3 *Sociological methods*

## Introduction

Are the following statements true or false?

- There has been a steady increase in lone-parent families.
- Low family income reduces a child's chances of success in education.
- More and more women are taking up paid employment.

According to the 2007 edition of *Social Trends*, published by the Office of National Statistics, all the above statements are true.

- In Britain in 1981, 12% of families with dependent children were headed by lone parents. By 2006, this had doubled to 24%.
- In England in 2005/06, 32.6% of pupils receiving free school meals attained five or more grades A* to C at GCSE. The figure for pupils who did not receive free school meals – those from higher income families – was significantly higher at 60.7%.
- Between 1971 and 2006, the employment rate for working-age women in the UK rose from 56% to 70%.

The statements at the beginning of this introduction are not based on opinion or prejudice, guesses or gossip. They are based on research.

Research involves systematically collecting and analysing information. The term *data* is often used for information gathered as part of a research project. This chapter looks at sociological research methods – the methods used by sociologists to collect and analyse data.
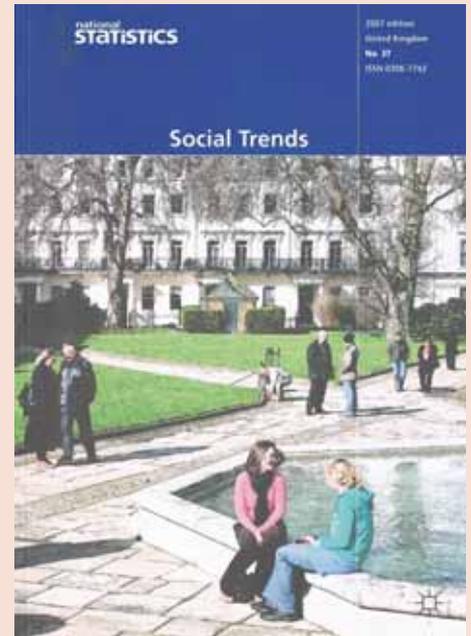
chaptersummary

- ▶ **Unit 1** looks at the kinds of data used in research.
- ▶ **Unit 2** provides an overview of the research process.
- ▶ **Units 3 and 4** look at two types of research – experiments and social surveys.
- ▶ **Units 5, 6 and 7** examine three methods of data collection – questionnaires, interviews and observation.
- ▶ **Unit 8** looks at secondary sources of data.
- ▶ **Unit 9** examines further types of research, including life histories, longitudinal studies and comparative studies.

Unit 1 *Types of data*

keyissues

1 What types of data do sociologists use?
2 How good is that data?

1.1 Primary and secondary data

One of the first questions sociologists ask when starting a research project is 'What kind of data will I use?' There are two main types of data – *primary data* and *secondary data*. Often researchers use both types.

Primary data refers to information which was not present before the research began. It is generated by the researcher during the actual process of research. It includes data produced by questionnaires, interviews and observations.

Secondary data refers to data which already exists. It includes data from historical records, official statistics, government reports, diaries, autobiographies, novels, newspapers, films and recorded music.

1.2 Quantitative and qualitative data

A second question sociologists ask when starting research is 'What form do I want the data in?' There are two forms of data – *quantitative data* and *qualitative data*. Researchers often use both forms.

Quantitative data This is data in the form of numbers. Examples of quantitative data are given in the introduction to this chapter. Here are some more examples from the year 2000. Twenty-six per cent of 16 to 24 year olds in England and Wales had taken cannabis in the past year.

In Britain, nine per cent of people with managerial/ professional occupations went to the opera in the past year compared to one per cent of people with unskilled manual jobs (*Social Trends*, 2002).

Quantitative data is particularly useful for measuring the strength of relationships between various factors. The above examples would be useful data for measuring relationships between 1) age and illegal drug use and 2) social class and leisure activities.

Qualitative data This refers to all types of data that are not in the form of numbers. It includes:

- Descriptive data from observations, eg a description of behaviour in a pub
- Quotes from interviews, eg a woman discussing her marriage
- Written sources, eg diaries, novels and autobiographies
- Pictures, eg photographs, paintings and posters
- Films and recorded music.

Qualitative data can often provide a richer and more in-depth picture of social life than the numbers provided by quantitative data. Many sociologists combine quantitative and qualitative data in their research.

1.3 Validity and reliability

A third question sociologists often ask when starting research is 'How good will my data be?' Ideally, they want data which is valid and reliable.

Validity Data is valid if it presents a true and accurate description or measurement. For example, official statistics on crime are valid if they provide an accurate measurement of the extent of crime.

Reliability Data is reliable when different researchers using the same methods obtain the same results. For example, if a number of researchers observed the same crowd at the same sporting event and produced the same description of crowd behaviour, then their account would be reliable. The method – in this case observation – produces reliable results.

