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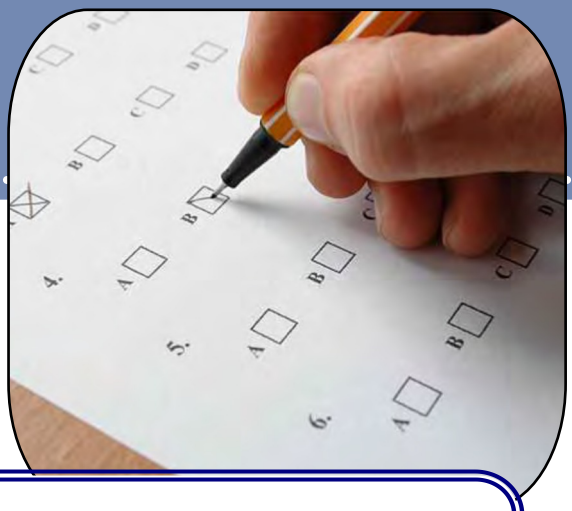

Research Considerations

Practical, Ethical and Theoretical

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Research Considerations

Practical Research Considerations

Sociological research involves confronting and resolving a range of *practical factors* relating to *choice of research method* in the general context of an assessment of how and why these methods are "fit for the purpose" of collecting data to test a hypothesis or answer a research question. As **Dunican** (2005) suggests *fitness for purpose* "Reflects how well the chosen research method is suited to the context of study. This is measured in terms of how well it is suited to answering the issues posed in the research question".

A good example to illustrate this idea is what ended-up as **Venkatesh's** (2009) *overt participant observation study*. He originally began "armed only with a questionnaire and a desire to learn more about the lives of poor black people, but he got to ask only one of his questions - “How does it feel to be black and poor?” - before realising that to make sense of this question it was pointless to ask it; to understand what it was like “to be black and poor” he had to experience these things and to do this he needed to live the lives led by the people he studied.

Time: Some methods are more time-intensive than others. **Whyte** (1943), for example, spent years on his *overt participant observation* study of an American street gang. Between 1937 and 1940 he gathered extensive information about the behaviour of one gang in a small area of the country (Boston, in case you were thinking of going there).

Aptness: Some topics may lend themselves more easily to one type of method than another; quantitative methods tend to be used when the researcher wants reliable data to establish statistical relationships (such as Kessler’s (2000) endlessly-fascinating study of the relationship between sponsorship and small business performance, where his main objective was to establish whether “those who are sponsored are more successful than non-sponsored individuals”. Alternatively, with studies such as **Diken and Laustsen’s** (2004) rather more *racy* analysis of tourist behaviour in Ibiza and Faliraki, a qualitative approach is more appropriate, given the descriptive nature of the research.

Funding: In a perfect world, money would always be available for research into any topic, using any method (my offer to study crowd behaviour at International football matches still stands), but it’s not a perfect world (which probably explains why the offers haven’t been rolling in) and the amount of money you have to spend will directly influence the methods used; questionnaires are generally cheaper than in-depth interviews, interviews are generally cheaper than participant observation. The amount of funding available will also influence the size of any research team. In this respect, therefore, "fitness for purpose" is not always determined solely by the researcher (both in terms of what they'd like to do and, perhaps more importantly what their funding source or sponsor wants them to do).

While **Dunican's** observation that "It seems logical that the selection of any research method should be based on the nature of the research question" is, of course, perfectly reasonable, it's not always possible for the researcher to follow this line of reasoning. As **Boaz and Ashby** (2003) note "Sensitivity to the sponsor’s requirements can, of course, contribute to the fitness for purpose of research but can equally well introduce biases that conflict with the aim of producing objective, good quality evidence".

Size of group: The size and composition of the group being studied may be a factor in choice of method(s). Social surveys and questionnaires lend themselves easily to the study of large, widely-dispersed, groups. Participant observation, on the other hand, may be more appropriate for the study of small, geographically-localised, groups.

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Ethical Research Considerations

Ethics refer to the *morality* of doing something and *ethical questions* relating to sociological research involve beliefs about what a researcher should or should not do *before*, *during* and *after* their research. As a matter of course, this will also include consideration of both *legal* and *safety* issues (for the researcher, those being researched, and any subsequent researchers).

1. Legal considerations

Illegal behaviour: In Britain the collection, storage and retrieval of data are governed by such things as the Data Protection Act, the Human Rights Act, Copyright laws and the laws of libel. In addition, if research involves criminal or deviant activities, the researcher may have to consider the ethical question of participation in such behaviour or their responsibilities to both the perpetrators and their possible victims.

Power: It would be unethical to bully or blackmail (emotionally or physically) people into participating in research. In addition, especially when researching people who are relatively *powerless*, relationships need to be based on *trust* and *personal integrity* on the part of the researcher. For example, if the researcher promises *anonymity* as a way of researching people involved in criminal or deviant activities, disclosing those identities to the authorities or the media would be unethical.

Research consequences: Data can be used in many different ways (and not always in the way the researcher intended - media reports may seriously distort the research, for example) and participants should be aware of any possible consequences of their participation. In addition, if respondents feel they have been *mistreated* (physically or verbally, for example) or *misled*, this may have legal consequences for the researcher and create problems for any subsequent research.

Consent: The researcher should always (at least try to) gain the informed consent of those being researched.

2. Safety considerations

Rights and **well-being**: Care should always be taken to ensure the *physical* and *psychological* safety of both the researcher and the respondent and the former needs to safeguard the interests, rights and general well-being of respondents. Examples here might be respecting respondent privacy or minimising anxiety / distress caused by the research.

