out stratified sampling). Therefore, the researcher may need to resort to *unrepresentative* means to construct a sample. This technique is not ideal but it may represent the only way a researcher can construct a research sample. As we’ve seen with the **Wallis** (1977) example “secretive” organisations that refuse to disclose details of their membership to “outsiders” would make it impossible to construct a representative sample. On the other hand, **Charlton et al** (2001) in their study of “mobile telephone ownership and usage among 10- and 11-year-olds” simply used an *opportunity sample* of schoolchildren in the absence of any available sampling frame.

**Cluster Sampling:** This is usually done when a target population is spread over a wide geographic area. For example, an opinion poll on voting behaviour may involve a sample of 1000 people representing the 35 (or so) million people eligible to vote in a General Election in the UK. If a simple random sample were taken the researcher might have to question 10 people in Newcastle, 15 in Cardiff and so forth – something that would be a *time-consuming*, hugely *expensive* and *organisationally difficult* process to manage (and the

results from the poll would probably be out-of-date before it could be finished). To avoid these problems, a researcher uses **cluster samples** that firstly, divide the country into smaller *sampling units* (in this example, electoral constituencies) and then into small units within constituencies (for example, local boroughs).

Individual local boroughs could then be selected which, based on past research, show a **representative cross-section** of voters and a sample of electors could then be taken from a relatively small number of boroughs across the country. Thus, *sampling units* (electoral constituencies) have the same basic characteristics (population size, for example), but each *cluster* is a small scale version of the target population.

### Types of Sampling: Explanations

The first thing we can note, when thinking about both the **advantages** and **disadvantages** of different types of sampling, is to follow **Lindauer** (2005) in suggesting that one significant *evaluative* aspect of sampling is:

**External validity** – the question of whether or not the people who are actually questioned, observed or experimented on “accurately represent an overall population to which the findings are generalized” (something normally achieved through random / representative sampling). The importance of this type of validity to different sociologists using different research methodologies does, as we’ve previously suggested, differ in terms of the overall methodological aims of a piece of research. **Positivist** methodology, for example, is more-likely to stress the importance of external validity than **Interpretivist** methodology.

We can identify further evaluative aspects of different types of sampling by noting a selection of their general **advantages** and **disadvantages**.

**Simple Random and Systematic Sampling** have certain **advantages** for the researcher:

**Time:** Both are relatively quick and easy ways of selecting samples.

**Random:** They produce random or near-random samples based on chance (the sample cannot be accidentally biased by the researcher).



**Expense:** Both are reasonably inexpensive to create using a sampling frame accurate for the target population.

**Information:** Other than some way of identifying people in the target population (a name for example), the researcher doesn't require any other knowledge about this population.

However, a couple of **disadvantages** here might be:

**Sampling Frame:** These techniques *always* need a sampling frame - and one may not be available.

**Unrepresentative:** Sampling based on chance may not produce a representative sample.

**Stratified Random** and **Stratified Quota sampling** have a number of important **advantages:**



**Representativeness:** Known differences in the target population will be accurately reflected in the sample and we can, therefore, be reasonably sure our sample will be

broadly representative.

**Generalisation:** Where representativeness is assured it is possible to generalise from the sample to the target population, even in instances when the sample is relatively small in relation to the target population. Most commercial opinion polling organisations (such as Gallup or Mori), for example, sample the political views of around 1,000 people to produce a broadly representative (and accurate) picture of voting behaviour in Britain.

**Focus:** The researcher can focus their sample on relevant distinctions in the target population (age, gender, class, ethnicity, etc.) and ignore irrelevant factors.

**Size:** Stratified samples can be relatively small, since it's possible to make certain we have accurately reflected our target population. In this respect **Nguyen** (2005) has argued that it is "the *absolute sample size* that matters the most in determining the accuracy of the findings...not the size of the sample in relation to its population". In other words a very small sample (relative to a target population) can still be representative as long as it confirms to certain minimum criteria for its absolute size (which, when you think about it, makes sense – a "sample of one person", for example, is unlikely to be representative of anything other than that person).

**Resources:** *Quota* samples are usually relatively cheap and quick to construct accurately.

**Sampling Frame:** Although a sampling frame is always useful it's not strictly necessary for something like *stratified quota sampling*. In some instances it's enough just to know the characteristics - and their associated quotas – of respondents in order to construct a sample.

They can, however, have **disadvantages:**

**Accurate information** about the target population isn't always available and if a researcher don't have this information then any sample constructed will be unrepresentative.



**Out-of-date** information: Even in situations where accurate information is available this information may be out of date by the time the research is actually done. This is especially true where the sample is large and complex or where the composition of the target population may change rapidly - age-groups in a large general population, for example, will probably change on a daily basis.

**Uncertainty:** When using a team of researchers to construct a *quota sample* you can't be certain they have correctly placed everyone in the right quota category. If, for example, your research assistant cannot find "100 men over the age of 65" to fill their quota, there may be a temptation to fill it using men under that age. This affects not just representativeness – it may also affect the *reliability* and *validity* of the research.

**Unrepresentative:** *Stratified quota sample* selection is *not* truly random and for this reason there is a chance it may not be representative.



**Opportunity Sampling** has couple of distinct **advantages:**

**Availability:** It allows a researcher to construct a sample in situations that would be impossible using any other sampling technique.

**Resources:** It can be a relatively cheap and quick method of sampling (although this will depend on both the size of the sample and the speed at which it's possible for the researcher to contact suggested respondents).





It also has some serious **disadvantages**:

**Unrepresentative:** It is very, very, unlikely the sample will be representative.

**Reliability:** There is no way of checking whether or not your sample is representative.

**Resources:** It can be a relatively expensive and time-consuming sampling method (if the sample is large, widely dispersed across a large area and respondents are reluctant or unable to suggest further potential respondents).

A **self-selected sample** (see below – sampling errors) is a distinct possibility.

**Cluster Sampling:** Although not very widely used in sociological research, some **advantages** are:



**Resources:** This type of sample saves the researcher time and money because relatively small samples can represent very large target

populations.

**Replication:** Once a valid sample has been established, the researcher can use the same (or very similar) sample *repeatedly* (as with political opinion polling, for example).

There are, however, important **disadvantages**:

**Representativeness:** Unless great care is taken, the cluster samples will be unrepresentative of the target population.

**Resources:** Although it is a relatively cheap form of sampling, this is not necessarily the case. A sample that seeks to represent the whole of Britain, for example, is still going to be too expensive for many researchers.



### Sampling Errors

Although sampling is generally a risky business (getting a representative sample is not always as easy as it sounds), we can identify a couple of basic sampling errors that can produce samples which are unrepresentative of a target population:

**Self-Selected samples** involve creating a sample that effectively "picks itself" rather than being selected by the researcher. For example, the type of *opinion polls* that appear in newspapers and magazines almost invariably involve a self-selected - and hence *unrepresentative* - sample. *Reasons* for this lack of representativeness are not hard to find:

- Only a minority of the population buy the newspaper on the day the poll appears and such people have, unwittingly, selected themselves for the sample.

- An unknown number of readers will not notice the poll (and so don't vote in it). Those who notice the question, therefore, have again potentially selected themselves for the sample.

- Only a proportion of readers will respond to the question. This proportion is made even smaller if the *respondent* has to pay to vote (by calling at their own expense a telephone number set-up to record their vote, for example).



- People who do respond to such polls are likely to be those who have very *strong* views either way on the question - and these are unlikely to be representative of the population of Britain.

