

GCSE Sociology

Unit B671 (Sociology Basics) Revision

Part A- Investigating Society

How do sociologists decide what to research?

There are several steps:

1. The first step is to choose a topic to research. The choice will be influenced by:

- ✚ The interests and values of the researcher- obviously, any researcher will want to study topics that they find interesting but the question of “**values**” raises some questions. If a researcher thinks a topic is important enough to research, they may have strong feelings about it and there may be a risk that these feelings will affect how they see the situation and do their research.
- ✚ Current debates in the academic world- sociologists, like anyone else, will be drawn to study topics that are creating interest and controversy.

The choice will also be influenced by practical issues.

- ✚ **The time and resources needed-** first-time researchers often underestimate how long it takes to collect data, analyse it, and write the report. A lone researcher, will only be able to do a small-scale study (maybe a **case study**). Large-scale studies need a team of professional researchers and can take years to complete- these kind of studies are known as **longitudinal**.

What is a case study?

A case study is a detailed and in-depth study of one particular group or situation to find out as much information as possible. Student research is often case study based. An example of a case study is a student who is studying peer pressure but only investigates their own school. Case studies are also used a lot by professional sociologists and a famous example of this is James Patrick's case study of gangs, a *Glasgow Gang Observed* (1973). In terms of understanding why certain things happen, or how people think, this is a great method to use as you have the depth of information needed to do this. It does have some disadvantages, though, the main one being that because a case study only looks at one situation or group you cannot really generalise from it.

- ✚ **Access to the subject matter-** some areas of social life are more available to researchers than others. For example, the private life of a family is much harder to study than the public life of the school classroom. Rich and powerful people can deny access to a researcher more easily than poor and powerless people can.
- ✚ **Whether funding is available--** large-scale research projects expensive salaries, equipment, living expenses, travel, computer resources, secretarial help and thousands of other items have to be paid for. Individuals and organisations can bid for but there is stiff competition for this money. Many researchers have very limited resources.

What is a longitudinal study?

These are studies that go on for a long time. A good example of such a study that you may have heard about or seen on television is the *Child of our Time* study. This 20-year project is following 25 children from across the UK who were born in 2000 and looking at how their social circumstances affect their lives. Longitudinal studies are good in that they allow researchers to build up a picture of social life that recognises change and does not go out of date. However, they are quite difficult to manage as people's circumstances are constantly changing. Therefore, researchers have to cope with people dropping out of the study, moving away and even dying.

2. Reading around the subject –

The next step in any research project is to read what others have already published on the subject. This saves repeating the same work, and may provide some initial data. It will also give the researcher some ideas about how to approach their own project.

3. Formulating a hypothesis or research question –

It is all very well to be interested in a topic but the research must be focused. If the researcher already has a hunch about something, or wants to test an idea, they should formulate a hypothesis. This is simply a statement that can be tested. It is a prediction of what the research will find. For example: “students who study sociology watch the TV news more often than students who do not study sociology” is an hypothesis. It can be tested by collecting evidence about the TV news watching habits of the two categories of student. This will confirm or reject the hypothesis, or suggest what further research is needed.

Researchers doing descriptive research do not usually start with an hypothesis. They will have a general question that has prompted the research

but they don't make any predictions. However, they may develop an hypothesis as they learn more about what they studying.

4. Prepare the research design --

First, there is the choice of whether to base the research on primary data (i.e. data collected by the researcher), or secondary data (i.e. data that is already available). In either case, the data will have to be analysed and interpreted by the researcher.

Primary data

The most common methods of collecting primary data are:

- **By survey**, usually involving questionnaires (perhaps sent by post) and/or **interviews**; this generates mainly **quantitative** data.
- **By observation**, which may be participant (where the researcher joins in the life of the group being studied) or non-participant (where the researcher remains detached from the group); this generates mainly **qualitative** data

Secondary data

Many kinds of data are already available to sociologists:

- **Official statistics** collected by government agencies (quantitative)
- **Reports** in newspapers, TV and radio (mostly qualitative)
- **Historical documents** (quantitative and qualitative)
- **Personal letters and diaries** (qualitative)

For your exam you must-

- have a good understanding of the advantages and disadvantages of each of the methods and be able to say which method is the most appropriate one to use in a particular circumstance- this is dealt with below
- be clear on the difference between quantitative and qualitative data. (**Qualitative** data deals with people's attitudes and opinions whereas **quantitative** data often comes in the form of statistics and can be used in a more scientific way)

When conducting their research many sociologists may choose to use more than one type of research methods. This is sometimes called, "**triangulation**" or "**multiple methods**" and illustrates how sociologists may try to find different sorts of evidence to make their research stronger.

Once the sociologists has decided what they are going to study and how they are going to do it they are ready to begin their research.

Part B- Collecting and Using Information and Evidence

Before beginning their research the researcher must identify the **population**, i.e. the group under study. The population may, for example, be students, the unemployed, pensioners or househusbands, depending on the aims of the study.

In practice, it may be too expensive or time-consuming for the sociologist to question all the members of the population. If this is the case, a **sample** or subgroup of the population will be selected for questioning. In selecting the sample, a **sampling frame**, which is a complete list of all members of the population, is required. Examples of sampling frames are the electoral roll, a college register or a doctor's list.