However, reliable data may not be valid. Say the crowd was at a baseball match in the USA, and the sociologists were English and knew nothing about baseball. They may well fail to understand the crowd's responses to the game. As a result, their description of the crowd's behaviour may be reliable – they all produce the same descriptions – but invalid – their descriptions are inaccurate.

activity1 types of data

Item A World War 1 recruiting poster from USA

These Men Have COME ACROSS They Are at the Front NOW JOIN THEM ENLIST in the NAVY

Item B A Hamar woman
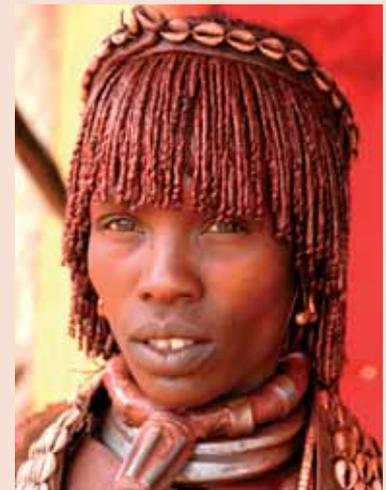
Item C Social class and leisure

Great Britain   Percentages

	Managerial/ professional	Other non-manual	Skilled manual	Semi-skilled manual	Unskilled manual
Sporting events	24	20	18	15	7
Plays	29	17	8	6	5
Opera	9	3	2	1	1
Ballet	7	3	1	1	1
Contemporary dance	4	2	1	1	1
Classical music	17	8	4	2	2
Concerts	19	17	13	9	5
Art galleries/Exhibitions	30	18	8	6	7

Source: *Social Trends*, 2002 Office for National Statistics

questions

1 What types of data are Items A, B and C, quantitative or qualitative? Give reasons for your answer.

2 How might a sociologist studying images of gender use Item A?

3 How might a sociologist use the data in Item C?

4 Ask 10 people what the rings round the neck of the woman in Item B indicate. Are their observations
a) valid, b) reliable?

These rings or torques made of iron are engagement presents. They indicate her future husband's wealth and are worn for life.

key terms

Data Information collected as part of a research project.
Primary data New data produced by the researcher during the research process.
Secondary data Data which already exists, which can then be used by the researcher.
Quantitative data Numerical data – data in the form of numbers.
Qualitative data All types of data that are not in the form of numbers.
Validity Data is valid if it presents a true and accurate description or measurement.
Reliability Data is reliable when different researchers using the same methods obtain the same results, ie the same description or measurement.

summary

1. Sociologists often use both primary and secondary data in their research.

2. Quantitative data is useful for measuring the strength of relationships between various factors.

3. Qualitative data can provide a rich and in-depth picture of social life.

4. Ideally, research data should be both valid and reliable.

Unit 2 *The research process*

keyissues

1 What practical and theoretical considerations influence the research process?

2 What ethical issues are raised by sociological research?

Designing a research project, conducting the research, and analysing the results involve a number of decisions. These include choosing a topic, selecting appropriate research methods, and deciding whether the research is morally right.

2.1 Choosing a topic

Choosing a topic for research is influenced by a range of factors. Some of these will now be briefly examined.

Values of the researcher Researchers are likely to study something they consider to be important. And what they see as important is influenced by their values. For example, a sociologist who believes strongly in equality of opportunity may study the relationship between social class and educational attainment, since there is evidence that class inequality prevents equality of educational opportunity. Similarly, a sociologist who believes in gender equality may study the position of women at work and in the home, comparing their workloads and rewards with those of men.

Values of society The values of researchers often reflect the values of society. Feminists have criticised mainstream (or 'malestream') society as male-dominated and based on male values. They have made similar criticisms about sociology. For example, sociological research has traditionally focused on male concerns and male interests. As a result, female issues have been seen as unimportant and, until fairly recently, as unworthy of research. For example, Ann Oakley (1974) broke new ground when she chose to research housework, a topic then considered by many male sociologists to be of little significance.

Values in society change and with them the priorities and concerns of researchers. Today, gender inequality is seen as a major issue. And in sociology it forms the focus of a large number of research projects.

Funding Choosing a research project is also influenced by a number of practical issues. For example, is it affordable? Most research projects conducted by professional sociologists require outside funding. Research funds are

activity2 choosing a research topic

Vegetable gardening

Women's jobs

questions

1   Choose one of these topics for research.
2   Explain why you have chosen this topic.
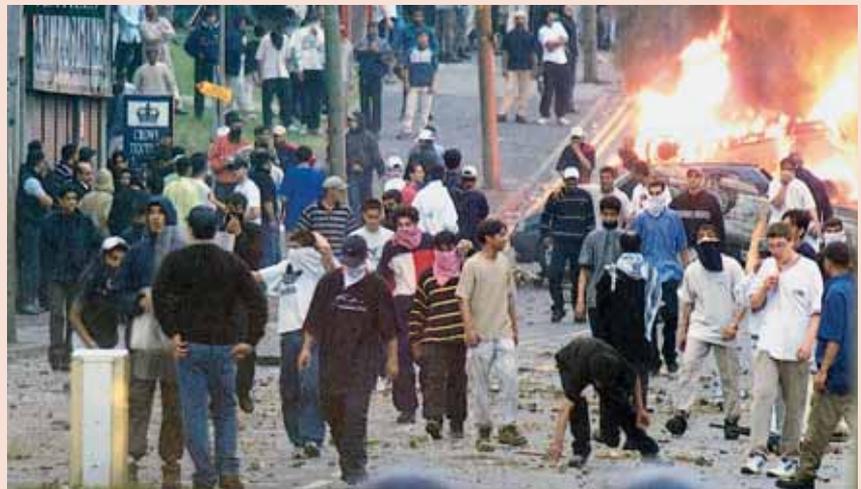
Asian and White rioters in Bradford, 2001

available from various sources – charitable foundations such as the Joseph Rowntree Foundation and the Runnymede Trust, government organisations such as the Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC), and industry. Each funding body has its own priorities. For example, industrial organisations will tend to fund projects dealing with their own particular concerns, such as solutions to stress in the workplace. The choice of research project is often shaped by the priorities of the funding body.