A classic *example* of a self-selected sample is "**The Hite Report**" (**Hite**, 1976), an investigation into male and female sexuality in America; although it claimed to uncover a range of *interesting* sexualities and practices "representative of the population of America" the sample used was **self-selected** (people simply responded to advertisements asking them to talk openly about their sexual behaviour to researchers). In this particular context, therefore, the responses of a small number of *unrepresentative* people who wanted the world to know about their sexual behaviour came to (erroneously) represent, in the eyes of the media when the research was published, general public behaviour in America.

**Statistically Inadequate Samples:** At the start of this section we suggested the question of *sample size* is not as important as that of how *representative* it is. This is true up to a point, but a sample that is *too small* to accurately represent a target population is going to be inadequate for research purposes (asking your mate what they think about the education system is probably not going to be an adequate sample). As a general rule, therefore, the *larger* your sample as a *proportion* of your target population the greater the *probability* it will be statistically adequate. This may improve the chances of your sample being representative of the target population; however, a large sample is no guarantee of a representative sample.

## Tried and Tested

- (a) Explain what is meant by the term “snowball sample” (2 marks).
- (b) Suggest **two** social factors that could be used in the creation of a stratified sample, *apart from* gender (4 marks).
- (c) Suggest **two** reasons why sociologists might use non-random sampling (4 marks).
- (d) Examine the strengths and limitations of any type of sampling technique with which you are familiar (20 marks).

## Quantitative and Qualitative: Observations

At the start of this Chapter we outlined the concepts of quantitative and qualitative data and we can revisit these concepts to both develop and firm-up our understanding of them. In this respect, therefore, a further area of choice open to the researcher surrounds the methods they will use to actually collect data and this choice, as with so many others, is influenced partly by research methodology (in terms of the broad characterisation we’ve used throughout this Chapter, a decision between those methods that reflect either a **Positivist** or **Interpretivist** research methodology) and partly by the nature of the research being undertaken; some methods, for example, are better suited to the collection of large-scale quantitative data while others are more suited to the collection of small-scale qualitative data. To complete this Section, therefore, we can initially look at a broad range of **strengths** and **limitations** associated with these methods:

## Quantitative Strengths

The ability to quantify relationships in the social world has a number of distinct advantages for sociological researchers and the **strengths** of quantitative methods can be found in areas like:



**Comparisons:** Statistical data can be **standardised** (the same questions, for example, given to different groups) which allows for comparisons over both **time** (the same society at different points in its development) and **space** (across different societies or cultures). **Longitudinal studies** (where, for example, the same group of respondents may be questioned at different times) are able to exploit this feature of quantitative data to identify and track *social changes*. In this respect **Kruger** (2003) argues that one strength of quantitative methods and data is that they “allow us to summarize vast sources of information and facilitate comparisons across categories and over time”.

**Convenience:** Where social behaviour can be expressed statistically (as in, for example, the numbers of pupils each year who achieve national Key Stage

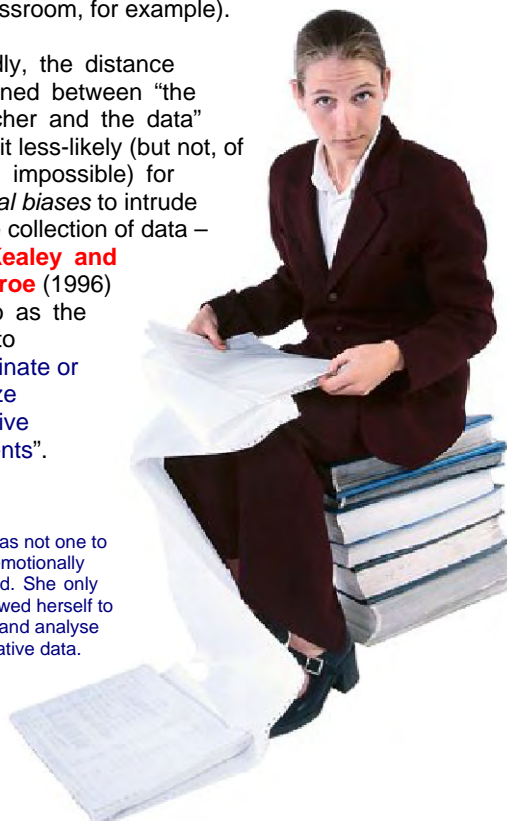
educational targets) potentially complex forms of behaviour can be simplified and easily analysed.

**Reliability:** The ability to standardise the collection of quantitative data makes it easier to *replicate* which, in turn, potentially increases its reliability. In addition, a further contribution to the high levels of reliability achieved through quantitative methods is that the meaning of the data is not as open to the **subjective interpretation** of the researcher (as tends to be the case with **qualitative** methods and data). By removing this “layer of interpretation” the researcher effectively distances themselves from any subjective involvement in the production of such data. The data gained from a structured interview, for example, is produced *independently* of the involvement of the researcher (they simply ask standard questions and note the answers), thereby removing a possible source of researcher bias (the latter doesn’t have to make decisions about whether the data is significant, insignificant and so forth). **Matveev** (2002) notes that the ability to *control the conditions* under which data is collected (through standardised questionnaires, experiments and the like) also makes quantitative methods more reliable.

**Objectivity:** Two general advantages are evident here. Firstly, the researcher has no direct, necessary and personal involvement with the generation of data – an idea that can be exemplified using the different ways quantitative and qualitative researchers use observation as a research method. For the former data collection might involve a simple counting of something (such as the number of pupils who pass GCSE Maths and English each year) whereas for the latter data collection may involve actually participating in the behaviour from which the data is being generated (as someone participating in the behaviour they are observing – openly or otherwise - in a classroom, for example).

Secondly, the distance maintained between “the researcher and the data” makes it less-likely (but not, of course, impossible) for *personal biases* to intrude into the collection of data – what **Kealey and Protheroe** (1996) refer to as the ability to “...eliminate or minimize subjective judgments”.

Dawn was not one to get emotionally involved. She only ever allowed herself to collect and analyse quantitative data.



**Generalisations:** Statistical data can be generated from large numbers of respondents (who may be spread across diverse geographic regions) and this, combined with high levels of **reliability**, **standardised** data collection and the relative **absence of subjective interpretation** makes it far easier to reliably generalise the results from a sample to a target population.

**Testing:** Where the researcher is interested in testing a specific **hypothesis**, quantitative data has two major advantages. Firstly it allows for relatively simple “True / False” distinctions to be made on the basis of *statistical comparisons* (the hypothesis, for example, will be *either confirmed or falsified*) - something that’s much harder to achieve with qualitative methods since, almost by definition, the data generated isn’t conducive to making these kinds of distinctions. Secondly this attribute of quantitative data makes it easier to structure research in a way that sets objectives (such as testing a particular hypothesis) and provides a clear route to the completion of the research. Qualitative data, by its very nature, makes it more difficult to set clear limitations to a piece of research (participant observation, for example, can be open-ended research that lasts for months or even years).

