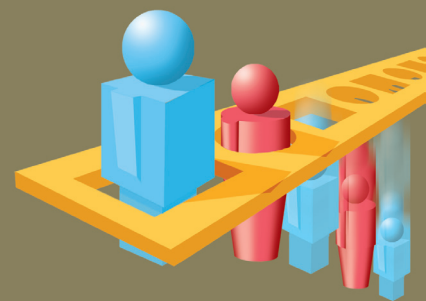


Chapter 6

Exploring the use of qualitative data-collection methods and analysis in the context of research



- By the end of this chapter you will be able to define and evaluate qualitative data and primary and secondary research methods (including semi-structured and unstructured interviews, focus groups, content analysis, non-participant observation, covert and overt participant observation).


Many of the research methods outlined in this chapter are associated with the idea of **ethnography**. In sociology, this involves the study of people 'in their natural setting'. This can be done in a wide range of ways, from joining (either openly or secretly) the group you want to study ('participant observation') to engaging people in 'conversation' (semi-structured and unstructured interviews) designed to reveal their beliefs, values, norms, feelings and motivations.

Ethnography is not a research method as such (although the term is sometimes used interchangeably with 'participant observation'). Rather, as with the idea of social surveys, it's a general *research technique* involving an overall *philosophy* about how to study people in a reliable and valid way. It has a number of basic characteristics:

- **Depth:** The focus is on the depth and detail of data collection since the objective is to discover and understand as much as possible about people's beliefs and behaviours.
- **Interpretive:** One aim of this type of research is to uncover the *meanings* people give to everyday events, by closely observing or questioning them; this explains why qualitative data is seen as both desirable and most useful (although this doesn't preclude the use of some forms of quantification). In some respects, therefore, the

objective of ethnographic study is to provide a range of **narrative data**: that is, data which ‘tells a story’ about the people or cultural behaviour being studied.

- **Small scale**: The focus is generally on small groups or individuals studied, as much as possible, in natural or normal settings and situations. Ethnographic research frequently involves case studies.
- **Understanding**: A major objective of ethnographic research is an in-depth understanding of how respondents see and understand the world in which they live. In other words, sociological understanding develops out of allowing respondents to describe and explain their thoughts and behaviours, with the sociologist’s role being that of a channel through which these things can be drawn out. Cultural anthropologists call this an **emic account** — an attempt to get an ‘insider’ or ‘native’ view and explanation of behaviour; to let individuals ‘speak for themselves’ rather than impose an ‘outsider’ view on things (by trying to test hypotheses, for example).
- **Severity**: These studies make intense demands on both the researcher (participant observers, for example, may live for months or even years with their subjects) and the researched (as the subjects of extensive and detailed questioning, for example).
- **Empirical**: One objective of ethnography is to develop insights into people’s behaviour based on a rigorous examination of their cultural beliefs and behaviours. The methods used to achieve this (e.g. observation, participating in the behaviour being studied) are similarly rigorous and based on objective standards of evidence, reliability and validity.



Depth
Interpretive
Small scale
Understanding:
Severity
Empirical

Primary qualitative methods

Semi-structured (‘focused’) interviews

Nichols (1991) defines this method as ‘an informal interview, not structured by a standard list of questions. Researchers are free to deal with the topics of interest in any order and to phrase their questions as they think best.’

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. The interview has a structure (the things the interviewer wants the respondent to focus on), but it’s not as tightly controlled as a questionnaire or structured interview (hence the term ‘semi-structured interview’). There is no list of questions that must be asked and answered, and different respondents may be asked different questions on the same topic, depending on how the interview develops.

The objective is to understand things from the respondent's viewpoint, rather than make generalisations about people's behaviour. Open-ended questions are frequently used, some of which are created before the interview, while others arise naturally from whatever the respondent wants to talk about. There are a number of factors that can affect the conduct, reliability and validity of semi-structured interviews, discussed in the following subsections.

Personal demeanour

This method requires certain skills of the researcher, such as knowing when to prompt for an answer and when to simply listen. Although these 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, talk, appear interested or bored and so forth) can be significant factors. For example, respondents may restrict their answers if the researcher appears uninterested, and this may impact on research validity.

Setting

It's important to build a rapport with people to get them to talk openly and at length; they should feel comfortable with the researcher, the interview and their surroundings. Unlike structured interviews which can be conducted almost anywhere, semi-structured interviews can't be easily conducted on street corners. Gray's (1987) study of women's relationship to video recording technology used semi-structured interviews in a home setting because she needed to put her respondents at their ease and get them to talk at length about their feelings and experiences.

Trust

Interviews may deal with matters of personal importance to respondents; they should feel that they are being taken seriously (whatever they may say or do) and that the information they give will be confidential. Building trust (rapport) may increase data validity because the researcher is more likely to get a detailed and well-rounded picture of whatever they're researching.

Interview schedule

The interview schedule is a plan used to specify and track the progress of the interview. Although each one will be slightly different, they have the same general structure:

- **Introduction:** Schedules often start with an open-ended question about the major topic (or focus), designed to get the respondent focused and talking (e.g. 'Can you tell me about...').
- **Subsidiary questions:** These are questions or topics the researcher wants to explore and they 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, which has a clear and rigid question order).

- **Exploratory questions:** The schedule can be updated with questions that arose during the interview — some suggested by the respondent and some which may have occurred to the researcher during the interview. These questions may or may not be used in subsequent 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).

Hierarchical focusing

Tomlinson (1989) argues the researcher should construct a schedule that starts with the most general question and gradually introduces more specific questions as the interview progresses (a 'question hierarchy'). General questions are used to encourage respondents to talk and specific questions are used as and when required to refocus the interview.