Availability of data It makes little sense to choose a research topic where there is little or no data available and little chance of producing it in the future. For example, there is probably insufficient data to conduct a study of child abuse in Anglo Saxon England. And there is little chance of conducting a systematic study of secret service organisations such as MI5 and MI6.

Theoretical position Choosing a research topic is also influenced by the theoretical position of the sociologist. As noted earlier, feminist sociologists will tend to select topics which reflect feminist issues – in particular gender inequalities.

Every theoretical position sees certain aspects of society as particularly important. For example, Marxism sees the class system as the foundation of capitalist society. As a result, Marxists tend to focus on topics such as class inequality, class conflict and class identity.

2.2 Choosing research methods

Having selected a topic, the researcher must then choose appropriate methods to collect and analyse data. The choice of methods depends on a number of factors. Some of these factors will be introduced briefly in this section and examined in more detail in later sections.

Practical considerations

Some methods are more suitable than others for conducting particular types of research. Think about the

problem of studying a teenage gang whose members sometimes commit illegal acts. They are often hostile to outsiders, particularly those they see as representing authority. Asking gang members for interviews or presenting them with questionnaires is unlikely to produce the required data. However, joining in their activities and gaining their trust can allow the researcher to obtain information by observing their behaviour. This method has been used successfully by a number of sociologists studying gang behaviour.

A researcher can only observe and record the behaviour of a small number of people. What if the research involved making general statements about the relationship between social class and criminal behaviour? Some sociologists have claimed that members of the working class are more likely to commit crime than members of other social classes. It would take a lifetime of observation to assess this claim. For purely practical reasons, some sociologists have turned to official statistics on crime to investigate the relationship between social class and criminal behaviour. (However, there are problems with the use of official statistics as Section 8.1 shows.)

Theoretical considerations

A number of sociologists suggest there are two main research traditions, or approaches to research, within sociology (Halfpenny, 1984). These 'approaches' are often called *interpretivism* and *positivism*. They are based on different views of human behaviour. They sometimes lead to the use of different research methods.

Interpretivism Some sociologists argue that understanding human behaviour involves seeing the world through the eyes of those being studied. People give meaning to their own behaviour and to the behaviour of others, they define situations in certain ways and act accordingly. To understand their behaviour, it is essential to discover and interpret the meanings and definitions which guide their actions.

This view of human activity is sometimes called interpretivism. Sociologists who support this view tend to favour particular research methods. For example, many see *participant observation* – observing the people being studied by joining their activities – as a suitable method for discovering the meanings which guide their actions.

activity3 choosing methods

Item A *Casual sex*

Laud Humphreys studied casual sex between gay men in public toilets in the USA. His main method of research was observation. He pretended to be a 'voyeur-lookout'. A voyeur doesn't join in but gets pleasure from watching the activities of others. A lookout warns of approaching police.

Source: Humphreys, 1970

Item B *Sex for money*

Don Kulick used observation to study transsexual prostitutes in Brazil during 1996. He rented a small room in a house with 13 transsexual prostitutes. The prostitutes are referred to as 'travestis'.

'I associated with travestis pretty much continually during those eight months, eating breakfasts of sweetened coffee and buttered rolls with them when they woke up about midday, chatting with them as they sat in doorsteps, plucking whiskers from their chins in the late afternoon sun, crowding onto mattresses with them as they lay pressed together smoking cigar-sized joints and watching late-night action movies on television. Every night, from about 8pm until 1 or 2am, I walked the streets with them at their various points of prostitution.'

Source: Kulick, 1998

question

Why do you think Humphreys and Kulick chose observation as their main research method?

A 'lady boy' transsexual prostitute in Bangkok, Thailand

Interpretivists also tend to favour in-depth, unstructured interviews since this method gives people the opportunity to talk about their behaviour as they see it. Asking them to fill in a questionnaire is unlikely to provide such freedom of expression.

Interpretivist sociology attempts to discover and understand the meanings and definitions that direct social life. It assumes that some research methods are better than others for this purpose.

Positivism By contrast, positivist sociology tends to model itself on the natural sciences such as physics and chemistry. It favours 'hard', quantitative data, rather than the 'soft' qualitative data often used by interpretivist sociology. It is less concerned with the meanings people attach to their behaviour and more with the behaviour itself.

Behaviour can be directly observed and quantified – for example, number of visits to the opera in one year. Meanings cannot be directly observed, they can only be interpreted, for example the meanings that direct people to go to the opera.

Positivist sociology attempts to measure behaviour by translating it into numbers. This makes it possible to use statistical tests to measure the strength of relationships between various factors. This may indicate causal relationships – that one factor causes another.