### And Limitations...

Although quantitative research methods have, as we’ve just suggested, a number of significant strengths this isn’t to say they don’t have a range of **limitations**:

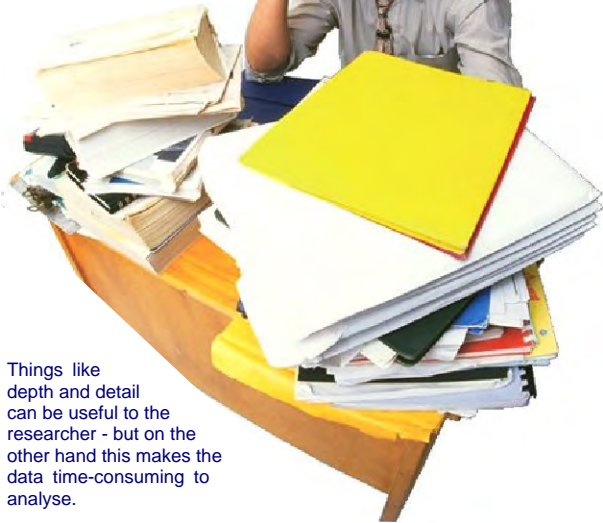


**Control:** Although the ability to quantify social behaviour can be a significant plus-factor for a researcher this situation is frequently achieved by placing the respondent in an “artificial social setting”. In other words realism is sacrificed for control. In their everyday lives, for example, people rarely – if ever - encounter situations in which they are asked to respond to a set of questions asked by a researcher; similarly, people are rarely placed in a laboratory-setting while their behaviour is observed (secretly or otherwise). The main question here, therefore, is that of the extent to which a researcher can capture people’s “normal behaviour” or “real opinions” when they place respondents in a situation that is neither “normal” nor “real”.

**Validity:** The collection of quantitative data raises a couple of validity questions (“does the research actually measure what it claims to measure”). Firstly, as we’ve just noted, can valid data be collected by placing people in situations that are generally a long way outside their normal behaviour? Secondly, a major criticism of quantitative methods is that they only capture a relatively narrow range of data - what **Day** (1998) has called the “**Who, What, When and Where**” of people’s behaviour – and while these may be important, interesting and informative questions quantitative methods are relatively poor at capturing the *reasons* for such behaviour. This idea is related to the problem of:

**Depth:** Quantitative methods are not well-suited to providing large amounts of depth and detail, precisely

because the more detailed the data about people’s behaviour



Things like depth and detail can be useful to the researcher - but on the other hand this makes the data time-consuming to analyse.

the more difficult it is to meaningfully quantify. In this respect, therefore, one criticism of quantitative methods is that they focus on relatively **superficial** aspects of behaviour (the “What, When and Where?”) while failing to address the complexities involved in even very simple forms of behaviour.

**Pre-Judgments:** **McCullough** (1988) argues that a significant methodological limitation of quantitative methods is the fact that “...issues are only measured if they are known prior to the beginning of the survey (and, therefore, have been incorporated into the questionnaire)”. In other words, in order to quantify behaviour the researcher must decide, in advance of their research, what is and what is not significant in the context of the behaviour being studied. There is, unlike with qualitative methods, little or no scope to develop the research outside of the original parameters decided by the researcher.

**Meaning:** The general lack of depth and detail leads to a further limitation – one noted by **Kruger** (2003) when he suggests that it is ‘...difficult to get the real meaning of an issue by looking at numbers’. Although quantitative methods *can* explore questions of meaning (asking people *why* they commit crimes or *why* they truant from school, for example) a general problem here is that these methods are not, by their very nature, very successful at producing data that has depth and detail (and consequently can’t easily get at the “richness of meaning” that lies behind even some of the simplest forms of social behaviour).

**Reliability:** Although, as a general principle, quantitative data is usually considered both “highly reliable” and “more reliable” than qualitative data, this is not necessarily the case (reliability is *not* an *automatic* quality of any one particular research method). As **Harvey** (2002) argues “Many apparently quantitative data depend critically on the way in which they were collected, who collected them, where they were collected, when they were collected and from whom they were collected”.

Finally we can note a concept used by **Sorokin** (1956) to describe not so much a weakness of quantitative methods, *per se*, but rather a weakness of those researchers who attempt to reduce all aspects of human behaviour to quantifiable characteristics:

**Quantophrenia** refers to what **Sorokin** (partly tongue-in-cheek) terms a “psychological compulsion to grasp for the numeric” – a “condition” that leads to the use of quantification for its own sake, regardless of whether or not it tells us anything useful or interesting about the behaviour being quantified. As **Eberstadt** (2006) puts it, the “victims” of this condition “obsess over numbers as descriptors, no matter how dubious their basis or questionable their provenance”.

### Qualitative Strengths



As might be expected, many of the limitations of quantitative research methods we’ve just outlined are reflected in the **strengths** of qualitative methods – something we can firm-up in terms of the following ideas:

**Depth:** Qualitative methods provide greater depth and detail about the behaviour being studied since, as **Day** (1998) suggests, they are concerned with discovering “the Why?” about (or *reasons* behind) such behaviour; in other words, because qualitative methods are designed to draw-out the complex reasons for social behaviour it follows they are likely to involve digging more deeply into people’s beliefs and behaviours.

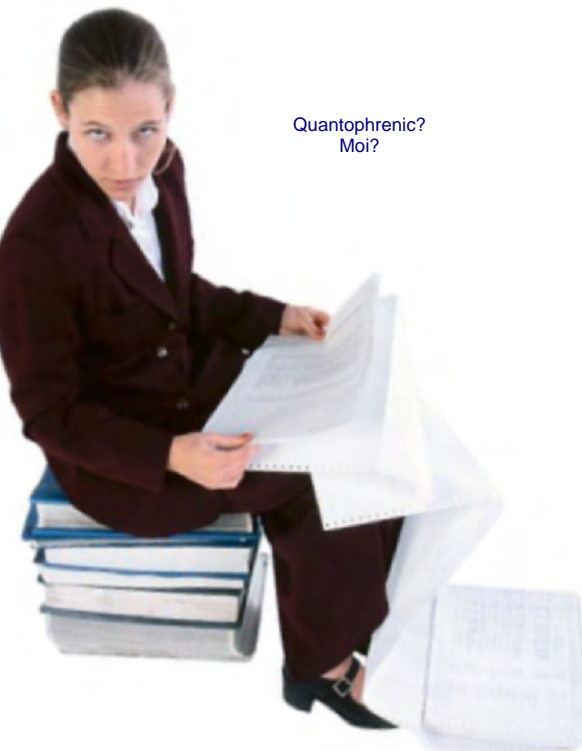
**Pre-judgements:** Qualitative methods avoid, to some extent, the problem of the researcher pre-judging what is and what is not significant data prior to starting their research. In other words, the research objective is not necessarily to test a particular hypothesis but rather to describe or draw-out people’s opinions and reasons for their behaviour – the *respondent*, rather than the *researcher*, is effectively the driving-force behind the research.

**Flexibility:** When people are encouraged to talk about their behaviour (or

even go about their daily lives without knowing they are the subject of a research study) the researcher is unable to tightly-control the research process. Respondents may, for example, start to talk about things they see as significant and take the research into directions and places the researcher had not originally thought about when the research was being planned. This, in part, can be further related to:



Studying people in their everyday environment has its advantages.



Quantophrenic?  
Moi?

**Relationships:** Many qualitative methods (such as *covert participant observation*) demand that the researcher establish some sort of *rapproch* with the people being researched (which doesn’t mean they have to like them, only that they understand the situation of those being studied). This has a couple of specific *advantages*: firstly it means that everyone involved in the research is free to suggest new ideas and directions – the role of the researched isn’t limited to answering closed questions. Secondly, where the atmosphere is more-relaxed and less clinical the researcher is more likely to get respondents to open-up about their thoughts and feelings – something that may improve the validity of the research.

**Validity:** Qualitative methods do not have a monopoly on validity (and nor is it simply the case that quantitative methods “lack” or necessarily have lower validity – any poorly-designed piece of research can lack validity regardless of the methods used) but when we’re dealing with the complexities of human behaviour it is much *more likely* that research methods that try to dig into this complexity will score highly in terms of their validity – they will, in other words, measure what they claim to measure.

