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| **Learning Table 3 - Surveys** | | |
| **Type of Survey** | **Advantages** | **Disadvantages** |
| **Questionnaires**  The use of written (self-completion) questionnaires means that we can distribute them to people at home and be returned by post, e-mailed or completed and collected on the spot. There are two types of questions:   * Closed ended: respondents choose from a limited range of possible answers e.g. ‘yes’ or ‘no’. Data yielded is quantitative and so coded so researchers can count the numbers of responses easily. * Open ended: respondents are free to give whatever answer they wish, and elaborate where they want without any pre-selected information. The data yielded is qualitative and so is richer in detail and considered to be more meaningful. | **Practical advantages**   * Quick and cheap to gather large amounts of data from large numbers of people, from different geographical locations * There is no need to recruit and train interviewers or observers to collect the data * The data is usually easy to quantify (particularly quantitative data from closed questions)   **Reliability**   * If repeated by another researcher, the questionnaire should give similar results because the questions used will be the same, and with postal online questionnaires there is no researcher present to influence the respondent’s answer * If we find differences in responses from researcher to researcher we can assume it is because of real differences between individuals and not a result of different questions * The allow easy comparison over time and between different societies   **Hypothesis testing**   * They are useful for testing hypotheses about cause-and-effect relationships between variables e.g. finding a correlation between academic achievement and family size * Because questionnaires allow us to identify possible causes, they are attractive to positivist sociologists who take a scientific approach and seek to discover laws of cause and effect   **Detachment and objectivity**  Positivists also favour questionnaires because they are detached and objective (unbiased) method i.e. the sociologist’s personal involvement is kept to a minimum  **Representativeness**  Because you can collect information from a large number of people, the results stand a better chance of representing a larger number of people (higher population validity)  Researchers who use questionnaires pay more attention to the need to gain a larger sample so we can more accurately make generalisations from the data yielded  **Ethical issues**  They pose fewer ethical problems than other methods, because although they may ask intrusive questions, respondents are not obligated to answer them  However, researchers should gain respondent’s fully informed consent, guarantee their anonymity and make it clear that they have the right not to answer any of the questions that they do not wish to. | **Practical problems**   * The data from questionnaires tends to be limited and superficial because they are generally brief to try and ensure people are inclined to respond to them * Although they are cheap to carry out, it may be necessary to offer incentives to persuade people to complete the questionnaire * With postal and online questionnaires there are additional problems: whether the respondent has actually received the questionnaire and whether the questionnaire was completed by the intended respondent   **Low response rate**   * The issue is that while a large number may receive the questionnaires, not everyone will complete the questionnaire e.g. Shere Hite’s (1991) study of ‘love, passion and emotional violence’ in America sent out 100,000 questionnaires but only received 4.5% of that number as a reply * You also risk receiving responses from only a select group who have time to answer them e.g. the unemployed or socially isolated, or only from people who have a particular interest in that topic   **Inflexibility**   * Once the questionnaire is finalised, the researcher is stuck with those questions and cannot explore any new areas of interest that might arise   **Questionnaires as snap shots**   * They only give a picture of social reality from one moment in time; the moment when the respondent answers the questions   **Detachment**   * Interpretivists such as Cicourel (1968) argue that the data from questionnaires lacks validity and that we can only gain a valid picture by using methods that get us close to the subjects of the study and share their meanings. Postal questionnaires are the most detached as they involve zero contact between the researcher and the respondent. * This also means there is no way of clarifying any misunderstandings so there is no way of knowing if the researcher and respondent interpret the questions in the same way   **Lying, forgetting and ‘right answerism’**   * Respondents may lie, forget, not know, not understand ( and not wish to admit that they don’t understand i.e. social desirability) or try to please or second guess the researcher i.e. Hawthorne Effect.   **Imposing the researcher’s meanings**   * Interpretivists argue that questionnaires impose the researcher’s own meanings rather than revealing those of the respondent * By choosing what questions to ask, the researcher has already decided what is important, not the respondent |