Some research methods are more likely to produce data in a numerical form. Questionnaires are an example. It is fairly easy to translate the answers to a questionnaire into numbers. And some existing data is available in a numerical form – for example, official statistics.

Positivist sociology attempts to explain human behaviour by discovering cause and effect relationships. It requires data in the form of numbers for this purpose. Some research methods are designed to do this and, as a result, tend to be favoured by positivist sociologists.

Social facts Positivists argue that sociologists should focus on social facts rather than actions which can be explained by the unique experience of individuals. Social facts are aspects of society – for example, the institutions and values of society. Social facts direct individual behaviour but have an existence outside individuals – they are part of the wider society. The following example illustrates this view.

Suicide is usually seen as a very personal act which can only be explained in terms of an individual's experience – for example, he took his own life because his wife left him and he was depressed. However, the suicide rate – the number of suicides as a proportion of the total population – can be seen as a social fact. It can be argued that the suicide rate is determined by factors in the wider society – by social facts external to the individual.

This view is illustrated in Activity 4, Item A which argues that one social fact – the level of social isolation in society – causes another social fact – the suicide rate. Here the explanation is social (found in society) rather than individual (found in individual experience).

Social facts are external to individuals and direct their behaviour. In this sense, they are similar to the forces which are external to and direct the behaviour of matter, which is studied by the natural sciences. According to positivists, this means that the methods and approaches of the natural sciences are often appropriate for the study of social facts.

Dividing sociologists into interpretivists and positivists is a simplistic and rough and ready division. However, it's a useful starting point for understanding different approaches to research. A flavour of this difference can be seen from Activity 4.

2.3 Ethical issues

Ethical considerations can have an important influence on the research process.

Ethics are moral principles – beliefs about what is right and wrong. In terms of research, ethics are the moral principles which guide research. Sociological associations in many countries have a set of ethical guidelines for conducting research. Sociology departments in universities usually have an ethics committee to ensure that research conducted by members of the department is in line with these guidelines.

There is a growing awareness that those who participate in research have rights and that researchers have responsibilities and obligations. For example, should participants be informed about the purpose of the research and what their participation involves? Should researchers make every effort to ensure that participants come to no physical or psychological harm? Is it ever justifiable to deceive participants about the purpose of the research? These are some of the ethical questions researchers should consider.

Informed consent Many researchers argue that those they are studying should be given the opportunity to agree or refuse to participate in the research. This decision should be 'informed' – information must be made available on which to base a decision to participate or not. Researchers should therefore provide information about the aims of the research, what the conduct of the research involves, and the purposes to which the research will be put.

Deception This means that information is withheld from participants and/or they are provided with false information. They may be unaware they are participating in a research study. They may be misled about the purpose of the study and the events that may take place during the research.

Clearly, participants cannot give informed consent if they are deceived. Is deception ever justifiable? Some researchers argue that deception is justified if there is no other way of gathering data. This means using a research method such as *covert (hidden) observation* so that people are unaware they are participating in research. Or, it means misleading participants about aspects of the research. For example, Humphreys (1970) gathered further

activity4 researching suicide

Item A *Explaining suicide*

In a famous study entitled *Suicide*, first published in 1895, the French sociologist Emile Durkheim examined the suicide rates of different groups in society. He compared the following groups and, using official statistics, found that in each case, the group on the left had a higher suicide rate than the group on the right.

<div align="center">

City dwellers : Rural dwellers
Older adults : Younger adults
Unmarried : Married
Married without children : Married with children

</div>

Durkheim argued that members of each group on the left are more socially isolated than those on the right. For example, married couples without children have fewer ties to bind them together than married couples with children.

Durkheim believed he had found a causal relationship between two social facts, the level of social isolation and the rate of suicide – the higher the level of social isolation, the greater the likelihood of suicide.

Source: Durkheim, 1970

questions

1 How do Items A and B illustrate positivism and interpretivism?
2 Explain Item C from a) Durkheim's and b) Atkinson's view.

Item B *Understanding suicide*

From an interpretivist view, suicide is a meaning which people give to certain deaths. The job of the sociologist is to discover why particular deaths are defined as suicides. From observations of inquests and discussions with coroners, the British sociologist J. Maxwell Atkinson believes that coroners have a picture of a typical suicide and a typical suicide victim. Road deaths are rarely seen as suicides whereas deaths by drowning, hanging, gassing and drug overdose are more likely to be interpreted as suicides. The typical suicide victim is often seen as a lonely, friendless, isolated individual with few family ties.

Source: Atkinson, 1978

Item C *A typical suicide?*

The Maniac Father and The Convict Brother Are Gone – The Poor Girl, Homeless, Friendless, Deserted, Destitute, and Gin Mad, Commits Self Murder.

(From a series of illustrations entitled 'The Drunkard's Children' drawn by George Cruikshank in 1848)

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information about some of the gay men in his research by calling on their homes and pretending to be conducting a health survey.

Privacy Researchers generally agree that participants' privacy should be respected. The problem here is that most research intrudes into people's lives. It has been argued that if participants consent to take part in research, then they accept this. However, they may be unaware of the extent of the intrusion. With hindsight, they may see it as an invasion of privacy.