**Naturalism:** An important aspect of the “claim to greater validity” is that qualitative methods are better-positioned to capture a wider range of data in a way that doesn’t necessarily take respondents out of the social locations in which they live; in other words, qualitative methods allow researchers greater freedom to study people in their “everyday” or “normal” settings – and it follows from this that there is a greater chance

of either observing or revealing what people “really believe” or how they “really behave”. If this is a little unclear think about the difference between *asking* people to remember and describe something like “what they did yesterday” with the ability to follow and observe them to discover exactly what they did. **Matveev** (2002) suggests, in this respect, that qualitative methods allow the researcher to gain a “more realistic feel of the world that cannot be experienced in the numerical data and statistical analysis used in quantitative research”.

**The Bigger Picture:** Continuing the general theme of depth, detail and validity, qualitative research frequently takes what **Matveev** (2002) calls an “**holistic approach**” to research. That is, it tries to examine the “bigger picture” by allowing respondents to talk extensively about their lives (**focused** and **unstructured interviews**) or by participating in the behaviour being studied (overt and covert **participant observation**). Unlike quantitative methods where individual respondents have little or no scope to deviate from the research path determined by the researcher the reverse is potentially true – respondents lead researchers.

### And Limitations...



Qualitative methods have certain **limitations**, a sample of which we can note in the following terms:

**Generalisations:** Qualitative research generally focuses on the intensive study of relatively small groups and, in consequence, opportunities to generalise research findings are limited.

**Comparisons:** For similar reasons it’s difficult to compare qualitative research across **time** and **space**; qualitative research also tends to be less systematic in terms of the way data is collected (it’s not simply a matter of asking direct questions) and is structured in ways that make the research difficult to replicate – something that impacts on:

**Reliability:** Qualitative research methods generally produce data with lower levels of reliability than their quantitative counterparts, for a range of possible reasons; **Cassell and Symon** (1994) for example, suggest that where research evolves to take account of the input made by different respondents the original research objectives may change, making it difficult for subsequent researchers to replicate. In addition, where qualitative methods produce a potentially vast amount of data across a wide range of disparate issues the researcher, as the initial interpreter of such data, has a pivotal role to play in determining the meaning of such data – and where it’s perfectly possible for different researchers to arrive at different conclusions based on the same (or broadly similar) data reliability will necessarily suffer.

**Levy** (2006), on the other hand, suggests that *reliability* evidenced through the ability to *replicate* research – something that is perfectly practical and possible using quantitative methods – is *not* a useful test for qualitative



research methods. Rather, she notes, the concept of **trustworthiness** might be a more useful measure of the *internal reliability* of qualitative methods: “In qualitative research, as there are no numerical measures...it is up to the qualitative researcher to provide evidence of reliability by carefully documenting the data collection and analysis process, hence the term “trustworthiness” is used to assess how reliable the results are...can we trust that the results are a ‘true’ reflection of our subject?”.

**Skills:** Qualitative methods require different personal and interpersonal skills from the researcher (as compared with the skills required for quantitative methods). Interview techniques between the two types, for example, are markedly different and reflect the different emphasis placed on objectivity and subjectivity; the qualitative researcher, for example, may seek to establish a close **rapport** with their respondents while for their quantitative counterparts this is neither necessary nor desirable (since it would lower the objectivity of the research). In something like participant observation the researcher needs to be able to convincingly and consistently “play a role” within the group they are studying – and this requires a very different set of skills to those needed to deliver a questionnaire or structured interview.

### Quantitative and Qualitative: Explanations

Quantitative and qualitative research methods are, as we’ve seen, many and varied and the latter, in particular, have clear and significant differences that make lumping them together as “one type” a little dubious (covert participant observation, for example, doesn’t have a great deal in common with a focused interview aside from the fact that both deliver varying amounts of qualitative data). Be that as it may, for our current purpose we can focus on the *broad distinction* between the two data types and briefly outline the way decisions about whether or not to collect each type of data are influenced by a number of practical and theoretical factors.

#### Module Link

#### Research Methods

The significance of **practical and theoretical research considerations** is discussed in more detail in the final Section of this Chapter.

**Methodology:** Perhaps one of the most significant influences on the decision to use quantitative or qualitative research methods is the *methodological beliefs* of the researcher:

- **Positivist** research methodologies, for example, lean towards collecting *quantitative* data, for all the reasons we've previously outlined – not the least being the fundamental belief in and desire for *objectivity* (as **Firestone** (1987) puts it, the assumption here is that “there are social facts with an objective reality apart from the beliefs of individuals”); where such significance is placed on objectivity it's not too surprising that Positivist researchers should choose methods that offer higher levels of objectivity and reliability.

- **Interpretivist** research methodologies on the other hand lean towards collecting *qualitative* data for different – but related – reasons. In a situation where, as **Firestone** (1987) notes “reality is socially-constructed through individual or collective definitions of the situation” it follows that the researcher is likely to use methods that allow them to capture as much as possible of this *fluid, subjective* situation. In other words, if “social reality” is something constructed by people trying to define and make sense of their social situations – and such a sense of “reality” will differ from individual to individual and group to group (what I define in one way may be defined as something quite different by you) - it follows that the researcher needs to employ (qualitative) research methods that offer greater opportunities to capture this “subjective sense of social reality”.

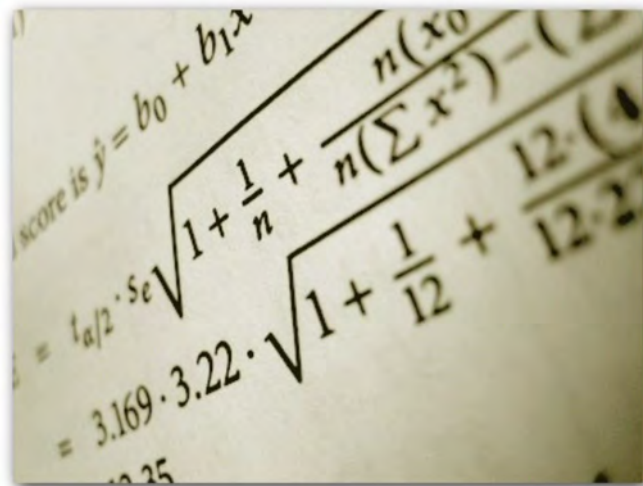
Two ideas are closely related to the above:

1. **Objectivity:** Where this is important to the researcher they are likely to opt for research methods that reflect this belief. As **Firestone** puts it: “In quantitative research, the emphasis is on collecting data that lead to dependable answers to important questions, reported in sufficient detail that it has meaning to the reader”.

2. **Subjectivity:** Where the reverse is true (the researcher fundamentally believes that what is important is to capture how people make sense of the social world and their situation in that world) then *qualitative methods* are more-likely to be used since, as **Firestone** suggests, the main objective is to “help the reader understand” how people see their world and situation. **Reason and Rowan** (1981), in advocating a subjective, qualitative, approach summarise their position in the following terms: “There is too much measurement going on. Some things which are numerically precise are not true; and some things which are not numerical are true. Orthodox research produces results which are statistically significant but humanly insignificant; in human inquiry it is much better to be deeply interesting than accurately boring.”

On a more *practical* level we can note that decisions about which research method to use are influenced by things like:

**Purpose:** The aim of the research (what the researcher hopes to achieve by doing a piece of research) is



clearly going to influence *how* they go about such research in terms of the research methods used. If, for example, the general aim is to test a particular hypothesis then it's likely quantitative methods will be used; if, on the other hand, the objective is to allow people to “tell their story” then qualitative methods are likely to fit the bill here.

**Scale:** Some quantitative methods (such as questionnaires) are better suited to large-scale surveys where the aim might, for example, simply be to establish how many people do something (such as commit crimes). On the other hand qualitative methods, such as focused interviews, might prove more useful and productive if the research objective is to create a detailed insight into a relatively small-scale form of social behaviour (such as relationships within a school classroom or why particular people commit crimes).

