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| **Learning Table 1: Secondary Sources** | | | | | |
| **Qualitative Secondary Sources (Documents)** | | | **Quantitative Secondary Sources (Official Statistic)** | | |
| Qualitative secondary sources include newspapers, radio and TV reports, websites, novels, literature, art, autobiographies, letters, diaries, registers, historical documents, previous sociological studies, school records, social work files, police records, minutes of meetings and some official government reports. | | | Quantitative secondary sources include a huge range of statistical data produced by groups like companies, charities and pressure groups. A major source of such data is the mass of official statistics collected by the national and local governments and other official agencies. These include census data, data on births, marriages, deaths and social services. | | |
| **Advantages** | | **Disadvantages** | **Advantages** | | **Disadvantages** |
| * Interpretivists tend to favour documents because they achieve the main goal of validity. They are not usually written with the research in mind and can thus be an authentic statement of their author’s views. * They may provide valuable or the only source of information in an area. For example, historical documents are often the only way of investigating the past. Without them, it would be very difficult to find out about history. * They are useful for interpretivists who wish to gain insights into the worldview of ideologies of those who produced them. Some historical documents and personal documents like autobiographies and diaries can be particularly useful for their purposes. * They may be useful for assessing people’s concerns of worries. For example the letters pages and advice columns of newspapers and magazines may give valuable insights into the thinking of readers. * They are a cheap source of data because someone has already gathered the information. For the same reason, using existing documents saves the sociologist time. | | * Positivists tend to reject documents because they fail to achieve the main goals of reliability, generalizability and representativeness. They are often unstandardized and unreliable, for example every person’s diary is unique. Furthermore analysing documents involves the sociology imposing their own meaning on the data. * *Scott (1990) puts forward four criteria to truly assess the usefulness of documents to research.*  1. *Authenticity – is the evidence genuine or forgery?* 2. *Credibility – Is the evidence believable, sincere and honest? Does it contain biases, distortions and exaggerations by the writers to deceive or mislead readers?* 3. *Representativness – Is the document typical of those appearing at the time?* 4. *Meaning – What do documents mean? Do they have the same meaning now as they did at the time they were first produced? For example the meaning of words may change over time.* | * Positivists favour official statistics as objective social facts that achieve the main goal of reliability, generalizability and representativeness. They provide reliable data because their standardised categories and collection techniques can be easily replicated. They are collected at regular intervals and show trends over time. They are usually large scale and so are representative. * They are important for planning and evaluating social policy such as responding to housing needs, transport and education planning. * They are readily available and cheap to use. They is no need to spend time and money collecting data, and some data such as the census would be impossible for one individual to collect. * They allow inter group and international comparisons to be made, such as between working class and middle class families, education levels. * They can be used in the comparative method in sociology (see learning table 3). * They are unlikely to breach ethical issues as they are publicly available whilst remaining confidential. | | * Interpretivists reject official statistics, particularly ‘soft’ ones such as crime statistics as social constructs and not social facts. Official statistics fail to achieve their main goal of validity. * Official statistics are collected for administrative purposes rather than for the purposes of sociological research – so the definitions and classifications adopted may be unsuitable for that research. * Official statistics are produced by the state and so may be ‘massaged’. This means they may be incomplete or not provide a complete picture to avoid political embarrassment to the government. |
| **Content Analysis** | | | | | |
| Content analysis is a research method that produces primary quantitative data from the study of qualitative data in secondary sources. It is a way of analysing the content of documents and other qualitative material by quantifying it. This is done by sorting out categories and then analysing a document to record the number of times items in each category appear. | | | | | |
| **Advantages** | | | **Disadvantages** | | |