Certain research methods, which are generally considered ethical, may result in an invasion of privacy. Take the case of the informal, unstructured interview – it often develops into a friendly chat between researcher and participant. In this relaxed atmosphere, participants may reveal all sorts of personal and private matters which they may later regret.

Confidentiality It is generally agreed that the identity of research participants should be kept secret. According to the British Sociological Association's *Statement of Ethical Practice* (1996), confidentiality must be honoured 'unless there are clear and overriding reasons to do otherwise'. It has been argued that when people in powerful positions misuse their power, then there may be a case for naming names (Homan, 1991).

Protection from harm There is general agreement that research participants should be protected from harm. This includes any harmful effects of participating in the actual research process and any harmful consequences of the research.

Publication of research findings may harm those who have been studied. For example, a study by Jason Ditton of workers in a bread factory revealed all sorts of fiddles and petty thefts. As Ditton himself recognised, management may well clamp down on such practices after publication of his book (Ditton, 1977).

Ethics and the research process As noted earlier, all researchers have values which define what is right and wrong. To some extent, these ethical values will affect every stage of the research process. If, for example,

researchers see poverty, male domination, racial discrimination, or private education as ethically wrong, then they may choose to study these topics in order to reveal the wrongs and discover ways to right them.

key terms

Interpretivism An approach which focuses on the meanings and definitions which guide and direct behaviour.

Positivism An approach which attempts to explain behaviour in terms of cause and effect relationships.

Participant observation A research method where the researcher joins the activities of those they are observing.

Social Facts Aspects of society which are external to individuals and which direct their behaviour.

Covert observation Hidden observation. Participants are unaware that they are being observed as part of a research project.

Ethics Moral principles – beliefs about what is right and wrong.

summary

1. The choice of research topic may be influenced by the
   - values of the researcher
   - values of society
   - type of funding
   - availability of data
   - theoretical position of the researcher.

2. The choice of research methods may be influenced by practical, theoretical and ethical considerations.

3. There are two main approaches to research in sociology – interpretivism and positivism. Each approach tends to favour particular research methods.

4. The research process is influenced by ethical considerations. Most sociologists believe that participation in research should be based on informed consent, that participants should be protected from harm, that their privacy should be respected and their confidentiality assured.

activity5 ethics and research

Item A The National Front

Nigel Fielding conducted a study of the National Front, which many, including Fielding, considered to be a vicious, racist organisation concerned with White supremacy. Part of his research involved attending local meetings of the Front, during which he concealed his real reason for being there. In order to avoid suspicion he contributed to discussions, appearing to be sympathetic to the Front's beliefs.

Source: Fielding, 1981

Item B Missing lessons

Val Hey studied friendship between girls. Her research was based on observation in two schools. She would sometimes give the girls small gifts and even excuses to miss lessons in exchange for cooperating in her research.

Source: Hey, 1997

Item C Illegal drug use

Smoking cannabis

In their study of illegal drug use, Howard Parker and his colleagues found that some of the responses to their questionnaires revealed that individuals were not coping with their drug use. The researchers had to decide whether to offer help and advice or maintain the confidentiality they had promised.

Source: Parker et al., 1998

questions

1 Why do you think Fielding chose to study the National Front?

2 Discuss the ethical issues involved in his research methods.

3 Do you think Hey (Item B) was justified in helping the girls truant from lessons? Explain your answer.

4 How would you have dealt with the problem faced by Parker in Item C? Give reasons for your decision.

(In the end, the researchers decided to treat each case individually.)

Unit 3 *Experiments*

keyissues

1 What are the main types of experiments?

2 Why are experiments rarely used by sociologists?

3.1 Laboratory experiments

For most people the word experiment conjures up a picture of white-coated researchers in a laboratory using scientific equipment to prove or disprove something. This is quite a good starting point for understanding the experimental method.

The main aspects of the experimental method can be illustrated by the following example. This experiment was conducted to test the *hypothesis* or supposition that, 'The speed of a boat depends on the shape of its hull'.

Controlling variables In order to discover the effect of hull shape on speed it is necessary to identify and control all the variables or factors which might affect speed. This is difficult to do outside a laboratory since variables such as wind strength and temperature cannot be controlled. In a laboratory, it is possible to control such variables and keep them constant so that hull shape is the only factor which

varies – from oval, to triangular, to rectangular, etc. In this way it is possible to find out how hull shape affects speed.

Quantifying results The results of experiments are usually quantified – presented in the form of numbers. Thus the speed of a model boat in the laboratory can be measured in centimetres per second using a metre rule and a stopwatch. Using a standard objective system of measurement is important as it reduces reliance on the judgement of the investigator and is therefore more likely to produce reliable data. And, it allows other researchers to *replicate* or repeat experiments and directly compare the results.

Correlation and causation If changes in one variable (eg, the shape of the hull) are matched by changes in another variable (eg, the speed of the boat) then there is a *correlation* between the two variables. But this does not mean that one causes the other. However, being able to control variables in a laboratory does help us to judge whether the correlation is causative rather than coincidental. In the case of the boat, the only apparent change is in hull shape so any change in speed is likely to result from this.