**Anonymity:** In situations where the respondent wishes or needs to remain anonymous quantitative methods (such as postal questionnaires) that can be completed in the absence of the researcher may be the only way to collect data.

**Access:** Finally, in the reverse of the above, there may be situations in which the researcher (for whatever reason) wants or needs to ensure that those being researched are unaware of this fact; in such situations something like covert participant observation is a research option in a way that a questionnaire is not...

#### Tried and Tested

- (a) Explain what is meant by the term “qualitative data” (2 marks).
- (b) Suggest **two** reasons for the sociological use of qualitative research methods (4 marks).
- (c) Identify and explain two reasons why sociologists might not want to use qualitative research methods (4 marks).
- (d) Examine the strengths and limitations of either quantitative or qualitative sources of data (20 marks).

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## 5. The theoretical, practical and ethical considerations influencing choice of topic, choice of method(s) and the conduct of research.

### Research Considerations: Introduction

Whatever your personal perspective on the prospect of “doing sociological research”, it involves something more than simply choosing a topic, selecting a research method and wading into your chosen hypothesis or research question. Sociological research – whether it’s a large-scale, government-funded, project lasting many years or a small-scale, personally-funded, piece of sociology coursework – is always surrounded by a range of research considerations. To complete this chapter, therefore, we can examine some of the *practical*, *theoretical* and *ethical* factors that a researcher needs to be aware of when undertaking sociological research.

### Practical: Observations

Sociological research involves confronting and resolving a range of *practical factors* (the “nuts-and-bolts” of “doing research”, as it were) relating to *choice of topic* and *research method*.

### Choice of Topic

Decisions about what to study can be influenced by a range of *personal* and *impersonal* factors. These include:

**The Interests of the Researcher:** Sociologists, like anyone else, have their interests, concerns and specialisms and these potentially affect their choice of research topic. The **Glasgow Media Group** (1982, 1985), for example, have specialised (for around 25 years) in the study of bias in the media. Similarly, **Townsend** (1979) had an abiding interest in the study of poverty.

**Current Debates and Intellectual Fashions:** Surprising as it may seem, research topics go in and out of fashion and sociologists – being fashionable people with their fingers on the pulse of what’s hot and what’s not – reflect these trends (although factors like research *funding* (see below) always exert some form of influence here).

The 1960s, for example, produced a range of research into the possible changes in the *class structure*, the most notable of which was probably **Goldthorpe and Lockwood et al’s** (1968) research based around the

concept of “affluent workers”; this tested the then-fashionable “*Embourgeoisement Thesis*” (advanced by **Zweig** (1959), among others), the basis of which was the argument that most people in Great Britain had become “middle class”. More recently *Media sociology* has come into fashion (although, by the time you read this it will probably be considered “last year’s thing”), but areas like the *sociology of food* - see, for example, **Germov and Williams** (2004) or **Beardsworth and Keil** (1996) - and *Identity* (see, for example, **du Gay et al**, 2000) have also attracted a lot of recent sociological interest.



Some sociologists, however, either just ignore the fashions (hard to believe I know) or simply just decide to “do their own thing” and blaze a trail for their own particular interests - see, if you dare, **Southerton et al’s** (1998) tremendously exciting: “Research note on Recreational Caravanning”.

**Funding:** Research (especially large-scale research over a lengthy period) costs money and those who commission and pay for it, not unreasonably, usually want some say over choice of topic. In addition, in the UK and USA, where government agencies or departments fund large amounts of social research, the historical trend has been to fund research designed primarily to help policymakers make decisions - so if your research doesn’t aid this process then it’s probably less likely to be funded by the government.





**Time** can affect choice of topic in terms of such things as the depth and scope of the research. For example, although a researcher may be interested in studying the behaviour of football supporters at major International tournaments (if anyone's willing to provide the funds, I could probably find the time), money and time considerations may restrict them to studying such behaviour on a much smaller scale.

**Access and Co-operation:** To research a topic, you need access to people and (usually) their co-operation (things closely related to *ethical considerations* – see below). This is one reason why a lot of sociological research has focused on the activities of the *powerless* (who lack the ability to resist) rather than the *powerful* (who most certainly can - and do – resist being studied).

### Choice of Method

In a similar way to choice of topic, choice of research method is affected by a number of factors. These include:

**Time:** Some methods are more *time-intensive* than others. Participant observation, for example, may involve years of research - **Whyte** (1943) spent around four years on his study of a gang in America. Between 1937 and 1940 he gathered extensive information about the behaviour of one gang in a small area of the country (Boston, in case you were thinking of going there).

**Topic:** Some topics (or aspects of them) lend themselves more easily to one type of method than another. In general, quantitative methods tend to be used when the researcher wants reliable data to establish statistical relationships (such as **Kessler's** (2000) endlessly-fascinating study of the relationship between sponsorship and small business performance, in which his main objective was to establish whether or not "those who are sponsored are more successful than non-sponsored individuals" - heady and possibly ground-breaking stuff). Alternatively, with studies such as **Diken and Laustsen's** (2004) analysis of tourist behaviour in Ibiza and Faliraki a qualitative approach



Unless they want to be studied getting access to the rich and the powerful is far harder than getting access to the poor and the powerless.

is more appropriate, given the descriptive nature of the research.

A mix of methods (*triangulation*) is frequently used to satisfy different types of research question within the same topic. For example, a researcher interested in understanding the possible "Effects of marriage break-up" or "Why people fear crime", will probably use a method that provides in-depth, qualitative data (such as a focused interview). However, before doing any interview-based research the researcher might need to do a small *establishing study* (so-called because it's used to establish some basic information - to identify, for example, people who have experienced divorce or to establish if people actually fear crime) using a simple (quantitative) questionnaire.

### Module Link

### Theory and Methods

The concept of triangulation is developed in more detail in the A2 Section "The Relationship Between Theory and Methods".

### Youth moves on as Faliraki fades

Source: **BBC News 24**: 10th May 2004: <http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/uk/3700153.stm>

Drunken exploits in Faliraki hit the headlines last summer

The sun could be setting for Faliraki as a hotbed of loutish holiday action, after travel companies targeting the youth market began making an exit.

"There was a short term car-crash mentality in Faliraki. People went out, hated it and said it was much too much - even 18-year-olds who wanted to drink lots of shots had standards".



Drunken exploits in Faliraki hit the headlines in the summer of 2003.

**Funding:** In a perfect world money would always be available for social research into any topic, using any method (such as my aforementioned offer to study behaviour at International football matches – it still stands, by the way, if anyone's interested) - but it's not a perfect world (which probably explains why the offers haven't exactly been rolling in) and the amount of money you have to spend will directly influence the methods used; questionnaires are generally cheaper than in-depth interviews, interviews are generally cheaper than participant observation (although this general rule will, of course, depend on the size and scope of the interview-based study). The amount of funding available will also influence the size of any research team.

**Who (or what) you're studying:** The size and composition of the group being studied may be a factor in choice of method(s). Social surveys and questionnaires lend themselves easily to the study of large, widely-dispersed, groups. Participant observation, on the other hand, may be more appropriate for the study of small, geographically-localised, groups.

### Practical: Explanations

Practical problems and issues, of the kind we've just identified, are clearly important in terms of the way we conduct sociological research. If we can't, for example, solve "big" practical problems relating to things like **access** to research subjects – to administer questionnaires, organise interviews and experiments or participate in the behaviour of a group – then all other considerations (both *theoretical* and *ethical*) are largely immaterial. Similarly if a researcher has neither the **time** nor **funding** to support themselves through a year-long observational study then, once again, this research avenue is closed. On a smaller scale (once the researcher is actually involved in a piece of research), practical considerations – such as the **safety** of respondents – are also important in terms of the conduct of a particular piece of research (things that start to link into the type of *ethical research considerations* identified below).