Many researchers are interested in making **generalisations** about the group under study. Generalisations are general statements and conclusions that apply not only to the sample but to the population as a whole. If the researcher is to generalise, then it is essential that the sample is representative or typical of the population

How do sociologists collect a sample?

There are a number of sampling techniques used by sociologists in order to obtain a sample. The sampling techniques fall into two categories –

1. Random sampling:

- ✚ **simple**; this is the most straightforward way of selecting a random sample. It is the same as drawing names out of a hat! This, however, is only practical for small populations. For larger populations researchers use computers to select their random sample. The potential problem with simple random sampling, however, is that, by chance, the random sample may not be representative of the population
- ✚ **stratified**; imagine that a sociologist is interested in researching the attitudes of members of a group involved in environmental issues. She does not have sufficient time or money to interview the whole population, so she will have to interview a sample of members. She has a list of members, and has advanced knowledge of their age and gender, and wants the sample to reflect the age and gender characteristics of the population. In order to achieve this she will divide the population into sub-populations, in this case according to age and gender. A sample is then drawn randomly from each sub-population in proportion to numbers in the population as a whole. It's a bit like sorting the names into a number of hats and then drawing them out randomly.
- ✚ **cluster**; if the survey population is spread out across the country, it would prove relatively expensive and time-consuming to interview a randomly selected sample. Instead of going all over the country to

get information from the sample, the researcher could use cluster sampling. This involves selecting certain areas at random, for example London and Manchester, and then selected a sample of people from these areas. The sample will therefore be located in clusters around a geographical area so it is easier to collect the data.

2. Non-random sampling:

✚ **systematic sampling**; systematic sampling involves taking every n th name from the sampling frame, e.g. systematically taking every 10th name from the electoral register. Imagine that the population consists of 1000 people and a sample size of 100 is required. Using systematic sampling, the researcher would select a number at random between 1 and 10. If this turned out to be 5, then the 5th, 15th, 25th, name -- and so on up to the 995th name -- will be selected from the sampling frame. This would give the required sample size.

✚ **snowball sampling**; a sociologist may be interested in studying a population for which is no sampling frame, for example people who fraudulently claim DSS benefits while working in paid employment. Without a sampling frame the researcher would not be able to select a random or systematic sample. Using the snowball sampling technique, the researcher would begin by making contact with one member of the population, gradually gaining his or her confidence until that person is willing to divulge the names of others who might co-operate. In such a way, the researcher would obtain a sample, although it is unlikely to be a representative one.

✚ **quota sampling**; this is a technique favoured by market research companies which employ and train paid workers to interview people on the street. Each interviewer is told to interview an exact number (or quota) off people from categories all groups such as females, pensioners or teenagers, in proportion to their numbers in the population as a whole. This method is not random and it depends on the interviewer's ability to spot the right type of person to fill their quota. One problem with quota sampling is that the interviewer may, in practice, make a mistake. Another problem is that the interviewer may, at the end of a long hard day, fiddle the quota. Quota sampling will only work well when the researcher knows a lot about the population under study.

Once a researcher has collected a sample of people who are willing to take part in their research, they usually conduct a "pilot study".

What is a pilot study?

A pilot study is a small-scale trial run before the main research; it is a feasibility study. The pilot study allows the researcher to check whether the chosen method of gathering data is appropriate. The researcher will be particularly keen to check the wording of questions that might be asked in order to ensure that they are clear and straightforward.

A pilot study helps to overcome potential problems that may otherwise occur in the main study. The pilot study may save time, money and effort in the long run. A good example of where a pilot study has worked in the past is the work of **Schofield**. In 1965 Schofield and his team conducted research with the Central Council for Health Education on the sexual attitudes and behaviour of young people aged 15 to 19. After a series of pilot interviews, the research team met with a group of young people who were encouraged to criticise the questions they had been asked. This helped the research team to frame their questions in a way which would be meaningful to the young people.

What methods might a sociologists use to conduct their research

The answer to this question all depends on what type of data in the sociologist would like to collect. Some sociologists may want to collect statistics which they can then use to draw conclusions about people's lives- for example they may want to know how many people live in poverty in the UK. They therefore want to collect quantitative data. They would therefore choose a method which is "**fit for purpose**" for achieving this (for example, a questionnaire asking people about how much they are what they own might be appropriate in this case). Once they have collected this data it might be useful for a number of purposes, for example to identify which groups of people are more likely to live in poverty (the old?). The government might then use this information to improve the situation of these groups.

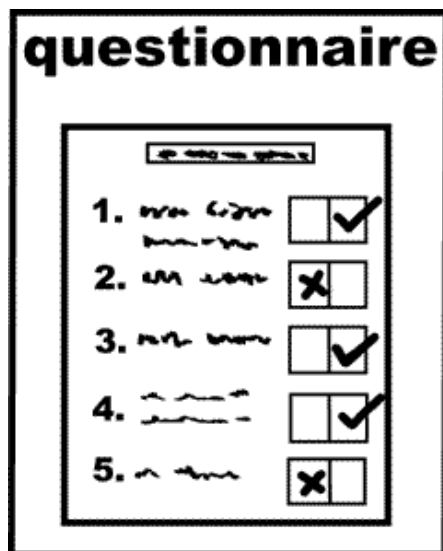
However, other sociologist might want to find people's attitudes and beliefs. They are therefore collecting qualitative data. For example, a sociologist may be interested in the attitudes of the population to drugs. The information collected may then be used by the government when deciding whether or not to change the laws on drug use.