| **Interviews**  **Structured interviews:** the interviewer is given strict instructions on how to ask the questions, and is given a set of pre-determined questions so it is standardised.  **Unstructured interviews:** the interviewer has complete freedom to vary the questions, wording and order for one interview to the next, pursuing whatever line of questioning seems appropriate at the time  **Semi-structured:** each interview has the same set of questions, but the interviewer can probe for more information  **Group interviews:** most are one-to-one, but some require up to 12 people being interviewed together e.g. focus groups. | **Advantages of structured interviews**  **Practical issues**   * Training interviewees is relatively straightforward and inexpensive * Surveys that use structured interviews can cover quite large numbers of people but not as many as postal questionnaires * Suitable for gathering straightforward, factual information * Easy to quantify because they use closed-ended questions with coded answers   **Response rate**   * Large numbers of interviewees means a more representative sample. Although the numbers that can be studied are lower than for questionnaires, the response rate is generally higher * Response rates can be increased if the interviewer can make several call-backs to chase up people who have failed to respond   **Reliability**   * Standardised questioning allows for another researcher to conduct the interview in exactly the same way * This means that if the following researcher conducts research in the same way, they should get similar results * We can also compare results easily and identify similarities and differences | **Disadvantages of structured interviews**  **Validity**   * Structured interviews often use close-ended questions that restrict interviewees from choosing an answer they might want and having to select an answer of ‘best fit’ * They give the interviewer very little opportunity to explain questions or clarify misunderstandings * People may lie or exaggerate – these responses will produce false data   **Inflexibility**   * There is an inflexibility because you have to draw the questions up in advance, as a result they may lack validity because they do not reflect the interviewees true concerns and priorities * They too, are like snapshots taken at one moment in time so they fail to capture the flowing, dynamic nature of social life   **Feminist criticism**   * Hilary Graham (1983) argues that survey methods such as questionnaires and structured interviews are patriarchal ad give a distorted, invalid picture of women’s experience * This is because the interviewer, not the female interviewee is in charge * Survey methods treat women as isolated individuals rather than seeing them in the context of the power relationships than oppress them |
| **Advantages of unstructured interviewees**  **Rapport and sensitivity**   * The informality allows the interviewer to develop a rapport with the interviewee * This puts the interviewee at ease and encourages them to open up e.g. in Dobash and Dobash’s domestic violence research   **The interviewee’s view**   * Allows the interviewee to discuss the things they think are important * By allowing them greater freedom to express their views, you are more likely to produce fresh insights and valid data   **Checking understanding**   * It makes it much easier for interviewee and interviewer to check each other’s meanings   **Flexibility**   * They are highly flexible: the interviewer is not restricted to a pre-determined list of questions, but instead has the freedom to deviate and probe as they wish * The researcher can formulate new ideas and hypotheses as they arise throughout the interview   **Exploring unfamiliar topics**   * When the topic is relatively new and one we don’t yet know much about, they can be useful because they are open-ended and exploratory * Some sociologists use unstructured interviews as a starting point to develop their initial ideas about a topic before going on to use more structured methods of investigation such as questionnaires | **Disadvantages of unstructured interviews**  **Practical problems**   * Time and sample size: they take a long time to conduct and this therefore limits the number of people who can be interviewed * Training: you need to train your interviewers – they need to have a background in sociology so they can recognise when the interviewee has made a sociologically important point and so they can probe further with an appropriate line of questioning, in turn adding to the costs   **Representativeness**   * The smaller numbers mean it is more difficult to gain a representative sample, which makes it harder to make valid generalisations based on the findings of the interviews   **Reliability**   * They are not standardised therefore they are not reliable. Replicability is virtually impossible and as a result, so is the comparison of results   **Quantification**   * Because mainly open-questions are used, answers cannot be pre-coded * It makes it difficult to quantify and count up responses, ad so this lack of quantitative data makes it difficult to establish cause and effect relationships   **Validity**   * Unstructured interviews are generally seen as producing valid data, but critics argue that the fact they involve an interaction between the interviewer and interviewee inevitable colours and distorts the information obtained |