Strengths


- **Prejudgement:** The problem of the researcher predetermining what will or will not be discussed is largely (although not totally) avoided, since there are few preset questions or topics.
- **Prior knowledge:** Where the interview allows the respondent to talk about the things that interest or concern them, it's possible to gather ideas and information that had either not occurred to the interviewer or of which they had no prior knowledge or understanding. This new knowledge can be used to inform subsequent interviews with different respondents; or the interview may form part of a **pilot study**, conducted to test how people respond to particular topics, issues and questions, and to generate new questions and lines of enquiry.
- **Validity:** By allowing respondents to develop their ideas and opinions the researcher tries to find out what they 'really mean, think or believe'. The focus on what the 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. Oatey (1999) also suggests that 'Freedom for the respondent to answer how they wish to is important in giving them a feeling of control in the interview situation.'
- **Help and guidance:** Within limits, face-to-face interaction allows the researcher to help and guide respondents — to explain, rephrase or clarify a question or answer, for example — which may improve overall validity.

Weaknesses

- **Skills:** Semi-structured interviews require certain skills of both the researcher (the ability to ask the right questions, establish a good rapport and think quickly about relevant question-opportunities as they arise) and the respondent (an inarticulate respondent will lack the skills to talk openly and in detail about the research topic). Oatey (1999) notes that open-ended questions, designed to get people to talk at length

about a topic, 'can cause confusion either because of the lack of understanding of the question by the informant or by the lack of understanding of the respondent's answer by the interviewer'.

- **Time:** Semi-structured interviews are more time-consuming to conduct than questionnaires or structured interviews. In addition, the large amount of information they produce has to be analysed and interpreted. As this data will rarely be tightly focused on a particular topic or question, a great deal of time may be spent analysing data that proves to have little or no use for the research.
- **Relevance:** Where the respondent largely dictates the direction of the interview, they may say things that are of little or no relevance to the research (although the researcher may not know during the interview whether the information will ultimately be relevant or irrelevant). The researcher usually needs to make skilled decisions about when and how to ask questions that refocus the interview.
- **Information recording:** This is not necessarily a limitation (unless the researcher is trying to manually record everything, which may disrupt the flow) but electronic recording (e.g. with a digital voice 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 can make some respondents 'play to the camera'.
- **Validity:** Although research validity may be high because of the depth and detail involved, any interview involves **reconstruction** as respondents try to remember and recount events that happened in the past, and this creates validity problems:
 - A researcher has no way of knowing if a respondent is lying, but a more likely problem is **imperfect recall**. It is hard to remember things that happened days, weeks or months ago; furthermore, our memories tend to be selective, with better recall of things that had an important impact on us.
 - Given the time to reflect, the respondent may 'make sense' of past behaviour by **rationalising** their actions. They are not consciously lying, but their explanations may be very different from what they actually felt or did at the time.
- **Extrapolation:** The lack of standardisation in questions put to respondents makes it difficult to generalise the research.



Skills
Time
Relavance
Information recording
Validity
Extrapolation



Suggest and explain two skills required by a researcher to successfully carry out a semi-structured interview.

Unstructured interviews

Unstructured interviews are also referred to as 'non-focused' or 'open-ended' interviews. With this method the researcher starts the interview with a general idea or topic they

want the respondent to talk about, the main objective being to record a respondent's views by encouraging them to talk freely about things they feel are important (hence the description 'open-ended'). As Kvale (1996) argues, 'human behaviour is understood from the perspective of those being studied; their perceptions, attitudes and experiences are the focus'.

The researcher's contribution is deliberately minimal; they may provide non-verbal cues (such as nodding or smiling) to encourage respondents to talk, but their role is mainly to observe and record rather than contribute or direct. Researcher non-participation is part of the technique, partly 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 the respondent to talk.

Strengths

Validity

The researcher's limited input means data reflects the interests of the respondent and, consequently, is more likely to be an accurate and very detailed expression of their beliefs. Hamid et al. (2010) used this method in their study of young Pakistani females because 'Unstructured interviews helped elaborate on the topics of participants' choice [concerning marriage and sexuality] and probed further their concerns.'

No prejudgements

Where the objective is to describe reality as the respondent sees it they, rather than the researcher, decide what is significant information.

Sensitivity

This type of interview, where the researcher must actively try to establish a strong rapport with their respondents in order to achieve their research aims, lends itself well to the exploration of sensitive issues and the study of groups who may be wary of being studied. This is because the respondent makes decisions about what to reveal (although they may still feel pressurised to talk about things they'd prefer not to).

Hamid et al. (2010), for example, established rapport with their respondents by meeting them a number of times before their research began because: 'Multiple meetings helped the participants to open up...and discuss sensitive issues regarding sexuality and growing up with reference to their marriage and other related topics of their choice.'

Setting

The research can take place in settings, such as the respondent's home, designed to put them at their ease. For Hamid et al. (2010), 'Participants were interviewed in their homes...to overcome the barrier of talking about sensitive issues with the researcher. This...gave the women an opportunity to expand on a range of issues that they wanted to discuss.'

Weaknesses

Focus

The researcher has little control over the direction of the interview and the respondent may wander into areas that, when the data is analysed, prove irrelevant to the research topic (the researcher would not necessarily know this at the time of the interview). The analysis of large amounts of information is, like the interview itself, time-consuming.

Impatience

Unfocused interviews require researcher skills since the temptation may be to try to converse with the respondent when the objective is simply to listen and record. The respondent must be reasonably articulate (able to express themselves clearly and understandably) and forthcoming; if they're not, it's difficult to produce data, and the researcher may be tempted to 'fill in the gaps'.