| * It is relatively cheap * There is no involvement with people whose presence may affect the results of research. * It is reliable, it produces quantitative statistical data that other researchers can easily check. | | | * It depends on the categories chosen by the research and how he or she interprets what they see. * It is mainly concerned with describing what is being studied and is not very good at explaining it. * The interpretation of what is being describe may differ from one researcher to the next (researcher bias). | | |
| **Methods in Content: Using Secondary Sources to Investigate Education** | | | | | |
| **DOCUMENTS** | | | **OFFICIAL STATISTICS** | | |
| **PRACTICAL** | ☺ Public documents on education are often easily accessible. This is because government policies emphasise parent choice. This makes a large amount of information on schools available to the public that researchers can easily use.  ☹ Some educational documents are confidential such as teachers’ personnel files and pupils’ disciplinary records which make them extremely difficult for sociologists to access. | | **PRACTICAL** | ☺ Much of the data is published and thus available to the sociology, saving them both time and money.  ☺ Educational statistics are collected at regular intervals to allow sociologists to make comparisons over time.  ☹ Governments collect statistics to evaluate their own policies and so can be manipulated to reflect something other than the truth.  ☹ The government may operationalise concepts differently to sociologists. For example, official definitions of pupils’ social class are based on parental occupation, whereas Marxist Sociologists define class in terms of property ownership. Furthermore the state may collect data on pupils claiming Free School Meals, however because of the stigma attached to Free School Meals, many pupils who are entitled to them do not claim them. This decreases the validity of the data. | |
| **ETHICAL** | ☺ There are few ethical concerns using public documents produced by schools. Having been placed in the public domain by the organisation that produced them, permission for their use is not required.  ☹ However, there are ethical issues involved with using personal documents. For example, in her study of girls’ friendships, Hey (1997) did not gain informed consent from her participants to use the notes passed around class. She simply collected them from the teacher’s desk after the lesson. | | **ETHICAL** | ☺ There are very few ethical considerations as the data is not collected by the sociologist and is completely anonymous. | |
| **RELIABILITY** | ☺ Many public documents for example attendance registers are produced in a systematic format. This enables researchers to make direct. This enables researchers to make direct comparisons of the absence rates of pupils in different schools.  ☹ However, deliberate falsification or accidental mistakes made when filling in registers can reduce their reliability as teachers are not applying the measure of attendance in a consistent way. | | **RELIABILITY** | ☺ They are very reliable because the government imposes standard definitions and categories for their collected which all schools must use. This enables the process to be replicated each year.  ☹ However, definitions may change. For example in 1988 the Conservative government brought in league tables in which all schools were judged on exam performance which resulted in schools with middle class pupils being placed higher up. The Labour government then introduced Contextual Value Added in 2006 to take into account the deprivation that pupils can suffer. | |
| **VALIDITY** | Documents can provide important insights into the meanings held by teachers and pupils and therefore be high in validity. For example, Hey (1997) initially examined girls’ friendships in schools through observation. However she realised she was ignoring a useful source of insight into girls’ feelings and actions – the notes pass around to each other in class. | | **VALIDITY** | ☹ Interpretivists question the validity of education statistics. They are they are socially constructed. For example, schools may manipulate their attendance figures by re-defining poor attenders as being on study leave or additional work experience. | |
| **EXAMPLE** | *What examples of your study of education can you think of?* | | **EXAMPLE** | *What examples of your study of education can you think of?* | |
| **REPRES’NESS** | ☺ Some documents are legally required of all schools and colleges, such as records of racist incidents. This makes it more likely that we can form a representative picture of racism in schools across the whole country. However, not all racist incidents will be documented.  ☹ Personal documents are often less representative. For example, Hey (1997) collected about 70 notes but the unsystematic way in which she came by them makes it unlikely that her sample was representative. | | **REPRES’NESS** | ☺ Some Official Statistics on education are highly representative. For example, all state schools have to collect a school census three times a year. These statistics cover virtually every pupil in the country and are therefore representative. | |
| **THEORETICAL** | *What do positivists and interpretivists think of this method?* | | **THEORETICAL** | *What do positivists and interpretivists think of this method?* | |