Another sociologist may need to collect both quantitative and qualitative data. They will therefore need to use more than one method which allows them to do this. For example, a sociologist might want to find out why some children perform better at school than other children. This might be because of a number of factors. It may be because the child comes from a deprived or poor background, the sociologist will therefore need to use methods which identified children in this group (a questionnaire, as we mentioned above, might be the method which is fit for purpose in this situation). However, not all children from poor backgrounds go onto under-achieve at school. The sociologist might think that this is something to do with the attitude of the child's parents, they might therefore choose to visit the parents of children from deprived backgrounds in order to find out what the parents think of

education. In a study such as this the sociologist would therefore need to use “**mixed methods.**”

Being able to choose the correct or fit for purpose method in any given situation is therefore extremely important. On your exam you must be able to say which method is likely to work best in a situation which you will be provided with. However, all methods have disadvantages as well as advantages and so you will also need to be able to say what the potential drawbacks of using this method might be. Make sure that you are able to give at least two advantages and two disadvantages to each of the methods below-

Questionnaires



Definition

A questionnaire is a list of written questions which are completed by a number of respondents. They are normally handed out or posted for self completion but occasionally they are read out to respondents instead. When this occurs they are known as interview questionnaires. There are two main types of questions that can be used in a questionnaire and most questionnaires will include examples of both.

Firstly, there are closed questions which are often fixed choice and tick box. The respondent might be presented with a list of possible questions and they have to tick the one which they most agree with. For example, " what do you think about the amount of violence on television?-far too much; a little too much; about right; not enough." alternatively, a closed question may be "two-way", meaning that there are just two answers to choose from. A common option for two-way questions is "yes/no". An example of a closed question that could be asked like this is "Will you vote in the general election?- yes/no".

If you want to gather more in-depth answers from your respondents, then open questions will work better. These give no preset answer options and instead allow the respondents to put down exactly what they like in their own words. An example of an open question would be, "Why do you think young people join gangs?"

Questionnaires are typically used to find out information from a large number of respondents. They can investigate peoples opinions, attitudes and behaviour and so can be used to analyse trends in society. They are used by a wide range of different researchers- from the government, to market research teams, to students- and are a very popular means of research.

What are the advantages of questionnaires?

Questionnaires provide a relatively cheap, quick and efficient way of obtaining large amounts of information from large numbers of people. This is particularly so with the postal questionnaire, which has no geographical restrictions and can be mailed anywhere. Schofield (1965) conducted research into the sexual attitudes and behaviour of young people aged 15 to 19. He states that a 1% sample of this age group would consist of 35,000 young people. It would have been far too expensive to interview such a large sample in person, but a postal questionnaire was more feasible.

Another advantage of questionnaires is that they provide quantitative data; that is, data which is in statistical form, e.g. 50% of respondents support the present government; 50% of respondents belong to a trade union. This is particularly true for close questions. With statistical data, it is possible to measure the strength of a connection between different factors, for example between support for the present government, occupation, and trade union membership. Comparisons between respondents can be made and any differences can be highlighted- it might be found, for example, that members of trade unions are more likely to vote Labour than non-unionised people.

As the questions it asks are standardised, a questionnaire can be replicated easily to check for reliability. This means that a second sociologist can repeat the questionnaire to check that the results are consistent. If the results are consistent that they can be seen as reliable or accurate. With postal questionnaires the research is not present with the respondent, so people may be more likely to answer personal or embarrassing questions, for example about their sexual activity.

Evaluation of questionnaires-

When using questionnaires the best advice is to keep things simple. As a researcher is not typically present when the research takes place, you've got to be sure that everyone taking part can understand the questions being asked of them. So questions need to be as clear and as straightforward as possible.

- Do not be too personal in the questions you ask.

- Try to keep your own ideas and opinions out of the questions. You do not want to influence the way that your respondents answer.
- Keep the questionnaires as short as possible, but make sure that you ask enough questions to find out what you need to know.
- Include a brief introduction to explain the purpose of the questionnaire and always end by thanking your respondents.
- Think carefully about who you give your questionnaires to, as you will be drawing all of your conclusions from these respondents.

What are the disadvantages of questionnaires?

Postal questionnaires have particular problems of their own. The response rate is usually low; those who choose to reply may not be representative or typical of the population under study. If this is the case, it will be impossible to generalise accurately or draw general conclusions from the sample of respondents to the population as a whole.

Postal questionnaires generally consist of at least some close questions. With close questions, it is difficult for respondents to develop and elaborate their answers in much depth. This means that the results may not be valid, in that they do not give a true picture of the respondents point of view.

If the interviewer is not present, questions may be misunderstood or misinterpreted by the respondent. Schofield (1965) quotes research jury which written questionnaires were given to girls. One of the questions asked, "Are you a virgin?" One girl wrote, "Not yet."