Bias

In common with their semi-structured counterparts, unstructured interviews can be prone to specific types of bias that lead to invalid data:

- **Unintentional bias** involves things a careful researcher can avoid doing, such as looking or sounding bored, or using intrusive and distracting recording devices.
- **Inherent bias**, on the other hand, cannot be avoided, according to critics of the method: interviews may be inherently flawed as a source of valid data (this is further explained under Effects).

Reliability

Reliability tends to be relatively low because the unstandardised format makes it impossible to exactly repeat the interview (even with the same respondent). Unintentional bias can intrude if a respondent is inarticulate or unwilling to open up and the researcher is then tempted 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 verbally respond and may say things they don't particularly believe, simply to 'fill the silence'.

Effects

Any process of interaction (such as the relationship between researcher and respondent, or teacher and student) represents a situation in which **status rules** apply. When a teacher takes the register, for example, students are expected to respond. Status rules involve people knowing and accepting their relative status positions. Interviews, as an interaction process, are subject to such rules.

Cohen and Taylor (1977), for example, argued that one form of **interview effect** happens when, through the act of questioning people, a series of subtle and not-so-subtle status manipulations come into play, the outcome of which is that respondents



tell the researcher what they believe they want 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 or a student of their teacher) and, consequently, is looking to defer to the researcher and to please them through their cooperation.

Interviews, according to this argument, can never 'get at the truth' because they involve what Goffman (1959) has identified as an (unstated) three-point process:

- **Negotiation:** Both researcher and respondent make decisions about how much or how little to reveal and these decisions can be crucial in terms of research validity.
- **Impression management:** Each participant attempts to manage the impression they make on the other. For the researcher this might involve a range of demeanours (friendly, curt, efficient) designed to give the respondent certain impressions about the research and their role in it. For the respondent impression management may involve trying to appear helpful or, alternatively, trying not to give anything away.
- **Manipulation:** This may, for example, involve the interviewer pushing the respondent into a position where they feel able to reveal 'the truth' about themselves. 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 gang who took part in the Great Train Robbery (1963) concocted a story about their involvement and subsequent behaviour which they claimed was 'the true story' behind the robbery.



Briefly explain why the reliability of unstructured interviews may be low.

Focus groups

Unlike other types of interview method, focus groups involve assembling a group of respondents in a room to 'focus' on a particular topic or issue decided in advance by the researcher. As Powell et al. (1996) put it, 'a focus group is a group of individuals selected and assembled by researchers to discuss and comment on, from personal experience, the topic that is the subject of the research'.

Such groups may be constructed as representative samples (a cross-section of society, for example) or they may simply represent a particular group whose culture and dynamic, for example, the researcher wishes to explore in detail. Sometimes, as Nichols (1991) suggests, it can be useful for focus groups to include people of the same sex and from similar backgrounds to prevent gender and class variables affecting the reliability and validity of the data.

Morgan (1997) characterises this research method as a 'form of group interviewing' whose effectiveness is based on two things:

- **Focus:** Merton and Kendall (1946) argue the interview structure needs to be based on clear participant guidelines (to avoid arguments within the group, for example) and that 'the subjective experiences of participants are explored in relation to predetermined research questions'.

- **Interaction** within the group: Gibbs (1997) argues 'The key characteristic which distinguishes focus groups is the insight and data produced by the interaction between participants.' Through organised discussion, the researcher gains 'insights into people's shared understandings of everyday life and the ways in which individuals are influenced by others in a group situation'.



A focus group

TopFoto

Strengths

Pilot studies

Groups can be used as part of a wider research design to generate hypotheses, suggest possible lines of research and develop questions for questionnaires and interviews.

Recording data

The group setting makes the use of video and audio recording equipment less obtrusive because participants, once involved with the group discussions, act as they normally would.

Empowerment

Involvement in a research process can help individuals and groups influence and effect changes in their environment. Smith et al. (1995), for example, noted how hospital patients were able to suggest improvements to the levels of service and care they received, which resulted in environmental improvements.

Validity

Researchers can investigate complex issues and behaviours by exploring how people think about a particular issue. The group situation also allows exploration of not just what an individual thinks about an issue but also why they hold particular views — and how they are able to justify these views in the context of group discussion and reflection.

Information

Pain et al. (2000) used focus groups for their exploration of the fear of crime across a range of different identity groups (from mothers of primary school aged children to Asian men) because this format allowed them to generate large amounts of detailed information in a relatively short time period. The flexibility of the method (allowing the researcher to identify and explore ideas raised within the group) also means the research may uncover attitudes, beliefs and ideas that would not have been revealed by less flexible methods (such as structured interviews).

Organisation

The researcher generally plays a facilitator role within the group, which means they can control the pace and extent of any discussion. They are able to plan a 'schedule' for the session in advance that allows them to focus and, if necessary, refocus discussion. The researcher can also intervene to ask questions or redirect aimless discussions.

Understanding

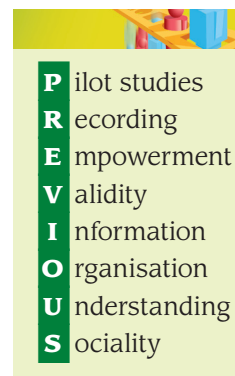
The need to interact within a group encourages respondents to elaborate and reflect on their beliefs and perception of issues. As Kitzinger (1995) suggests, 'Interaction enables participants to ask questions of each other, as well as to re-evaluate and reconsider their own understandings of their specific experiences.' This technique also lets respondents 'explore solutions to a particular problem as a unit rather than as individuals' — all of which contributes to greater researcher understanding of an issue.

Sociality

Gibbs argues, 'The main purpose of focus group research is to draw upon respondents' attitudes, feelings, beliefs, experiences and reactions in a way not feasible using other methods...These...are more likely to be revealed via the social gathering and interaction.' In other words, the researcher uses the group format to encourage respondents to open up about their experiences within the relative safety of the group. Being part of a group provides an environment conducive to revealing and talking at length about various attitudes and beliefs.