Laboratory experiments and people Laboratory experiments have been very successful in the natural sciences such as physics and chemistry. However, many

sociologists have serious doubts about their application to human beings. This is partly because people act in terms of their definitions of situations. They are likely to define laboratories as artificial situations and act accordingly. As a result, their actions may be very different from their behaviour in the 'real' world. An attempt to get round this is the *field experiment*, an experiment which takes place in people's everyday situations.

activity6 laboratory experiments

Item A Imitative aggression

A group of nursery school children watched an adult mistreating a Bobo doll – a large inflatable rubber doll – by punching it, kicking it and hitting it with a mallet. The experimenter, Albert Bandura, then exposed this group and another group who had not watched the violence to the following 'frustrating experience'.

The children were shown a room full of exciting toys and given the impression they could play with them. They were then told they could not play with them. They were then taken, one by one, to a room of unattractive toys which included a Bobo doll and a mallet. As Bandura had predicted, those who had earlier watched the mistreatment of the Bobo doll were more likely to imitate this behaviour and show aggression towards the doll.

Source: Bandura, 1973

Imitating adults – attacking a Bobo doll.

Item B The real world

Can the results of laboratory experiments be applied to the real world? For example, does the Bobo doll experiment suggest a link between violence in films and violence in real life? Unlike people, Bobo dolls are designed to be knocked around, they invite violent behaviour. As such, they are hardly suitable for an investigation into imitative aggression. Critics of experiments argue that the many differences between the laboratory situation and real life undermine any attempts to apply research findings to the claim that films promote aggressive or violent behaviour by imitation.

Source: Williams, 1981
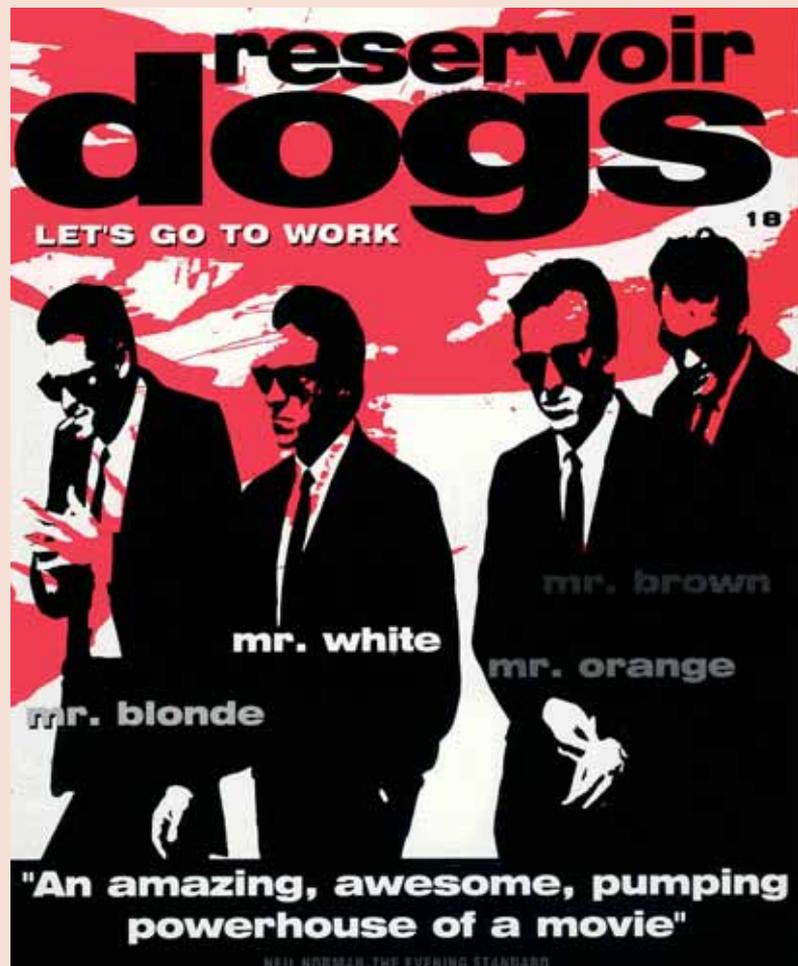
Described as 'sickeningly violent, appallingly funny and arrestingly accomplished', Reservoir Dogs became a cult movie in the mid-1990s (Chronicle of the Cinema, 1995).

questions

1 What hypothesis is being tested in Item A?

2 Do you agree with the views outlined in Item B? Give reasons for your answer.

3.2 Field experiments

Field experiments are conducted in normal social situations such as the classroom, the factory and the street corner. The following example was devised to test the effect of social class on interaction between strangers (Sissons, 1970). An actor stood outside Paddington Station in London and asked people for directions. The actor, place and request were kept the same but the actor's dress varied from a businessman to a labourer. The experiment indicated that people were more helpful to the 'businessman'. It could therefore be argued that people were responding to what they perceived as the actor's social class. However, there are other possibilities. For example, the actor may behave more confidently in his role as businessman and people might respond to his level of confidence rather than level of class.

Lack of control Field experiments are always going to be inexact and 'messy'. It is impossible to identify and control all the variables which might affect the results. For example, it is difficult, if not impossible, to control the social class of the people asked for directions in the above experiment. Most of them may have been middle class. If so, they may have been more helpful to the 'businessman' because he seemed 'more like them'.