Although it's tempting to simply see such practical research considerations in terms of the "nuts-and-bolts" of doing research there are wider ramifications here to consider – ones that link, as luck would have it, into *theoretical research considerations*. Although the two – practical and theoretical – can be separated for the sake of explanatory convenience it's evident that in the context of any real-world research the two are inextricably linked.

### Methodology

We can relate practical research considerations to sociological methodology in a general way by suggesting that "doing research" involves something more than searching in the cupboard (or shed – I've no idea where it might be kept) for your "Sociological Toolbox™" (the one containing

your collection of research methods) and then selecting the "right tool for the job". If only it was that simple...

**Ackroyd and Hughes** (1992) argue it is a mistake to view research methods as a set of "theoretical tools" to be picked up and discarded depending on how appropriate they are for the task at hand because, unlike tools in a toolbox, sociological methods do not have a clear, single and straightforward, purpose. For example, if we're faced with fixing a picture to a wall with a nail, we go to our toolbox and select the most appropriate tool for the job (in this instance, a hammer, since you ask). A hammer is specifically designed for just such a purpose and it performs its task well. If we'd selected a screwdriver we would probably find this tool didn't do the job as quite as efficiently (it is, after all, designed for a different task). Unfortunately, no such certainty applies to a method such as a questionnaire.

Not only do we have to consider *practical problems* in adopting particular methods, but also our *theoretical perspective* may lead us to believe questionnaires are not a valid way of studying the social world (regardless of how efficient this method might be in terms of "doing the job" of collecting data). At least two major *methodological considerations* are involved here:

**Validity** relates to our belief about whether a research method allows us to discover something about human behaviour 'as it really is' (whatever this may actually mean).

**Theoretical considerations:** When collecting data we have to decide:

- What counts as data (does it have to be quantitative or qualitative)?
- Should the data be statistical or descriptive?
- Do we try to test a hypothesis or simply report what respondents say?

These ideas, therefore, lead us inexorably (not a word you see every day) towards a consideration of theoretical research considerations.



## Tried and Tested

- (a) Explain what is meant by the term “practical research consideration” (2 marks).
- (b) Suggest and briefly explain **two** practical factors that might influence a researcher's choice of **topic** (4 marks).
- (c) Suggest and briefly explain **two** practical factors that might influence a researcher's choice of **method** (4 marks).
- (d) Examine the practical problems sociologists may find when deciding their choice of topic and method (20 marks).

## Theoretical: Observations

Sociological research involves confronting and resolving a range of theoretical questions - which we can express as the *How?* and the *Why?* of *choice of topic* and *research method*.

## Choice of Topic

This involves a range of theoretical considerations:

**Audiences** may influence (and in some cases actually dictate) topic choice in terms of who you're trying to reach with your research. To an *academic audience*, something like **Jessop's** "Governance and meta-governance. On Reflexivity, Requisite Variety, and Requisite Irony" (2003) is a perfectly acceptable topic; to a *non-academic audience*, however, it probably wouldn't prove quite so alluring or indeed accessible (even if we allow for the requisite irony of this statement). We can also note that there are practical dimensions to the idea of having to play to an audience; as we've suggested, those who commission and pay for research will have a large say in the choice of topic and method as well as the overall conduct of the research.

**Purpose** can be influential in terms of what the researcher is aiming to do – if testing a hypothesis, for example, the topic is likely to be much narrower in scope than if the objective is to provide a descriptive account of something. This idea is included as a theoretical consideration (although it has a practical dimension) because the researcher has a clear choice to make - albeit one influenced by their methodological beliefs and perspectives - about what to study and, indeed, how they study it (an observation that links back to **Ackroyd and Hughes** (1992) argument).

**Focus:** Research often evolves, in the sense of changing to meet new interests and concerns; while it's rare for a central topic to change during the research (if you begin by researching family life, you're not likely to

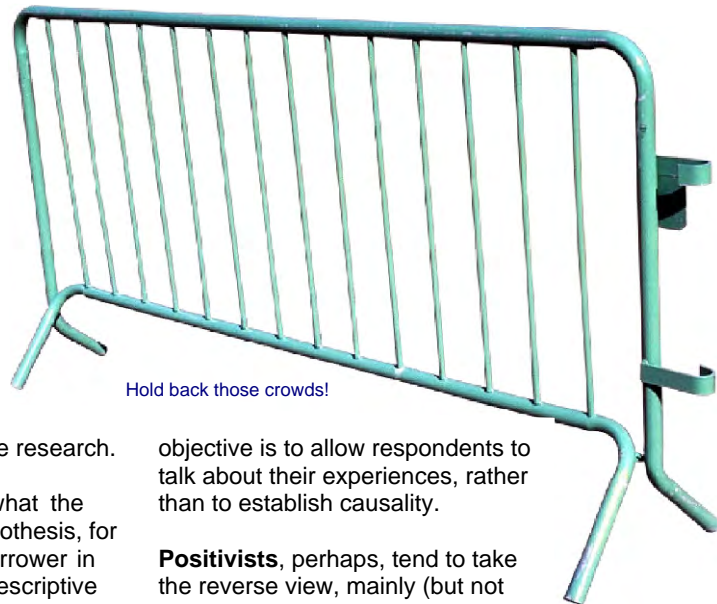
end up researching education), aspects of the topic may well change. As research develops changes may be made to quantitative questions or new areas of interest may open up in the light of respondent comments or researcher observations.

**Values:** In the social world (as in the natural world) there are an immeasurable (not really, but it sounded better than “enormous”) number of potential topics that could be studied by the sociologist - and while the choice of what to study may not be as critical in the former as in the latter (a cure for AIDS as against a more-effective missile system?) the general process is the same; what is considered “worthy of being studied” will be influenced by a range of values. These are both **personal** (if studying poverty holds no personal interest or fascination then a researcher is not likely to study it) and, most importantly for real-world research, **institutional**. Given that institutions such as universities and government departments are likely sources of research *funding* the topics *they value* are highly likely to be the ones that are actually researched.

## Choice of Method

Choice of method (or methods) to be used in a piece of sociological research is similarly surrounded by theoretical considerations:

**Theoretical Perspective:** Although this influence is by no means as strong as *some* texts might suggest (no-names, no law-suits), **Interactionist** researchers tend to *avoid* using statistical methods, mainly because their



Hold back those crowds!

objective is to allow respondents to talk about their experiences, rather than to establish causality.

**Positivists**, perhaps, tend to take the reverse view, mainly (but not necessarily) because they're not particularly interested in descriptive accounts of people's behaviour. In this respect (and assuming, for the sake of illustration that this characterisation is valid) there is something of an association between **Interpretivist methodology** and **qualitative research methods** (in-depth interviewing, participant observation, visual methods and the like), just as there is a similar association between **Positivist methodology** and **quantitative methods** (such as questionnaires and laboratory experiments).

**Reliability** and **Validity** are *always* significant theoretical (or methodological) research concerns since beliefs about the reliability and / or validity of particular methods will affect decisions about whether or not to use them – and these beliefs are related to the types of sociological methodology we've just noted.

**Values:** Researchers have values too and these are reflected in **ethical beliefs** about how something should (or should not) be studied. If, like **Polsky** (1971) you believe covert participation is unethical and methodologically invalid you're not likely to choose this research method.