In Buckingham's (1987) study of young *EastEnders* viewers the discussions were 'as open-ended as possible to avoid directing them towards particular issues'. This was achieved by putting his young subjects at their ease, by asking general background questions (about favourite and least-favourite characters) that started them talking and interacting.

The setting for focus group interviews reflects, to some extent, the natural way information is exchanged and developed within a group or community. It also removes status barriers to communication, such as those that exist between a researcher and respondent in a structured interview. Morley (1980), for example, used focus groups because he felt individual face-to-face interviews were 'abnormal situations'; they were not part of the social context of everyday interaction. The people he used already knew each other in the setting of an educational course.



Weaknesses

Skills

The researcher has to be able to control the behaviour of a group of 5 to 15 individuals in a way that allows people to speak freely and openly about an issue while at the same time ensuring the focus of the research is maintained. As Gibbs (1997) notes, 'Good

levels of group leadership and interpersonal skill are required to moderate a group successfully.' This involves, for example:

- the ability to grasp the overall direction of a discussion to ensure that it stays focused (and does not veer into areas that yield little or no useful data)
- ensuring group members have the confidence to talk openly and that weaker individuals (who may be inarticulate or inhibited) are not intimidated by stronger group members (who cannot be allowed to impose their views on the group)

Interview effect

While this method involves similar status problems to those associated with other types of interview, an additional weakness is that we can't simply assume focus group data is the 'unvarnished truth' — that individuals become lost in the group setting and reveal their true feelings or beliefs. While this is possible, the reverse is equally possible; rather than being 'an individual within a diverse group' people may take on a 'group view' of the world — one tacitly 'agreed' through the dynamics of group interactions.

This phenomenon, called '**groupthink**' by Janis (1972), involves group members feeling under pressure to arrive at 'desired outcomes', such as giving the researcher what they want (or what the people in the group think the researcher wants). In some instances focus groups may simply reflect what a group or community considers socially acceptable rather than what individuals actually believe. While this method may be useful for exploring group interaction and ideas, it doesn't fit well with explorations of individual ideas and beliefs.

One way of trying to limit the impact of groupthink is through **focused extensions**. Each group member completes a questionnaire, prior to the group meeting, that tests their personal views about a topic. In this way, if some are unable or unwilling to express their views while in the group, the researcher has data to fall back on (although this does, in some ways, defeat the object of a focus group interview).

Control

Morgan (1997) argues a researcher has less control over data produced in group situations because they have less control over group interaction and the various ways the conversations develop. This follows, as Gibbs (1997) notes, because 'By its nature focus group research is open ended and cannot be entirely predetermined.' This will impact on data **reliability** since it is impossible to exactly replicate the research.

Agenda-setting

A weakening or loss of control can also lead to the problem of agenda-setting. This occurs when the researcher is unable or unwilling to prevent alliances within the group taking control and, by so doing, effectively setting their own agenda for the group. A further, if weaker, dimension here is when powerful individual voices within the group are allowed to take control, either setting their own agenda or intimidating other group members, thereby preventing them from fully contributing or expressing their real thoughts.

Planning

The more people the researcher has to coordinate, the greater the potential problems in terms of resources (time, money, effort) and representativeness. If, in a carefully selected and representative group of 10, one person does not show up, the sample may become unrepresentative. For this reason some researchers assemble the group on territory familiar to participants. Merryweather (2010), for example, held focus group discussions ‘in the school, university or youth club from where participants had been recruited’, for two reasons:

- It avoided the logistical problems associated with conducting groups in other locations.
- A familiar setting would contribute to a more relaxed environment conducive to in-depth discussion.



Identify and explain two differences between focus groups and focused interviews.

Observation

The primary research methods we’ve outlined so far all share one feature: the researcher collects data on the basis of what people say they do or believe. These methods rely on people telling or remembering ‘the truth’ — and it’s by no means certain that they always do so. In contrast, observation allows a researcher to see what people actually do in particular situations. Below we will consider different types of observational method.

Non-participant observation

Non-participant observation involves observing behaviour from a distance — sometimes literally (when the research subject doesn’t know they’re being observed) but more usually in the sense that the researcher doesn’t become personally involved in the behaviour they’re studying. The idea is to avoid the researcher’s presence influencing the behaviour of those being watched.

Parke and Griffiths (2002), reporting on a study of slot-machine gambling, noted: ‘Non-participant observation usually relies on the researcher being unknown to the group under study...[they] can study a situation in its natural setting without altering the conditions — but only if the researcher can blend in naturally.’ They found ‘the art of being inconspicuous’ was an important researcher skill:

If the researcher fails to blend in, then slot machine gamblers soon realise they are being watched and are therefore highly likely to change their behaviour. Some players get nervous, perhaps agitated and stop playing. Others do the opposite and try to show off by exaggerating their playing ritual...Blending into the setting depends upon a number of factors, including whether the venue is crowded and easy to wander around in without looking suspicious.

Strengths

- **Objectivity:** The ability to stay detached or personally separated from the people you're researching can be a key strength. A researcher interested in crowd behaviour might simply observe and record behaviour witnessed at a football match or a rock concert. The theory underpinning this technique is that by secretly observing people we get an insight into the way they 'actually behave' in their everyday lives. Yule (1986), for example, successfully used this technique to discover how mothers really treated their children in public places.
- **Validity:** In their study of gambling, Parke and Griffiths (2002) argued they could not simply ask gamblers about their behaviour because 'Social and problem gamblers alike are subject to social desirability factors and may be dishonest about the extent of their gambling activities to researchers as well as to those close to them.' This problem can, to some extent, be overcome by observing gamblers 'at work'.
- **Access:** The researcher can study people who may not want to be studied, because their behaviour is illegal or embarrassing. They may also be suspicious or wary of a researcher. There is also the opportunity to study people who are in their natural setting: to see 'everyday behaviour' as, when and how it occurs.