Involvement: Some types of research involve methods (such as covert participant observation - see below) that create high levels of involvement with respondents. Where close personal and / or intimate relationships exist, care needs to be taken to ensure that once the research is completed and contact diminishes, distress is not caused to potentially vulnerable people. For example, if your research involves visiting the elderly on a regular basis, it would be unethical to simply stop your visits once the research is completed.

3. Code of Practice: The conduct of sociological research is surrounded by a range issues that can broadly be characterised by what the **British Sociological Association** (2004) terms:

Professional Integrity: The behaviour of researchers is bound by a code of ethical practice that is an integral part of the *professional research role* and **Pimple** (2002) suggests there are three main ethical questions - Is it:

1. True? This relates to both the research process (how it is generally conducted) and, most importantly, the relationship between research findings and their implications. At its most extreme, perhaps, *unethical behaviour* in this category involves things like the researcher deliberately *fabricating* ("making up") data or deliberately falsifying their results.

2. Fair? Unethical behaviour here relates to the different social relationships created during the course of a research study, something we can illustrate in terms of the relationship between the researcher and:

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Other researchers: This covers things like the *ownership* of a completed piece of research (who, for example, can ethically claim to be the author?). Authorship can be significant when career advancement (in a University, for example) depends on the ability to publish original research. A further aspect of fairness includes something like *plagiarism* - passing-off the work of others as your own.
Respondents: The relationship between researcher and researched is usually ethically straightforward, in terms of legality and safety for example. There are "moral grey areas" that sometimes come to light during **covert** forms of research where the respondent is not aware they're being studied:

- **Wallis** (1977) wanted to study The Church of Scientology but the Church leaders refused to co-operate with his request for access to existing members, so he contacted ex-members instead and based his research around their opinions and experiences.

- **Rosenhan** (1973) wanted to test if doctors could accurately diagnose schizophrenia and sent students displaying *fake* symptoms into hospitals to test his hypothesis that they could not - and the experiment discovered doctors were unable to expose the "pseudo (pretend) patients".

- **Millgram's** (1974) study of the effects of authority on people's behaviour - in this instance whether respondents were willing to inflict (or so they thought) extreme levels of pain on innocent strangers on the say-so of an authority figure - raises important ethical questions. Respondents were convinced they were administering electric shocks to "learners" whenever the latter gave an incorrect answer to a question (in fact no shocks were administered and the "victims" were under instructions to pretend they were being hurt).

Ethical dilemmas here include:

- Tricking people into co-operating with research.

- Causing distress to respondents. (some argued and protested about the instructions they were being given and some broke down in the face of the pain they believed they were inflicting).

- Experimenting on people without their knowledge or informed consent.

3. Wise? This refers to ethical questions over the relationship between "the research agenda and the broader social and physical world, present and future". In other words:

a. Can the research itself be morally justified?
b. Would some other type of research have greater moral justification?

As **Pimple** puts it: "Will the research improve the human condition, or damage it? Will it lead to a better world, or a worse one? Or less grandly, which of the many possible lines of research would we be better off pursuing? We have finite time and money for pursuing research, and the wisdom of research programs is a valid question in research ethics".

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Theoretical Research Considerations

Although some research methods have greater "fitness for purpose" in some research situations than others, **Ackroyd and Hughes** (1992) argue it's wrong to simply view methods as a set of "tools" to be picked up and discarded on the basis of some objective measurement of fitness.

In this respect theoretical beliefs - that questionnaires are not a valid way of studying social behaviour, for example - play an important part. When collecting data, for example, a researcher has to make initial decisions about a range of factors:

- What counts as data (does it have to be quantitative or qualitative)?
- Should the data be statistical or descriptive?
- Do we try to test a hypothesis or simply report what respondents say?

Sociological research, in this context, involves confronting and resolving a range of theoretical questions, which we can express as the *how*? and the *why*? of *choice of topic* and *research method*.

a. Choice of Topic

Purpose can be influential in terms of what the researcher is aiming to do; if testing a hypothesis, for example, the topic is likely to be much narrower in scope than if the objective is to provide a descriptive account of something.

Focus: Research often changes to meet new interests and concerns; while it's rare for a central topic to change during the research (if you begin by researching family life, you're not likely to end up researching education), aspects of the topic may well change. As research develops, changes may be made to quantitative questions or new areas of interest may open up in the light of respondent comments or researcher observations - all of which relates to constantly revising ideas about a method's fitness for purpose in the light of changing ideas, interests and needs.

Values: What is considered "worthy of being studied" will be influenced by a range of values. These are both **personal** (if studying poverty holds no personal interest or fascination then a researcher is not likely to study it) and, most importantly for real-world research, **institutional**. Given that institutions such as universities and government departments are likely sources of research *funding* the topics *they* value are likely to be the ones actually researched in the way they want them researched. If a government sponsor values quantitative statistical data about some aspect of the education system, research involving in-depth qualitative data is not likely to be considered fit for purpose.

b. Choice of Method

Theoretical Perspective: Although this influence is by no means as strong as some suggest, **Interactionist** researchers tend to *avoid* using statistical methods, mainly because their objective is to allow respondents to talk about their experiences, rather than to establish causality. **Positivists** may take the reverse view, mainly because they're not particularly interested in descriptive accounts. There is, therefore, something of an association between Interpretivist methodology and qualitative research methods, just as there is a similar association between Positivist methodology and quantitative methods - but as we've noted, this relationship probably shouldn't be pushed too far.

Reliability and **Validity** are *always* significant research concerns since beliefs about the reliability / validity of particular methods will affect decisions about whether or not they are considered fit for purpose - and these beliefs are related to the types of sociological methodology we've just noted.

Values: Researcher values are reflected in ethical beliefs about how something should be studied. If, like **Polsky** (1971) you believe covert participation is unethical and methodologically invalid you're not likely to choose this research method.

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