We can never really be sure that the right person actually completed the postal questionnaires. The completed questionnaire may be the result of a group effort or it may be treated as a joke. Postal questionnaires are also inappropriate in certain populations, for example in a study focusing on homeless or illiterate people.

Sometimes questionnaires can be used in structured interviews. These are interviews that are delivered face-to-face. As such, they have problems which arise from the interaction between the interviewer and interviewee.

Interviews

Definition

There are two main types of interview: **structured** and **unstructured**, with **semi-structured** falling somewhere in-between.

Structured interviews are basically a list of questions that the researcher reads out the respondent in a particular order. They typically contain closed questions and so produce largely quantitative data.



What are the advantages of structured interviews?

The main advantage is that the response rate for interviews is far higher than for questionnaires, as this is a personal experience and we all know that it is much harder to say "no" to someone than it is to throw a piece of paper in the bin. Also, you can get a lot more depth and details from respondents, allowing you to find out what they really think. All the answers will be in their own words, so there will be no problems with them being obliged to simply select an option that is closest to what they think. If the respondent does not understand the question properly then the interviewer is able to rephrase and explain it to make sure that the respondent is able to answer. This means that the answers gained are much more valid as the respondent will know what the interviewer means by asking a certain question. Finally, many people believe that respondents are more likely to open up and tell the truth if they have developed a bond with the researcher- again this means that the results are likely to be far more valid and give a true picture of any situation.

What are social surveys?

A survey is where information is gathered from a group of people in the research population by asking them questions. Probably the best example of this is an opinion poll. Results of these can be found everywhere, and you will probably have seen them recently during the general election.

While surveys help us to see what people think of a subject or issue, it is important that they are given to a cross-section of the population if the results are to be accurate. So factors such as age, gender, ethnicity, social class and religion all need to be accounted for. The problem, however, is that surveys only tell us what somebody thinks at one moment in time. Opinions change from day to day and surveys cannot really show this.

What are the disadvantages of structured interviews?

Interview bias: in an interview, interviewees may give answers which they think are socially acceptable or which show them in a positive light. In this way, they might not reveal their true thoughts or behaviour so the results may be invalid.

In an interview, the age, gender, ethnicity or appearance of the interviewer may influence the respondent. The respondent may also lie or try to shock the researcher.

Postal questionnaires and structured interviews are both based on a pre-set list of standardised questions. The wording, order and focus of the questions are predetermined by the researcher. This assumes that the researcher knows, in advance, what all of the relevant questions are. Critics argue that these techniques impose the researchers prior assumptions about the situation being researched. In this sense, questionnaires and structured interviews close off rather than open up new and interesting issues and areas. They can be seen as invalid because they do not provide a true picture of what is being studied

Unstructured interviews, however, are very different. Instead of having a set of pre-planned questions, the interviewer will just have some ideas and topic areas to cover. This should make the interview less formal and more like a conversation. It is also likely to take place in a relaxed environment where the researcher tries to put the respondent at ease. This means that the results collected should be **valid**- in other words they give a true picture of what the respondent really thinks about what they are being asked.

What are the advantages of unstructured interviews?

Informal interviews have a higher response rate than postal questionnaires. Interviewees have the opportunity to talk at length use the right words and ideas. They can develop their answers, giving a more in-depth account. Informal interviews may also allow the interviewer to compare what he or she observes with what the interviewees says, and thus check the validity of replies.

In an informal interview questions can also be rephrased and any misunderstandings clarified. The method allows more complex issues to be examined.

What are the disadvantages of unstructured interviews?

Successful informal interviewing needs a skilled and trained interviewer in order, for example, to keep the conversation going and to encourage people to open up. Unstructured interviews may also be affected by interview bias. The interviewee may give a socially desirable response to please the interviewer or may not be totally frank with the interviewer. There is also potential for interviewer bias, where the interviewer may lead or influence the interviewee. If this happens, the results will be invalid.

Informal interviews are relatively time-consuming and expensive and therefore fewer can be undertaken, making for smaller samples. We've no standardised schedule of questions to follow, it is difficult to replicate the interview in order to check for reliability

Evaluation of interviews –

The key to being a successful interviewer is being prepared and organised. You should make sure you have made appointments with all of your respondents before the interview date. Never just turn up, presuming it will be okay to do the research. You will also need to do the following-

- Book a quiet interview room and organise how you are going to collect your findings. If this involves any recording, make sure you have got permission to do so.
- Think carefully about how you dress and how you speak and present yourself doing interviews.
- Explain at the start what you are doing and why. Consider including some “warm-up” questions so your respondents can settle down and feel more comfortable with you before the proper interview begins.
- Try to maintain as much by contact as possible and look interested in what is being said.
- Following up on anything interesting that your respondents tell you, as long as it is relevant to your research, of course!

As you can probably imagine, interviews have been used extensively by researchers to investigate attitudes and behaviour and to try to understand what motivates people to act and think as they do. Sue Sharpe (1994), for instance, used in-depth interviews to draw conclusions about what it meant to be a girl in contemporary society. Frosh looked at how masculine identities were constructive for boys aged 11-14 use both individual and group interviews. You will also see and read interviews regularly in the media, for example, with politicians, actors, the police or the latest Big Brother evictee.