Gamblers in Las Vegas

imagebroker / Alamy

Weaknesses

- **Reliability:** Observational studies can't be easily or exactly replicated. An observed group may, for example, change over time.
- **Access:** The researcher may need considerable skills in 'blending in' to gain access as an unnoticed observer, as Parke and Griffiths (2002) found in their study of slot-machine gambling.
- **Triviality:** Observing people 'from a distance' may produce data that fails to capture the depth and richness of their behaviour.
- **Ethics:** In situations where research subjects are being observed without their permission, the question is raised of whether it is ethical to conduct research in this way. In other situations those being observed may simply not want to be watched, for a variety of reasons. Parke and Griffiths (2002), for example, found that 'Some gamblers simply refuse to take part in research because they feel that there is nothing in it for them.'



Suggest two advantages of secretly observing people from a distance.

Participant observation

Participant observation is sometimes called subjective sociology because the researcher aims to understand the world from the subject's viewpoint — it involves 'getting to know' the people being studied by participating in their world and sharing their experiences. Weber (1922) called this **Verstehen** ('to understand').

Mead (1934) argued that the researcher should exploit their ability to take the part of the other in order to understand how people experience the social world. People have the ability to empathise (to see things from the viewpoint of someone else), and the sociologist should use this ability in a positive way. This argument reflects 'the claim social behaviour cannot be understood unless it is personally experienced' (Downes and Rock 2003).

Parker (1974) points out 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'.

Table 6.1 summarises three idealised levels of observation. The difference between overt (open) and covert (secret) participant observation is explained below.

Table 6.1 Levels of observation (Brewer 2000)

Type	Overt/covert	Participation	Characteristics
Non-participant observation	Overt/covert	None/minimal	Complete observer
Covert participant observation	Covert	Full	Complete participant
Overt participant observation	Overt	Full	Participant-as-observer

Overt participant observation

Overt participant observation involves participating in the behaviour of people who know they are being studied. The researcher joins the group openly, possibly (but not always) telling its members about the research being undertaken (its purpose, scope and so forth), and carries out research with the permission and cooperation of the group (or, at least, important members of the group).

Strengths

- **Going native:** This method makes it easier to separate the roles of participant and observer and reduces the chance of the researcher becoming so involved in a group they stop observing and simply become a participant ('going native'). (This is not always easy: Venkatesh (2009) found there were times he became so involved with the black American street gang he was studying that he acted 'like one of them' and effectively ceased to be an objective and impartial observer — for example when a rival gang started shooting randomly at people, including Venkatesh, on the street.)
- **Recording data:** This is relatively easy because the group knows and understands the role of the researcher. The researcher can ask questions, take notes and so on with the permission of the people involved.

- **Access:** In groups with hierarchical structures (e.g. a school or large corporation) the researcher can gain access to all levels in the organisation (the boardroom as well as the shop-floor). Although 'getting in' to a group in the first place can be a problem (see below) a commonly used technique is **sponsorship**, where the researcher initially gains the trust and cooperation of an important or powerful group member.
 - For example, Venkatesh's (2009) study of a black American gang was made possible by a middle-ranking gang leader called 'JT' taking him under his protection (echoing Whyte's (1943) entrance into an Italian street gang through the sponsorship of its leader 'Doc'). JT's sponsorship gave Venkatesh initial access to lower-ranking gang members and, eventually, some limited access to the most powerful members.
- **Validity:** The ability to observe individual behaviours and experience the day-to-day life of respondents (and not just ask questions) helps the researcher to build up a highly detailed picture of the lives they are describing. The researcher can come to understand not only what people 'say they do', but also what they actually do — which all adds to potential validity.
- **Ethics:** Where the observer's role is clearly defined there is less risk of involvement in unethical, criminal, dangerous or destructive behaviours. The researcher can, for example, withdraw from unethical or risky situations without necessarily losing the trust or arousing the suspicions of the people being studied.



Weaknesses

- **Observer effect:** A major criticism of this approach is that the observer's presence in the group changes the way people behave in unknown ways. The question, therefore, is the extent to which people who know they're being studied change (consciously or subconsciously) the way they normally behave.
 - This may involve not doing something they would normally do, because they know that it will be recorded by the observer or that they would face possible questions about their behaviour they do not wish to answer.
 - On the other hand, Venkatesh (2009) witnessed a 'punishment beating' he felt was partly designed to demonstrate the limits of his observational role — it seemed that higher-level gang members were effectively 'putting on a show' for his benefit.
- **Participation:** If the researcher doesn't fully participate in the group, their involvement may not be deep enough to fully experience the world from the viewpoint of the people being studied. Depth of involvement may be limited by ethical considerations — not participating in criminal behaviour, for example. Alternatively, there may be **over-involvement**: the researcher's presence may (perhaps inadvertently) become the focal point around which people orientate their behaviour. (Venkatesh, for example, was given 'special treatment' in terms of access to people and places, because he was identified as a researcher sponsored by a powerful gang member.)

- **Effort:** This method involves huge amounts of effort, time and money; a researcher must, after all, live while doing the research. Venkatesh (2009), for example, spent around 8 years on his study of a single gang in a small area of one American city.
- **Reliability:** This type of research is impossible to replicate and we must take it on trust that the researcher saw and experienced the behaviour they document. While outright fabrication may be unlikely, a more likely problem is that of accurately recording behaviour. All research — even or perhaps especially participant observation — involves the selection and interpretation of ideas and events.
- **Access:** While openness can be a strength, the flipside is that if a group refuses the researcher permission to observe then the research can't be carried out.