The Hawthorne effect Whether in the laboratory or in more normal social contexts, people are often aware they are participating in an experiment. And this in itself is likely to affect their behaviour. This particular *experimental effect* is often known as the *Hawthorne effect* since it was first observed during a study at Hawthorne Works of the Western Electricity Company in Chicago in the late 1920s. The researchers conducted an experiment to discover whether there was a relationship between the workers' productivity and variables such as levels of lighting and heating and the frequency of rest periods. The researchers were puzzled as the results appeared to make little or no sense. For example, productivity increased whether the temperature in the workplace was turned up or down. The only factor which appeared to explain the increase in productivity was the workers' awareness that they were part of an experiment – hence the term Hawthorne effect.

Experimenter bias People act in terms of how they perceive others. They will tend to respond differently if the

key terms

Hypothesis A statement that can be tested about the relationship between two or more variables.
Variables Factors which affect behaviour. Variables can vary or change, eg temperature can increase or decrease.
Replication Repeating an experiment or research study under the same conditions.
Correlation A measurement of the strength of the relationship between two or more variables.
Laboratory experiment An experiment conducted in specially built surroundings.
Field experiment An experiment conducted in everyday social settings.
Experimental effect Any unintended effect of the experiment on the participants.
Hawthorne effect Changes in the behaviour of participants resulting from an awareness that they are taking part in an experiment.
Experimenter bias The unintended effect of the experimenter on the participant.

experimenter is young or old, male or female, Black or White and so on. People also tend to act in terms of how they think others expect them to act. This might explain the results in the experiment involving the actor dressed as a businessman and a labourer. He might be conveying two different expectations and this may affect the responses to his request for directions. For example, he may expect more help in his role as businessman and unintentionally convey this to the participants. The unintended effect of the experimenter on those being studied is known as *experimenter bias.*

Ethical questions Is it right to experiment on human beings? This depends partly on the nature of the experiment. Nearly everybody would reject the medical experiments performed on inmates against their will in Nazi concentration camps. However, fewer people would object to the actor asking directions outside Paddington Station. Should people be told they are the subject of an experiment? Yes, according to the British Psychological Society, unless it's absolutely necessary to deceive them, and then they must be told immediately afterwards (British Psychological Society, 1998).

summary

1. There are two main types of experiments – laboratory experiments and field experiments.

2. Experiments are often designed to test hypotheses.

3. Experiments are usually intended to measure the strength of relationships between two or more variables.

4. Ideally, laboratory experiments allow the researcher to control all the important variables.

5. Laboratory experiments have been criticised for creating

artificial situations. Critics argue that as a result, findings from laboratory experiments may not apply to everyday social situations.

6. Field experiments help to avoid artificiality, but they do not provide the same control of variables.

7. Both laboratory and field experiments have been criticised for experimental effects. As a result, their findings may be low in validity.

activity7 asking directions

Same man...

different response

questions

1 Suggest reasons for the different responses pictured above.

2 Using this example, outline some of the problems with field experiments.

Unit 4 Social surveys

keyissues

1 What is a social survey?

2 What types of sample are used for social surveys?

4.1 What is a social survey?

Survey data The National Readership Survey tells us that in 2000, *The Sun* was the most popular daily newspaper in Britain – read by 20% of adults. The International Passenger Survey tells us that Spain was the most popular overseas holiday destination in 2000 – visited by 28% of UK residents who had a holiday abroad. And the British Gambling Prevalence Survey informs us that the National Lottery Draw was the most popular gambling activity in Britain in 1999, with 65% of people aged 16 and over participating. (All figures from *Social Trends*, 2002.)

Definition The above information comes from *social surveys.* A social survey involves the systematic collection of the same type of data from a fairly large number of people. Social surveys are usually designed to gather information on the same variables – eg, age and cinema attendance – from those participating in the survey. This often means asking everybody the same set of questions.

4.2 Sampling

Nearly all social surveys are based on a *sample* of the population to be investigated. 'Population' is the term given to everybody in the group to be studied. The population might be adult males, female pensioners, manual workers, 16-19 year old students, parents with dependent children and so on. A sample is a selection of part of the population. Samples are necessary because researchers rarely have the time and money to study everybody in the population. For example, if their research was based on women aged 16 and over in the UK, it would cover over 23 million people.

Most researchers try to select a sample which is *representative* of the population. This means that the sample should have the same characteristics as the population as a whole. Thus, if a researcher is studying the attitudes of British women, the sample should not consist of 1000 nuns, 1000 women over eighty or 1000 divorced women since such groups are hardly representative of British women. With a representative sample, *generalisations* are more likely to be true – findings from the sample are more likely to be applicable to the population as a whole.

Sample design and composition

Sampling unit Who should be included in a sample? In many cases it is fairly easy to define a *sampling unit* – ie, a member of the population to be studied. Dentists, males between 30 and 40 years of age, females who own their own businesses, people with one or more GCE A levels, can be defined without too many problems. However, other groups are not so easy – how would you define a semi-skilled manual worker or a person living in poverty? Who would you include in a population of 'criminals'? Do you limit the population to those convicted of a crime? Or do you include everybody who has ever broken the law, in

which case you would include nearly every adult in the UK?