Observation

Definition

Observation is a research methods typically used by those sociologists who believe that the best way to understand people and their actions is to see them in their daily lives do what they normally do. There are several different ways of observing and you will need to make sure that you can discuss all of these.



- **Non-participant observation-** the researcher is completely separate from what is being observed and plays no part in what is going on. Sitting at the back of the classroom and noting down what you see is a good example. In other words, it is like a “fly-on-the-wall” observation-you can see what is going on but you do not get involved in it.
- **Participant observation-** this time the researcher acts like a member of the group under study and basically does whatever they do.
- **Covert-** this is the name for a secret observation. The group being studied is not aware that the research is taking place.
- **Overt-** the group being observed knows that the research is happening, either because the researcher has explained what they are doing or because of their visible presence.

Evaluation of observation-

Observation can be used for any kind of study, particularly those where you want to collect qualitative data. It is thought by many researchers to be particularly useful for investigating people in deviant or criminal groups, where other methods such as questionnaires would not work. So you tend to find sociologists use observation for more taboo topics. For example, James Patrick (1973) used it to study gang behaviour, Laud Humphries (1970) used it to study male homosexuality and Eileen Barker (1984) used it to investigate what made people join the religious cult the “Moonies”.

In order to do observations well, good preparation is essential-

- If the research is overt, then you will need to schedule all of your observations carefully and gain permission to complete them.
- If it is covert, then you will need to gain entry into the group under study and think about how best to record your findings.
- For observations where you want to acquire quantitative data, you will need a pre-prepared observation grid.

What are the advantages of observations?

Probably the biggest advantage of observation is that you get to see what is going on with your own eyes. You do not have to rely on anyone else's memory or opinion, so the data you gather should be more accurate.

The big advantage of observing as a non-participant is that you will always be a step apart from your research subjects. This means that you are less likely to be influenced because of particular feelings you may have about members of the group, and that you remain objective

Researchers would argue that there are many benefits to using participant observation. The main benefit is that because you are acting as part of the group under study, you are going to really understand things as they do and see things from their point of view.

The main advantage of covert observation is that you can be confident that what you are seeing is real and natural behaviour. If the group does not know it is being observed then you can reasonably presume that it is not changing its behaviour.

Overt observation also has its good points. It's a big advantage over covert research is that there is no deception involved-everything is out in the open, so no one feels compromised.

What are ethics?

Ethics is the study of what is morally right or wrong. When sociologists take part in research they must bear in mind that their studies may have a detrimental effect on the people that fails studying. This particularly becomes an issue when the method of covert observation has been used.

The main ethical principles of social research are that:

- no one should suffer any harm as a result of the research
- participants' right to privacy and confidentiality should be protected
- researchers should be honest and open about what they are doing

Obviously, sociological search should not risk physical harm to anyone. This is seldom a problem. However, there may be a risk of harming someone:

- emotionally- for example, by asking insensitive questions

- socially- for example, by damaging their reputation, or exposing them to ridicule or punishment.

Ethical research is designed to avoid these risks.

All research participants have a right to their privacy. They have a right to know what the research is about and to refuse to take part in it or to answer particular questions. If they do take part, they must be sure that whatever they say cannot be traced back to them as individuals.

Confidentiality means that the information an individual gives to the researcher cannot be traced back to that individual. Ethical researchers are careful to disguise the identity of individual participants when they write up their research. This is easy in the context of a survey, where individuals may be anonymous in the first place and where individual responses are merged into totals. It is more difficult when a small group of people have been studied through participant observation and where particular characters are described or quoted. Simply changing the name of a location or an individual may not be enough to preserve their anonymity.

Ethical researchers seek the informed consent of participants, ensuring they know:

- that the research is going on
- who's doing it
- why it is being done
- how the results will be used.



It is not always a simple matter to gain informed consent. For example, very young children or people with learning disabilities may not be able fully to understand what the researcher is doing. In cases such as this the researcher may need first to approach the individual or group who has legal responsibility to look after these people. In this case this person becomes what is known as the “**gatekeeper**”- the person who restricts access to the sample.

What are the disadvantages of observation?

Probably the biggest disadvantage of non-participant observation is that you always remain an outsider, so how can you really claim to understand what is going on? With participant observation there are a number of potential problems. Firstly, it can often be difficult to gain access to the group you want to study. Eileen Barker took two years to gain access to the "Moonies", for example. That is a lot of time and effort! Or how do you go about recording your findings? Taking notes will be very difficult, meaning researchers often have to rely on their memories and write up their findings later. Obviously they can forget things or remember them inaccurately; this may lead to a lack of validity with the results.

Many researchers also find that they become too involved with the group they are studying and hence start to lose their objectivity. This can introduce elements of bias into the research findings.

Overt observers are always worried that they are not actually seeing true behaviour, that the group is changing its behaviour, either consciously or subconsciously, because of the researchers presence. This is known as the observer effect.

Covert observation, despite all of its advantages, is ethically unsound. It is difficult to justify spying on people in the name of research. Ethically this throws up a number of issues!



Content Analysis

Definition

This is a method used by sociologists to study the content of the media. Any form of media can be analysed in order to see how a social group, issue or event is represented. This is done by preparing relevant categories and then going through the specified media and recording the number of times items in each category appear. All terms used should be operationalised so that there can be no confusion about what the researcher is looking for in each category. So, if study in stereotyping in films, there might be such categories as “ethnic negative”, “male provider” and “youth as trouble makers”, amongst others.