### Theoretical: Explanations

If we think about the general relationship between theory and method in sociological research we can combine Positivist and Interpretivist approaches outlined in the previous section with the material covered in this section. Questions concerning the relationship between theory and methods, therefore, boil down to **four related ideas**, which we can outline and apply in the following terms:

**1. Ontology:** This idea poses the question "**What do we believe exists?**". In relation to Sociology, an *ontological question* is one that considers what we believe the subject matter of Sociology to be. Is it, for example:

- The attempt to find solutions to social problems?
- To answer questions such as "why are we here?"?
- To elaborate the fundamental laws of social development?
- To understand the nature of social interaction?
- Something quite different to any of the above?

The significance of *ontological questions* is that our answers will condition how we view the purpose and subject matter of Sociology, how we *conduct research* and, of course, how we see it as appropriate to study social behaviour (especially in terms of our choice of topic and method). In the example we've used here, most sociologists' ontological belief is that social behaviour is learned, not based on instinct.

**2. Epistemology:** The next question to ask is "**How we know what we claim to know?**" about the social world. This, in short, relates to the kinds of **proof** we will accept to justify our answer to *ontological questions*. For example, we may believe that:

- "Seeing is believing" or
- "Experiencing something is enough to prove it exists",

Alternatively, we may accept something on **trust**, or because we have **faith** (a characteristic, incidentally, of *religious proof*).

*Epistemological questions*, therefore, relate to the evidence we will accept to justify our belief something is *true*. For example, if I suspect you of stealing my pen,

what sort of proof will I accept in order to convince me you didn't take it?

- Your word?
- The word of someone you were with at the time of the alleged theft (an alibi)?
- A thorough search of your belongings?

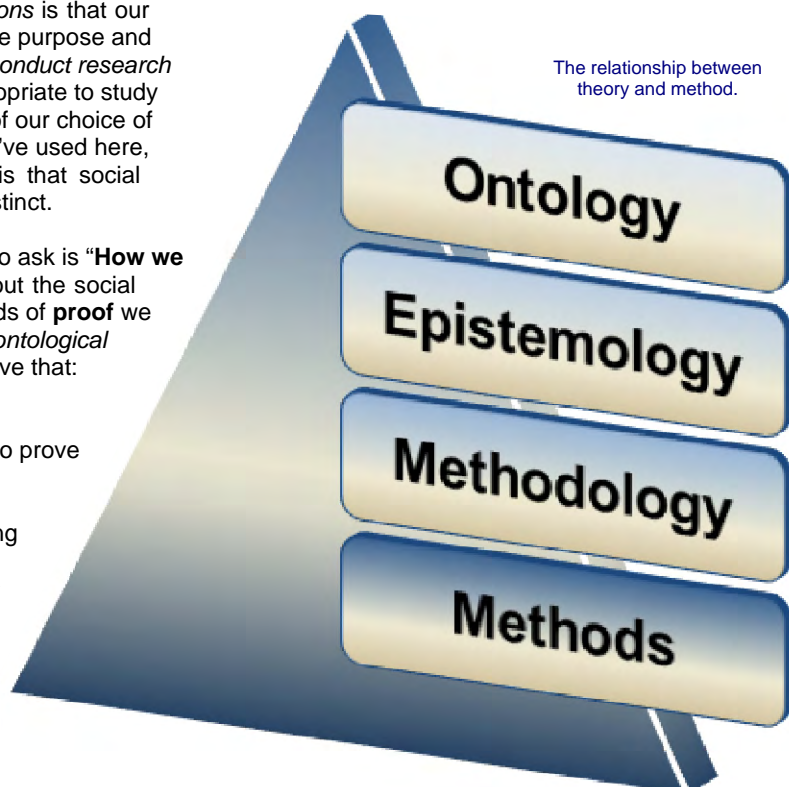
This idea is important, sociologically, because our beliefs about evidence influence our choice of research method - if you don't, for example, believe questionnaires produce valid data, you're not likely to use them in your research.

**3. Methodology:** This idea is concerned with beliefs about how to produce **reliable** and **valid** knowledge. We have come across this type of question before, in relation to two ideas:

- **The interview effect:** If you believe interviews are a manipulative process whereby the respondent presents a picture to you that accords with the picture they would like you to have, you are unlikely to see interview data as valid.
- **The observer effect:** If you believe a researcher's presence affects the behaviour of those being observed, you would not see overt participant observation as a valid way of collecting data.

**4. Methods:** This refers to specific techniques of data collection and our ideas about their appropriateness (or otherwise) to our research (ideas which will be conditioned by our *ontological, epistemological* and (deep breath) *methodological* beliefs).

The following table summarises the general relationship between sociological methodology (in this case **Positivism** and **Interpretivism**) and the four types of question we've just outlined.



Dimension	Positivism	Interpretivism
<b>Ontological</b> Society exists...	Objectively	Subjectively
<b>Epistemological</b> We know it exists because...	Behaviour is patterned, relatively stable and orderly. Therefore, something about "society" must cause this to occur.	People behave in their day to day lives "as if" society exists (that is, because it is a convenient fiction).
<b>Methodological</b> We can validate what we know using...	Objective and highly reliable methods to collect data.	Subjective and highly valid methods to collect data.
<b>Method</b> The objective is	The collection and analysis of quantitative data and the testing of hypotheses to create objective (factual) knowledge.	The collection and analysis of quantitative data and descriptions of reality from those who construct it to create subjective understanding.

### Tried and Tested

- (a) Explain what is meant by the term "theoretical research consideration" (2 marks).
- (b) Suggest **two** theoretical factors that might influence a researcher's choice of topic (4 marks).
- (c) Suggest **two** theoretical factors that might influence a researcher's choice of method (4 marks)
- (d) Examine the theoretical problems sociologists may find when deciding their choice of topic and method (20 marks).

### Ethical: Observations

**Ethics** refers to the *morality* of doing something and *ethical questions* relating to sociological research involve beliefs about what a researcher should or should not do *before, during* and *after* their research. As a matter of course, this will also include consideration of both *legal* and *safety* issues (for the researcher, those being researched, any subsequent researchers and so forth). In this respect we can identify some general examples of ethical research considerations in terms of:

**Rights and well-being:** The researcher needs to safeguard the interests, rights and general well-being (both physical and psychological) of respondents. Examples here might be respecting respondent privacy or minimising anxiety / distress that may be caused by the research.

**Research consequences:** Research data can be used in many different ways (and not necessarily in terms of the way the researcher intended - through media reports of the research, for example) and participants should be aware of any possible consequences of their participation. In addition, if respondents feel they have been *mistreated* (physically or verbally, for example) or *misled*, this may have

legal consequences for the researcher and create problems for any subsequent research.

**Legal considerations:** In the UK the collection, storage and retrieval of data are governed by things such as the Data Protection Act, the Human Rights Act, Copyright laws and the laws of libel. In addition, if research involves criminal or deviant activities, the researcher may have to consider the ethical question of participation in such behaviour or their responsibilities to both the perpetrators and their possible victims.

**Involvement:** Some types of research involve methods that create high levels of involvement with those being researched. Where close personal and / or intimate relationships between the researcher and respondent(s) exist, care needs to be taken to ensure that, once the research is completed and contact diminishes, distress is not caused to potentially vulnerable people. For example, if your research involves visiting the elderly on a regular basis, it would be unethical to simply stop your visits once the research is completed.

Deborah wasn't totally convinced that Simon's level of personal involvement in his research was entirely ethical...



**Power:** It would be unethical to bully or blackmail (emotionally or physically) people into participating in your research. In addition - especially when researching people who are relatively *powerless* - relationships need to be based on *trust* and *personal integrity* on the part of the researcher. For example, if the researcher promises anonymity as a way of researching people involved in criminal or deviant activities, disclosing respondent identities to the authorities would be unethical.