Suggest two ways the 'observer effect' might impact on research reliability.

Covert participant observation

In this variation the researcher joins the group 'secretly' (their identity as a researcher is not revealed) and, consequently, those being observed are unaware they are being studied. The main objective here is to observe behaviour in its 'natural setting' — to watch people behave as they normally behave. The researcher, of course, must balance the roles of researcher and participant while keeping the former role secret from other group members.

Strengths

- **Observer effect:** This problem is avoided because people are unaware they are being observed — their behaviour is largely unaffected by the researcher's presence.
- **Validity:** Personal experience means the researcher gains valuable insights into the meanings, motivations and relationships within a group that explain behaviour patterns. 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 'observer', means they can make sense of behaviour even when other group members may not fully understand (or be able to articulate) the reasons for their behaviour.
- **Access:** Covert observation may be the only way to study people who would not normally allow themselves to be researched. Examples include:
 - **Criminal or deviant groups:** Ward (2008) 'was a member of the rave dance drugs culture' when she began her 5-year study 'in London nightclubs, dance parties, bars and pubs and people's houses [where]...the social interactions and processes at the heart of rave dance drugs exchange were observed'.
 - **Closed groups:** Lofland and Stark (1965) secretly studied the behaviour of a religious sect because this was the only way to gain access to the group.

- **Anonymous groups:** Ray (1987) covertly studied groups of Australian environmentalists in order to 'minimize defensiveness on the part of those studied and to avoid breakdowns in co-operation'.
- **Level of participation:** Although it's possible to argue all sociological research involves some form of 'participation' (in the sense of interacting with those being studied), with this method such participation is generally very high and, in some cases, almost total. The researcher may live, work and socialise with the people they're studying and, in consequence, this method produces data which is massively detailed, insightful, personally observed and experienced.
- Parke and Griffiths (2008) note that it's possible to overestimate people's knowledge and understanding of their own behaviour, and hence their ability to explain it in an interview or questionnaire: 'We have observed that many slot machine gamblers claim to understand how slot machines work when in fact they know very little. This appears to be a face-saving mechanism so that they do not appear ignorant.'
- 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 because they experience such things for themselves.



Weaknesses

Goffman's (1961) study of an American mental institution identified problems for the covert participant observer in three major areas: getting in, staying in and getting out.

Getting in

Problems here involve entry and access.

Entry. While gaining covert entry to any group can be problematic, some groups are more difficult to enter than others. There are three areas of potential difficulty for the researcher:

- **Characteristics:** If the characteristics of the researcher (age, gender, ethnicity and so forth) don't match those of the group, the researcher won't be able to gain access. A man, for example, could not covertly study a group of nuns.
- **Invitation:** Entry to some groups (such as the Freemasons) is by invitation only. Unless the researcher is invited, they cannot join.
- **Qualifications:** Some groups have entry requirements. To covertly study accountants or doctors, for example, the researcher would need to hold the qualifications required to practise these professions.

Access. If the group is strongly hierarchical (divided into different levels) the researcher is unlikely to have access to all areas. A covert researcher posing as a student in a school would not have access to places (such as staffrooms) reserved for teachers. Parke and Griffiths (2008) also note 'It's impossible to study everyone at all times and locations... Therefore it is a matter of personal choice as to what data are recorded, collected and observed [and]...This affects the reliability and validity of the findings.'

Burgess (1984) notes that in some situations access to areas within a group is controlled by certain people ('**gatekeepers**'). As far as a group is concerned, a covert researcher may have no reason to want access to some areas (and may arouse suspicion by demanding it).

Staying in

Once inside, there may be problems concerning **level of participation**. A researcher has to quickly learn the culture and dynamics of a group in order to participate fully. This may require a range of skills —mixing easily with strangers, creating and maintaining a plausible 'back story', thinking quickly in unexpected situations. 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.

In order to participate appropriately the researcher must have the **knowledge** and **skills** needed to fit into a group. Parke and Griffiths (2008), for example, noted the potential problems caused by 'lack of "street knowledge" about slot machine gamblers and their environments' (the terminology players use, machine features, gambling etiquette). If a researcher lacks the 'insider knowledge' appropriate to a group member, they risk exposure, which may jeopardise their ability to stay in the group.

The researcher may have to adjust to a situation in which the people being researched have greater expertise in certain situations. It can be difficult to 'relinquish control' to those you are secretly studying.

Another problem is that of '**going native**'. It can be difficult to separate the roles of participant and observer, especially in situations where the researcher becomes well integrated into a group. 'Going native', therefore, refers to a range of behaviours that may compromise the integrity of the research process.

At one extreme the researcher may have to choose to be an observer rather than a participant (such as when a group participates in criminal activities). At the other, the researcher may become so well integrated into the group they cease to be an observer and effectively become a full participant. This would raise serious doubts about the reliability and validity of the research. Whyte (1943), for example, found that he became so involved with the lives of gang members that he progressively came to see himself as 'one of the gang' and not as a researcher.

Finally, pretending to be someone you're not carries the ever-present risk of **exposure** as a 'spy'. The consequences vary from group to group (the Women's Institute might

write a letter of protest, whereas a criminal gang may take things a bit further) but the general consequence is the end of the research.

Getting out

It can be difficult to suddenly leave a group. A member of a criminal gang, for example, can't easily just 'stop participating'. For other groups, leaving may raise ethical problems, 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 is exploitative: does a researcher have the right to secretly spy on people (in Parker's (1974) terms 'pretend to be one of them') or use them for their own purposes?

Covert participation raises a further methodological problem in the shape of **reliability**. The study 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, for fear of exposure).