What are the advantages of content analysis?

This is a relatively cheap and easy method to use, as all you really need is the media to analyse. The growth of the Internet has made the whole process even easier, as newspaper articles, adverts and television shows are now archived and thus access is simple. This also allows researchers to make comparisons over time. Completing the research is straightforward, as you just need to tally up the number of times each category in your chart is shown. As long as the categories have been clearly operationalised there should be no confusion for the researcher when doing this. This quantitative data can then be turned into statistics, so comparisons between different media and different categories are easy to make. It is really the only method to use if you want to study the actual content of the media rather than what people think about it.

Evaluation of content analysis --

As most content analysis simply count the number of occurrences on something in the media- for example, the number and type of ethnic minorities in a soap opera- then this will give you quantitative data. However, were you to describe in detail the content of, say, crime stories in the tabloid press, then this data would be qualitative.

Just looking out, or reading, something in the media and then writing down what you see is not really the best way to do a content analysis, as it would be very vague and unfocused.

- It is better to produce an analysis table or grid that categorises all the factors you should be considering during the analysis.
- **Operationalising** what you mean will also be crucial, especially if there is more than one person completing the research.

- Finally, you need to carefully consider and select your media sample before beginning the research.

A good example of content analysis comes from the Glasgow University Media Group, who has a long tradition of working with this research method. For example, the GUMG completed a content analysis on press and television output in order to see how mental illness was represented in the media and found that the media often portrayed mentally ill people as being violent to other people. The researchers concluded from this that inaccurate beliefs regarding mental illness can be traced directly to media accounts.

What are the disadvantages of content analysis?

The media itself is often very biased, so a researcher using content analysis needs to be aware that any results gained may also be biased. The success of a content analysis is clearly dependent on the quality of the categories that have been drawn up. If important points are missed out, then these will also be missing from the final result. Similarly, if the terms used in the categories are not clearly operationalised, then there will be no consistency when completing the research. This would be a real problem if research was being conducted by a team of researchers, as they would all be recording different information in different categories. Content analysis typically produces quantitative data. This could be a problem as it will not be detailed or in-depth, so some would question just how useful it actually is. Finally, results are often based on the thoughts, judgements and opinions of one person. This is likely to make any conclusions biased.

What does “operationalise” mean?

All researchers have to operationalise concepts. This means defining phenomenon being studied so that it can be counted or measured in a way that is clearly understood and can be used consistently. This may be straightforward. For example, if we want to study “*young people*”, we just need to define what we mean by young- we might say that young means anyone in the 16-24 age group. If we are trying to define the term “*healthy*”, then it may not be a simple!

Part C- Culture

What is Culture?

Being human is about contact with other people- without that contact we are reduced to basic and instinctive behaviour. But when people work together- as they usually do- they create cultures that are complex, fascinating and different. Our own culture always appears to be the most “normal” and other cultures may seem strange, different or even inferior in some cases (a view known as “ethnocentrism or sometimes racist”)

The idea of culture is very important for sociologists. Culture is commonly defined as the way of life of a social group. More specifically, the term refers to “**patterns of belief, values attitudes, expectations, ways of thinking, feeling and so on**” (Billington) which people use to make sense of their social world.

Some sociologists also argue that culture also consists of customs and rituals, norms of behaviour, statuses and roles, language, symbols, art and material goods- the entire way in which a society expresses itself. Culture is taken for granted because it is shared. The idea of culture helps us to understand how individuals come together in groups and identify themselves as similar to or different from others.

When societies become large and more complex, different cultures may merge in the same society. Think of Britain today, where there are cultures based on different ages, genders, classes, ethnic groups, regions and so on- a situation known as “cultural diversity”. Sociologists refer to these cultures within cultures as “sub-cultures”. They share some aspects of what we think of as “British culture”- maybe eating with a knife and fork and speaking English- but they also possess distinctive cultural features of their own- ways of dressing, accents and attitudes to the family, for example.

Culture is made up of several different elements, including values, norms, customs, statuses and roles.

What is a subculture?

Sociologists appreciate that within any one society there may be a variety of subcultures or social groups which differ from the dominant culture in terms of language, dress, norms and values. Youth subcultures, for example, have a distinct set of values within the dominant culture. Youth subculture is such as hippies, mods and punks have their own particular style of dress and music which marked them off from others.

Values

Values are widely accepted beliefs that something is worthwhile and desirable. For example, most societies place a high value on human life—although during wartime this value may be suspended. However, in some societies, and in certain circumstances, suicide, euthanasia and capital punishment may be valued more than the sanctity of human life.

Norms

Norms are values put into practice. They are specific rules of behaviour that relate to specific social situations, and they govern all aspects of human behaviour. For example, norms govern the way we dress, the way we prepare food and how we eat that food, our toilet behaviour and so on.

Customs

Customs are traditional and regular norms of behaviour associated with specific social situations, events and anniversaries which are often accompanied by rituals and ceremonies. For example, in Britain many people practice the custom of celebrating bonfire night on November 5th, and this usually involves a ritual burning of a Guy Fawkes effigy and setting off fireworks.

