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| **Factors influencing the choice of method** |
| **Practical Issues**  **Time and money**  Different methods require different amounts of time and money and this may influence a sociologists choice of research method  e.g. large-scale surveys may employ dozens of interviewers and data-inputting staff and cost a great deal of money. By contrast, a small-scale project involving a lone researcher using participant observation may be cheaper to carry out, but it can take several years to complete.  The researcher’s access to resources can be a major factor in determining which methods they employ. A well-known professor will probably have access to more research funds than a young student for example.  **Requirements of funding bodies**  Research institutes, businesses and other organisations that provide the funding for research may require the results to be in a particular form. For example a government department funding research into educational achievement may have targets for pass rates and so require quantitative data to see whether these targets are being achieved.  **Personal skills and characteristics**  Participant observation usually requires the ability to mix easily with others as well as good powers of observation and recall, while in-depth interviews call for an ability to establish a rapport with the interviewee. Not all sociologists have these qualities and so some may have difficulty using these methods.  **Subject matter**  It may be much harder to study a particular group or subject by one method than another e.g. it might prove difficult for a male sociologist to study an all-female group by means of participant observation, while written questionnaires may be useless for studying those who cannot read or write.  **Research opportunity**  Sometimes the opportunity to carry out research happens quickly and unexpectedly, and so it may not be possible to use structured methods that need to be prepared in advance such as questionnaires or structured interviews. For example a Glasgow gang leader offered the sociologist James Patrick (1973) the chance ‘out of the blue’ to spend time with his gang. With little time to prepare, Patrick had no choice but to use participant observation. In other circumstances the researcher may have been able to set up the research opportunity carefully beforehand and have plenty of time to select their method.  **Ethical Issues**  **Informed consent**  Research participants should be offered the right to refuse to be involved. The researcher should also tell them about all of the relevant aspects of the research so that they can make a fully informed decision. Consent should be obtained before research begins and, if the study is lengthy, again at intervals throughout the process.  **Confidentiality and privacy**  Identify of research participants should be kept entirely secret to prevent possible negative effects on them. Researchers should also respect their privacy. Personal information concerning research participants should be kept confidential.  **Harm to research participants**  Researchers need to be aware of the potential effects of their work on those they study. These could include police intervention, harm to employment prospects, social exclusion and psychological damage. Wherever possible, researchers should anticipate and prevent such harm.  **Vulnerable groups**  Special care should be taken where research participants are particularly vulnerable because of their age, disability, or physical or mental health. For example, when studying children in schools, researchers should have regard for issues of child protection. They should obtain the consent of both the child and the parent, and they should provide information in language that the child can understand.  **Covert research**  When conducting research ‘under cover’, it can create serious ethical issues such as deceiving or lying to people in order to win their trust or obtain information. Clearly it is impossible to gain informed consent while at the same time keeping the research or its purpose secret. However, some sociologists argue that the use of covert methods may be justified in certain circumstances. These may include gaining access to secretive, dangerous or powerful groups.  **Theoretical Issues**  **Validity**  This means producing a true or genuine picture of what something is really like. It allows the researcher to get close to the truth. Many sociologists argue that qualitative methods such as participant observation gives us a more valid or truthful account of what it is like to be a member of a group than quantitative methods such as questionnaires. This is because participant observation can give us deeper insight through first-hand experience.  **Reliability**  This means ‘replicability’. a reliable method is one that gives the same results when repeated by another researcher. For example, in Physics or Chemistry, different researchers can repeat the same experiment and obtain the same results every time. In sociology, quantitative methods such as written questionnaires tend to produce more reliable results than qualitative methods such as unstructured interviews.  **Representativeness**  This refers to whether the people we study are a typical cross-section of the group we are interested in. Imagine, for example that we want to know about the effects of divorce on children. It would take a great deal of time and money to study every child of divorced parents, and we might only be able to afford to study a sample of 100 such children.  However, if we ensure our sample is representative or typical of wider population, we can use our findings to make generalisations about all children of divorced parents, without actually having to study them all.  Large-scale quantitative surveys that use sophisticated sampling techniques to select their sample are more likely to produce representative data.  **Methodological perspective**  Positivist prefer quantitative data, seeking to discover patterns of behaviour and see sociology as a science.  Interpretivists prefer qualitative data, seek to understand social actors’ meanings and reject the view that sociology can model itself on the natural sciences.  Functionalists and Marxists often take a positivist approach. They see society as a large-scale (macro-level) structure that shapes our behaviour. By contrast, interactionists favour an interpretivist approach. They take a micro-level view of society, focusing on small-scale, face-to-face interactions. |
| **Conclusion**  The sociologist’s theoretical perspective is usually the most important factor when choosing which method to use. Whenever possible, they will want to obtain the type of data – quantitative or qualitative – that their perspective views as most appropriate.  However, practical and ethical factors usually limit the choice. Just because a sociologist prefers a particular kind of method, doesn’t mean that they can simply go ahead and use it. Time, resources, access, consent, privacy and so on are all constraints on their choice.  Finally, even sheer chance may determine the method used. For example David Tuckett (2001) describes how one postgraduate sociology student found himself taken ill with tuberculosis and confined to a hospital ward, so he used this as an opportunity to conduct a participant observation study. |