Goffman (1961) solved this problem by using a field diary to write up his observations at the end of every working day — although this still requires that the researcher remember things accurately and make decisions about the significance of events. Another possibility is to use modern technology (such as miniature cameras and voice recorders) to ensure data is accurately captured and recorded, but these not only risk exposure (how might a group respond if they discovered everything they did or said was being taped or filmed?) but also raise ethical questions about the extent to which it is permissible to secretly record people's behaviour.



Identify and explain one problem a researcher might face gaining access to each of the following:

- 1 a school
- 2 the police
- 3 a hospital

Secondary qualitative methods: documentary sources

In our society there are a large number of documentary sources available to sociologists and classifying them in any meaningful way is difficult. Table 6.2 identifies a number of different types and sources and also suggests that documents can be either historical or current (contemporary). This is not intended as a hard and fast categorisation, but for organisational convenience, in terms of outlining different document strengths and limitations.

Table 6.2 Types and sources of documentary evidence

Type	Official	Organisational	Individual
Possible Sources	government agencies and departments	private companies and organisations	personal documents created by individuals
Historical and Current	official reports, court reports, academic studies, websites	newspapers (local, national), film, magazines, books, church records, academic studies	letters, autobiographies, diaries (paper and video), biographies, oral histories, photographs, personal websites, social networking sites

Qualitative analysis of personal documents is often carried out using either of two types of content analysis:

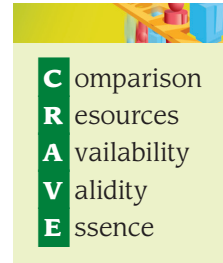
- **Conceptual** (or **thematic**) analysis focuses on the concepts or themes that underlie documents (or 'texts'). In this respect such analysis can be considered an extension of the quantitative form of content analysis. Philo and Berry (2004), for example, identified a number of recurring themes in 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').
- **Relational** (or **textual**) analysis examines how texts encourage the reader to see something in a particular way by relating one idea to something different. Hall (1980) calls this 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 necessarily appearing to do so). A brief glance through the sports pages of UK newspapers, for example, might lead you to think sport is mainly a white male activity.

Strengths

- **Comparison:** Historical documents can be used for comparative purposes — contrasting how people once lived with how we live now is useful for tracking and understanding social change. Historical analysis also demonstrates the diversity of people's behaviour — things we now take for granted may have been seen differently in the past (and vice versa).
- **Resources:** The researcher gets access to data that would cost a lot of money, time and effort to collect personally.
- **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 and crime may be the only available evidence for a researcher.
- **Validity:** There are a couple of aspects we can note:
 - Documentary evidence may provide qualitative data of great depth and detail. For example, diaries can provide extensive and valuable details about people and

their daily lives (examples are those of Samuel Pepys, who recorded life in England during the 1660s, and Anne Frank, who recorded her life in hiding from the Nazis during the Second World War).

- It's sometimes possible to compare accounts across time to test the validity of current accounts of social behaviour. We can, for example, compare past and present accounts of family and working lives to understand the continuities and changes in social behaviour. Pearson (1983) used media accounts going back over 100 years to demonstrate that 'hooligan' or 'yobbish' behaviour is not a recent phenomenon in our society.
- **Essence:** Documents can have two levels of meaning — **literal** (what they actually say) and **metaphorical** (what they tell us about the hopes, fears, beliefs and so forth of whoever produced them). Newspaper articles, for example, may frequently tell us more about their writers and how they see social problems than about the topic of the writing.



Weaknesses

- **Reliability:** Aside from our ability to replicate qualitative data, documents have reliability problems in that they may be incomplete, inaccurate or partial (biased towards one viewpoint).
- **Representativeness:** When using documentary sources we need to know if they represent only one individual's view (as with a diary) or 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 — which makes generalisation difficult (if not impossible). While this may not be an issue if we have a large number of different sources, it will be a problem if there is only a single documentary source.
- **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. Increasingly this applies to both photographic and video sources.
- **Credibility:** We don't always know why or by whom a document was created. Therefore we can't always be sure if the document is a credible source. Did the author have first-hand experience of the things they describe or are they simply repeating something at second or third hand?



Anne Frank writing her diary

TopFoto



Suggest two reasons for using personal diaries in sociological research.

Qualitative research methodology

As we suggested earlier, when we looked at positivist methodology in Chapter 5, methodological beliefs are an important factor in deciding whether or not to use qualitative data. In this respect qualitative research methods can be associated with a specific research methodology and design: interpretivism.

Interpretivism

This is a different way of looking at human behaviour and social research from the positivist approach we outlined earlier — one that argues the social world is understood ('interpreted') by different people in different situations in different ways (for example, something you interpret as a 'problem' 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 create and define it — the people involved in particular types of behaviour, whether it takes place in an asylum, family, school classroom or prison.

Harris (2005) captures the distinction between the two methodologies when he notes that positivists use 'terms like "cause", "law" or "fact"' when talking about human beings as if they were 'snooker balls' being pushed around by some unseen force (social structures). Interpretivists, however, argue people are very different from snooker balls because they have **consciousness** — an awareness of both themselves and the world. Whereas a snooker ball has no choice but to move when hit with a cue, human beings can make a wide range of choices (and responses) should someone try to do the same thing to them.

The ability to think, reflect and act makes people very different from inanimate objects in the natural world — and this means we cannot study them in the same way we study plants or rocks. Some key features of interpretivism are outlined below, in terms of description, social contexts, participation, validity and constructionism.

Description

A major goal is to **describe** social behaviour, primarily in terms of the **meanings** and **interpretations** of those involved. While this involves 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'). By 'taking the role of the other' (using a method like participant observation) the researcher sees the world through the eyes of the people being studied;

the sociologist experiences what they experience, and, by so doing, gains an insight into why people behave in the way they do.