It is also the social custom to mourn for the dead at funerals, and this usually involves an elaborate set of ritualistic norms and ceremony. For example, it is generally expected that people wear black at funerals. Turning up in a pink tuxedo would be regarded as deviant, or norm breaking behaviour.

Statuses

All members of society are given a social position by their culture. These positions are known as statuses. Sociologists distinguish between **ascribed statuses** and **achieved statuses**. Ascribed statuses are fixed at birth, usually by inheritance or by biology. For example, gender and race are fixed characteristics (which may result in women and ethnic minorities occupying low-status roles in some societies). Statuses over which individuals have control are achieved. In Western societies, such status is normally attained through education, jobs and sometimes marriage.



Roles

Society expects those of a certain status to behave in a certain way. A set of norms is imposed on status. These are collectively known as a role. For example, the role of “doctor” is accompanied by cultural expectations about patient confidentiality and professional behaviour. In practice, our roles do not necessarily fall neatly into separate categories and so it is possible to experience role conflict. This occurs when the demands of one of our roles conflict with those of another. As a student, for example, we are respected to spend a considerable amount of time studying, but this may come into conflict with our role as boyfriend, best friend or part-time employee.



Part D- Socialisation

At birth, we are faced with a social world that already exists. Joining this world involves rapidly learning “how things are done” in it. Only by learning the cultural rules of a society can a human interact with other humans. Culture needs to be passed on from generation to another in order to ensure that it is shared. Shared culture allows society’s members to communicate and co-operate. The process of learning culture is known as socialization. This involves learning the norms and values of thinking, behaving and seeing things that are taken for granted or internalised.



Sociologists distinguish between primary and secondary socialisation. Primary socialisation refers to early childhood learning during which we acquire a basic behaviour patterns, language and skills that we will need in later life. The agencies of primary socialisation are usually families and parents who ensure that this learning takes place. Secondary socialisation takes place during later childhood and continues into adult hood, during which we learn society's norms and values. The agencies of secondary socialisation include the peer group, the school, the workplace, religion and the media.

What are the agencies of socialisation?

Families

Families are important in the process of primary or early socialisation of children. Through interaction within their families, children are helped to acquire language and other essential skills. Families are expected to teach children the norms and values of the wider society and, in so doing, may exert a powerful influence on attitudes and behaviour.

Norms regarding how control over children's behaviour is exercised have varied from culture to culture and over time. The Cheyenne of North America, for example, controlled a baby's crying by hanging the cradle from a tree, well away from the camp.

Peer groups

Peer groups are groups of people who share a similar social status and position in society, such as people of similar age, outlook or occupational status. They can exert considerable pressure on their members to conform to the group's norms and values, for example within a school or workplace. Members of the group may feel the need to prove that they are accepted by the group members. In this way, such groups can be very powerful in

ensuring conformity. Failure to conform may involve the risk of rejection by the group.

James Patrick (1973), and his covert PO study of a Glasgow gang, had to learn their norms and values in order to fit in and be accepted. He felt at times that some gang members viewed him with suspicion and hostility because of his behaviour; for example, unlike them, he made every effort to avoid involvement in violence.

What is social control?

Much social life is subject to both written and unwritten rules. The question is: why do most people conform or go along with most of the rules most of the time? Social control refers to the processes by which people are persuaded to obey the rules and to conform.

In explaining how social control operates, sociologists point to the role of **agencies of social control**. These are the groups and organisations in society that serve to ensure that most people conform and stick to the rules most of the time. Sociologists have identified two distinct types of social control: formal and informal.

Formal social control

Formal social control is based on written rules and laws. It is associated with the way in which the state regulates and controls people's actions and behaviour. The agencies are formal social control of those bodies in society which make the laws, enforce them or penalise convicted lawbreakers. For example, the courts act as an agency of formal social control. An individual accused of a serious crime is given a trial in a Crown Court; if found guilty they are sentenced by the judge to a term of imprisonment. Such **sanctions** (or punishments) are official and are backed by the state.

Informal social control

Rather than being based on written laws, informal social control is based on informal processes such as the approval or disapproval of others. Informal social control is enforced via social pressure-by the reaction of group members such as families, friends, workmates and bosses. Negative reactions towards individuals who do not conform to the group's expectations include ridiculing them, nor in them, gossiping about them or using arguments to try to persuade them to change their behaviour. Positive reactions include praising them, giving them a gift or promoting them at work or giving them a pay rise- in other words giving the individual a **reward**.

Education

Schools are imported in the process of secondary socialisation. During the years of compulsory schooling, pupils are expected to learn how to interact in groups larger than the family. They learn important new skills. They learn also that they are expected to conform to rules and regulations- regarding

punctuality and dress, for example. Much of the socialisation that takes place in schools takes place informally; however, the school does provide a more formal social control by punishing pupils who constantly break the rules.

Some pupils will resist the rules and oppose the authority of teachers! **Paul Willis's (1977)** study of a group of 12 working-class boys, "*the lads*", in a secondary school in the Midlands, shows that not all pupils are prepared to conform to the school's rules. "The Lads" developed their own informal counter-school culture based on opposition to the school. They would reject anyone who "grassed" or who conformed.