**Consent:** Related to some of the previous categories, where possible, the researcher should always gain the consent of those being researched.

**Safety:** Care always needs to be taken to ensure the physical and psychological safety of both the researcher and the respondent.

### Ethical: Explanations

When we think about the conduct of sociological research its evident that, as we've outlined above, it is surrounded by a range issues that can broadly be characterised by what the **British Sociological Association** (2004) term the:

**Professional Integrity** of sociologists: That is, the idea that the behaviour of research sociologists is bound by a code of ethical practice that is part-and-parcel of the *professional research role*. Although, in this respect, we have, at various points in the chapter, touched on or hinted at practical, theoretical and, most importantly for our current purpose, ethical considerations in the conduct of sociological research we can complete this chapter by looking at this (sometimes neglected) area of the research process in a more structured way. To help us do this we can use a structure proposed by **Pimple** (2002) when he suggests that "...concerns about the ethics of any particular research product or project can be divided into three categories":

#### 1. Is it true?

This "ethical question" relates to both the research process (how it is generally conducted) and, most importantly, the relationship between research findings and their implications. At its most extreme, perhaps, *unethical behaviour* in this category relates to things like the researcher deliberately *fabricating* ("making up") data or deliberately falsifying their results.

#### 2. Is it fair?

Unethical behaviour in this category relates to the different social relationships created during the course of a research study, something we can illustrate in terms of the relationship between the researcher and:

**Other researchers:** This, for example, would cover things like the *ownership* of a completed piece of research (who, for example, can ethically claim to be the author of the research?). In situations, such as is currently the case in British universities, where academic employment and titles can rest on

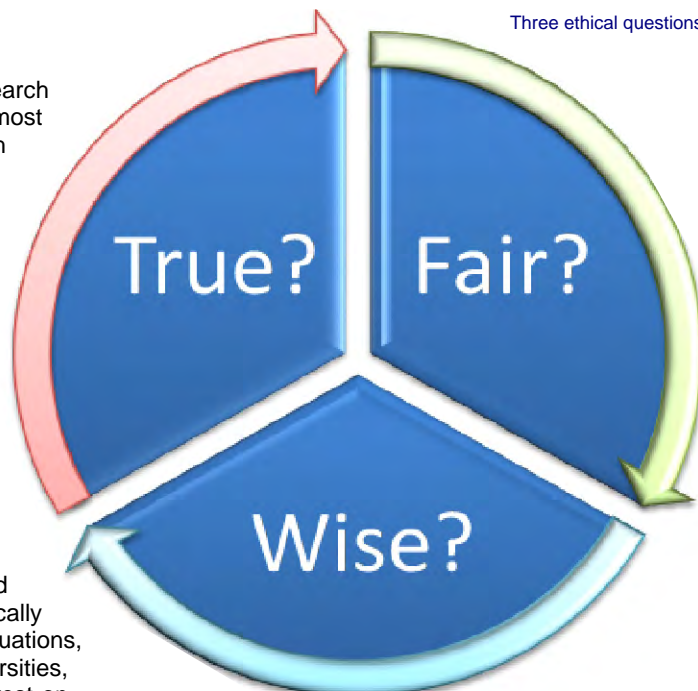
both the *production* of research and its *status* amongst other researchers (how often it is quoted as an authoritative source in subsequent research for example) authorship can be significant in terms of career advancement. In addition, a further aspect of fairness in the conduct of research includes things like *plagiarism* – passing-off the work of others as your own.



I'd like to sing you a little song I wrote called "Stairway To Heaven".

**Respondents:** The relationship between the researcher and the people they research involves a range of ethical considerations in line with those examples we've just noted (the **rights** and **well-being** of respondents, the possible **consequences** of research considered specifically in terms of the subsequent impact it may have on the lives of those being researched, whether the **consent** of those being studied is required, issues of health and **safety** for all involved and so forth). Although, on the face of things, these considerations may appear "ethically straightforward" (putting the safety of respondents in danger for the purpose of research would probably not be considered ethical by the vast majority of sociological researchers), there are certain "moral grey areas" in relation to these ideas that generally come to light during research that is *covert* in nature (covert participation, for example, or certain types of experiment). We can illustrate this "ethical dilemma" in a range of ways:

Three ethical questions...



## AS Sociology For AQA

- **Wallis** (1977) wanted to study The Church of Scientology but the Church leaders refused to co-operate with his request to be given access to existing members – so he contacted ex-members instead and based his research around their opinions and experiences. The ethical question here is the extent to which a researcher is justified in studying groups who clearly do not, for whatever reason, want to be studied? In this particular instance no explicit (physical) harm was suffered by the respondents who refused to co-operate – but could the decision to carry-out the research against the Church’s wishes be justified by the argument that such research is “in the public interest”?

- **Rosenhan’s** (1973) research raised slightly different ethical questions about the relationship between researcher and respondents in that his (covert) research didn’t involve direct contact between the two. **Rosenhan** wanted to test if doctors could accurately diagnose schizophrenia and sent students displaying fake symptoms into hospitals to test his hypothesis that they could not – and the experiment discovered that doctors were unable to expose the “pseudo (pretend) patients”. The main ethical question here relates to the extent to which a researcher is justified in either deceiving the objects of their study (in this case doctors) or misrepresenting the nature of their research. The ethical question to resolve in this instance might be the extent to which such research is justified if it exposes professional practices that might be detrimental to the public.

- **Millgram’s** (1974) classic study relating to the effects of authority on people’s behaviour – in this instance whether or not respondents were willing to inflict (or so they thought) extreme levels of pain on innocent strangers on the say-so of an authority figure – raises a rather different set of ethical questions. The respondents were convinced they were administering electric shocks to “learners” whenever the latter made an incorrect answer (in fact no shocks were



A shocking example of unethical research?

## Sociological Methods

administered and the “victims” were under instructions to pretend they were being hurt). The ethical dilemmas here operate on a number of levels – from the question of whether a researcher has the moral right to trick people into co-operating with their research to that of whether research should continue in the face of acute physical and mental distress being experienced by the respondent (some of **Millgram’s** respondents argued and protested about the instructions they were being given and some broke down in tears at the pain they believed they were being instructed to inflict).

### 3. Is it wise?

The third question **Pimble** raises relates to ethical questions over the relationship between “the research agenda and the broader social and physical world, present and future”. In other words it asks general questions about the morality of certain types of research along two specific lines. Firstly, can the research itself be morally justified and, secondly, would some other type of research have greater moral justification? As **Pimble** puts it: “Will the research improve the human condition, or damage it? Will it lead to a better world, or a worse one? Or less grandly, which of the many possible lines of research would we be better off pursuing? We have finite time and money for pursuing research, and the wisdom of research programs is a valid question in research ethics. These are the kinds of questions many people have in mind when they debate the ethics of human cloning”.

#### Module Link

#### Theory and Methods

Broader questions relating to ethical issues in scientific research (both the natural and social sciences) have been addressed by **Merton** (1942) and his advocacy of what he termed a “scientific ethos” – a set of normative (ethical) guidelines that relate to the practice of scientific research. The scientific ethos is discussed in more detail in the section “**The Nature of ‘Science’ and the Extent to which Sociology may be Regarded as Scientific**”.

#### Tried and Tested

(a) Identify **one** legal consideration a sociologist must take into account in the course of their research (2 marks)

(b) Suggest **two** ethical factors, other than legal considerations, that might impact on sociological research (4 marks).

(c) For any one ethical issue, explain how a researcher might minimise its potential impact on their research (4 marks).

(d) “The most important ethical consideration is the safety of researcher and respondent”. How far do you agree or disagree with this statement? (20 marks).

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