Social contexts

Behavioural rules in any culture are context-bound; that is, they shift and change depending on the particular situation in which people find themselves. For example, if you slap me in the face, you have no way of knowing, in advance, how I'm going to react. I might do any of the following:

- cry (because you hurt me)
- not cry (because my friends are watching and crying doesn't fit with my carefully cultivated hard-man image)
- laugh at you
- run away
- slap you back
- tell my dad (who will go round to your house and beat your dad up)

How I react will depend on a huge range of possible factors, relating to the overall social context of that behaviour.

Uncovering and describing behavioural rules, therefore, involves delving deeply into people's behaviour; it also involves the researcher gaining an intimate understanding of the context within which rules are created — hence qualitative research (and participant observation in particular) is frequently associated with this methodology because it involves exploring behaviour in this way. It also means that behaviour cannot be predicted — so there's no real point in trying to do the impossible.

Participation

Humphries (1970) argues participation is highly desirable; researchers get a deeper insight into people's behaviour because they may, for a time, actually *become* the people they're studying. Subjective involvement, rather than the objective detachment valued by positivists, is seen as the way to produce valid data. Research, from this viewpoint, is all about capturing the elusive qualities of human behaviour, which is not something that can be achieved using quantitative research methods and data.

Validity

While data reliability is important, interpretivists place more emphasis on validity, partly because human behaviour is impossible to exactly replicate (so perfect reliability is impossible) and partly because, in their view, the objective of sociological research is to uncover the rules, meanings and interpretations people use as guides in their daily lives.

Constructionism

Since, from this viewpoint, social reality is constructed and reconstructed by individuals on a daily basis, there is little or no interest in trying to discover 'wider behavioural laws'

since these cannot exist — all behaviour is context-bound, which means that behaviour seen by one individual, group or culture as the norm may be seen as abnormal (deviant) by other individuals, groups or cultures.

Interpretivist research design

Interpretivism uses what Oberg (1999) has characterised as an ‘exploratory research design’ consisting of four general stages: planning, information gathering, information processing and evaluation.

Planning

A research issue is identified and a research question takes shape. This may flow from background reading or the researcher may want to ‘come fresh’ to the research to avoid being influenced by what others have said or written.

Information gathering

Although the general research process here is superficially similar to the hypothetico-deductive model, there are major differences in the way information is collected. This research design can be described as follows:

- **Non-linear:** Research doesn’t begin with a hypothesis and end with it being confirmed or rejected. The objective is not to somehow discover definitive answers to a question; rather, it is to explore it from a variety of angles.
- **Exploratory:** The objective is to explore the behaviour being studied from a variety of different viewpoints, from those being observed to that of the observer. There can never be ‘definitive answers’; the best we can do is uncover how people see and understand behaviour, both their own and that of others.
- **Oriented to subjective perceptions:** If, as Firestone (1987) suggests, ‘reality is socially constructed through individual or collective definitions of the situation’, the researcher needs to use a design and method that offers the greatest opportunities to capture this ‘subjective sense of social reality’.
- **Holistic:** As much information as possible is collected, for two reasons. First, the researcher doesn’t judge the significance of data at this stage in the process. Second, by casting the net far and wide the researcher involves those being studied in the research process (they may suggest ideas and issues that did not originally occur to the researcher).
- **Goal-free:** Hypothesis-based research designs are goal-oriented (the goal being to test whether a hypothesis is true or false). Lindauer (2005), however, argues exploratory research designs are ‘goal-free’. The researcher is free to explore whatever they — or the people they’re studying — feel is important or interesting; these types of research design ‘take shape as data collection and analysis proceed’.
- **Evolutionary:** Visualising the difference between doing questionnaire-based research and covert participant observation gives a good idea of the difference

between positivist and interpretivist research designs. Where the hypothetico-deductive design framework is rigid and strong and directs the researcher clearly along every step in the process, the reverse is true of exploratory designs: the framework is flexible and weak, and bends to take account of new research ideas and developments. Rather than following an exact and predetermined path, interpretivist research design is open-ended; it can, for example, be expanded to cover areas suggested by those being studied.

- **Not researcher-focused:** While positivist designs are 'researcher-led and focused' (the needs of the researcher are considered more important than those of the researched), the reverse is true for interpretivist designs — the needs of the researched are more important than those of the researcher.
- **Active:** The participation and subjective involvement of the researcher in their research is actively encouraged. Venkatesh, for example, spent around 8 years working with the gang he was studying while Ray (1987) lived covertly with a group of Australian environmentalists.



Suggest two reasons why interpretivists might generally favour qualitative research methods.

Information processing

While attempts may be made to categorise the data in various ways or sift and sort it into some form of readable (descriptive) narrative, such analysis, according to Schultz et al. (1996), is something that happens *throughout* the research process, rather than simply being completed after data has been collected. This is significant because this type of design involves a **feedback loop** between data collection and data analysis: the analysis of collected data is used to inform further data collection and this informs further analysis. Since there is no requirement to collect data for the express purpose of proving or disproving something, analysis is descriptive and can use the viewpoint of both the researcher and those being researched.

Evaluation

Conclusions may be offered but it's more likely the reader will be left to draw their own conclusions. This highlights a further difference in research design between exploratory and hypothetico-deductive models. The latter model, by definition and design, involves the researcher making judgements (about what to research, what data to collect and, ultimately, the status — true or false — of the research hypothesis). The former, however, is **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 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'.

Firestone (1987) suggests that the main objective is to 'help the reader understand' how people see their world and situation, while Reason and Rowan (1981), in advocating a subjective, qualitative approach argue: 'There is too much measurement going on...in human inquiry it is much better to be deeply interesting than accurately boring.'

Explain and evaluate the use of ethnography as a way of researching young children's ethnic identity. (52 marks)