Another way in which schools work to socialise individuals, is through the influence of the teachers. Teachers can subconsciously (or more rarely perhaps consciously) influence their students' attitudes towards members of the opposite sex or members of a different ethnic group through their methods of dealing with members of that group. This process is known as the **Hidden Curriculum**.

Religions

Religions provide guidelines for behaviour and sanctions when those guidelines are broken. Christianity, for example, provides the 10 Commandments as a guide to how followers should behave. Muslims are expected to put into practice the five pillars of Islam, including paying Zakat and fasting during daylight in the month of Ramadan.

In our society, religion provides a method of informal social control. This means that there are no official sanctions applied to individuals who break religious laws. However, in other countries (such as Iran) religious laws provide formal social control- individuals who break religious laws in some countries, can face very serious sanctions!

Mass media

The mass media, which includes television, radio and newspapers, are a powerful source of information and knowledge. The media have a role in gender socialisation. Research, for example, has focused on the way in which males and females are represented in children's educational programs such as Sesame Street. **Dohrmann (1975)** found that the male child was much more likely to be shown as heroic, whereas the female child was more likely to be shown as helpless and passive. It is possible that such messages affect attitudes and behaviour, particularly when reinforced within families and schools. In this way the media provides a powerful form of informal social control- it portrays socially acceptable behaviour for members of the different genders.

Part E- The Formation of Identity

A Case Study: Gender

What is “gender role socialization?”

From an early age, people are trained to conform to social expectations about their gender. Much of this training goes on in the **family during primary socialization**. For example, people use gender based terms of endearment when talking to children, they dress boys and girls differently, and sex-typed toys are often chosen as presents.



Oakley (1982) identifies two informal processes of social control that are central to the construction of gender identity-

- **Manipulation** refers to the way in which parents encourage or discourage behaviour on the basis of appropriateness for the child's sex.
- **Canalisation** refers to the way in which parents channel children's interests into toys and activities that are seen as “normal” for that sex”.

These types of gender reinforcement are extremely powerful. By the age of 5, most children have acquired a clear gender identity. They know what gender they belong to and they have a clear idea of what constitutes appropriate behaviour for that gender.

Even today, the stereotypical assumptions of what it is to be “male” or “female” are very powerful and influence the way most people behave.

What are femininity and masculinity?

Definitions of femininity and masculinity are not fixed; they move with the times and there does not have to be just one definition. To be masculine means that you act in a way that your society considers to be typical of a male, and the same for being feminine. In our society there are so many choices to be made that there is no longer just one accepted version of either femininity or masculinity. So, yes, being a housewife is an example of feminine behaviour, but then so is having a career or dressing in a sexy way. It is a similar situation when you consider masculinity. Being strong and muscly is clearly masculine behaviour. But then so is being a loving family man or an image-obsessed “pretty boy”. These multiple versions of masculinity and femininity typically co-exist in modern societies, although it is probably true to say that some remain more dominant and acceptable than others.

What other agencies are involved in gender role socialization?

Other agencies of socialization are also involved in gender role socialization. Schools, and the mass media both have a significant role to play in reinforcing gender roles.

The Mass media

McRobbie's study (1991) of girl's magazines in the 1970s observed how girls retreated into a world of media romance and a culture of femininity that centred around finding a boyfriend.

Women are presented in a narrow range of roles in the media, whilst men perform the full range of social and occupational roles. Women are especially found in domestic settings- as busy housewives, contented mothers, eager consumers and so on. There has also recently been an increase in the number of "stronger" roles for women- for example in TV dramas such as **Prime Suspect** and **Sex and The City**. Soap operas also tend to promote independent and assertive female characters, whereas male soap characters tend to be weaker. This may be because soaps focus on domestic issues, the only legitimate (accepted) area of female authority.

Women are rarely shown in high-status occupational roles such as doctors or lawyers. If they are, they are often shown to have problems dealing with their "unusual" circumstances. For example, they are portrayed as unfulfilled (motherhood is sometimes an answer to this) as unattractive, as unstable, or as having problems with relationships. If they have children, successful women are sometimes shown as irresponsible, with their children getting into trouble because of emotional neglect. Men are rarely portrayed in this way.

Until fairly recently there has not been a great deal of analysis of how the media represent men and masculinity. However, male family-roles are represented as secondary compared with the primary representation of men as workers, high-powered businessman and leaders. In contrast with women, men are seldom presented nude or judged by the media in terms of how well they match up to a feminine view of an ideal male form.

Education

The process of gender socialization begun in the home often carries on





through schooling. Much of this socialization goes on through the school's "**hidden curriculum**". This consists of the hidden teaching of attitudes and behaviour, which are taught at school through the school's organization and the attitudes of teachers but which are not part of the formal timetable. The **hidden curriculum** emphasises the difference between males and females, and encourages different forms of behaviour.

There has been a long tradition of analysis considering the impact that teachers have upon their pupils.

One key element in this was the suggestion that boys and girls are treated differently. Boys are more heavily criticized in the classroom and girls are more heavily praised. If the attitudes and expectations of teachers through informal social control towards their pupils has an impact (which is generally seen as being the case) then this would be important in influencing the difference in attainment between boys and girls in schools.

Notes