Sampling frame Once the research population has been defined, the sample is selected from a *sampling frame* – a list of members of the population to be studied. In some cases an appropriate sampling frame is readily available, eg the Electoral Register for a study of voting behaviour. In other cases researchers may have to rely on listings, such as the Postcode Address File or telephone directories, which may or may not be suitable for their purposes. And all listings have drawbacks – not everyone is included, they are often out of date, certain groups are likely to be over or under-represented, eg the poor are less likely to appear in telephone directories. Sometimes, those who have data needed for a sampling frame are unwilling to release it. This happened to Howard Newby (1977) when the Ministry of Agriculture refused to supply information for his study of Suffolk farmworkers. Newby had to use the *Yellow Pages* for his first sampling frame. Many farmworkers were absent from this directory and those included were probably unrepresentative of the group.

The design and composition of the sample will partly depend on the type of sample used. Some of the more common types will now be outlined.

Types of sample

Random samples A *random sample* gives every member of the sampling frame an equal chance of being selected. Every name is given a number and then a list of random numbers is used to select the sample. This avoids bias in selection. If researchers choose who to include and who to leave out, they may select a sample which supports their hypothesis.

Systematic samples This form of sampling systematically selects people from the sampling frame by choosing every 5th, 10th, 20th, or whatever, sampling unit. This method was used by Young and Willmott (1957) in their first study of Bethnal Green (see page 51). They selected every 10th name from the borough's electoral register.

Neither random nor systematic samples necessarily produce representative samples. Few sampling frames cover everybody in the research population. For example, on electoral registers certain groups are unrepresented (those not old enough to vote) or under-represented (the unemployed).

Even if the sampling frame covers the entire research population, a representative sample is not guaranteed. Simply because it *is* random, a random sample may select, for example, a disproportionate number of Labour voters from an electoral register. However, the larger the sample the less likely this will be. Systematic sampling can lead to an unrepresentative sample if the sampling frame is organised systematically. For example, a list of married couples in which husband follows wife would

lead to an all male sample if every 10th person was selected.

Stratified samples Stratified samples offer a solution to the problem of representativeness. The population is divided into separate *strata* in terms of one of more characteristics, eg age, gender, ethnicity, class. A sample is then drawn which reflects those characteristics. Thus if the aim is to reflect gender divisions in the UK, 51% of the sample will be randomly selected from the female stratum and 49% from the male stratum. In terms of gender, the sample will be representative of the population as a whole.

A stratified sample can only be selected if researchers have sufficient information. In some cases, this is fairly easy to obtain. For example, the distribution of age in the UK population can be obtained from census data and this can then be mirrored in the sampling frame. In other cases, the necessary information is difficult or impossible to obtain. Religion provides an example. How do we get accurate information on the distribution of atheists, agnostics, Catholics, Protestants, Muslims, Hindus and so on in the population as a whole? And even if we can discover this, available sampling frames such as electoral registers may be no use at all since they provide no information about religious belief and practice.

Quota samples A market researcher stands on a street corner looking for likely 'victims'. She has to find twenty women between the ages of 30 and 45 to answer a questionnaire on magazine readership. She fills her quota with the first twenty women passing by who a) fit the required age group and b) agree to answer her questions. The sample selection is not random – it is not randomly selected from a sampling frame. The researcher simply fills her quota from the first available bodies. This method is known as *quota sampling*. It is 'a method of stratified sampling in which the selection within strata is non-random' (Moser & Kalton, 1971).

Quota sampling is often used for opinion polls and market research. It has its advantages – it is simpler, quicker and cheaper than stratified random sampling. However, it is less likely to produce a sample which is representative of the research population. For example, where and when a quota is filled can make significant differences to the sample. Stopping people on the street during weekday working hours would exclude many people in paid employment. And the fact that researchers can choose who they interview can bias the sample still further. Faced with two young men one 'smart' and 'pleasant' looking, the other just the opposite, researchers would probably choose the former. In quota sampling, people in the same strata do not have an equal chance of being selected.

Snowball and volunteer samples Sometimes researchers have great difficulty obtaining people for their samples. First, lists for a sampling frame might not be available. Second, the research population might be so small that normal sampling methods would not supply the numbers needed. Third, members of the research population might

not wish to be identified. Think of the problems in locating the following: burglars, heroin users, collectors of ancient Greek coins, gay men, members of a Masonic Lodge. One possibility is to use a network of like-minded or like-situated individuals. This is the basis of *snowball sampling*, so-called because of its similarity to rolling a snowball.

Snowballing works like this. The researcher finds someone who fits the bill. They are asked to find another person who fits and so on. In this way a network of members of the research population is built up and this forms the basis for the sample.

Snowballing has the obvious advantage of creating a sampling frame where other methods may fail. However, it is unlikely to provide a representative sample since it is not random and relies on personal recommendation.

Volunteer samples provide an alternative to snowballing. Advertisements, leaflets, posters, radio or TV broadcasts, newspaper or magazine articles announce the research and request volunteers for the sample. Annette Lawson (1988) wrote a newspaper article about her study of adultery. She used the article to obtain a volunteer sample by asking readers who had experienced adultery to complete a questionnaire. Five hundred and seventy-nine readers responded to her request.

Volunteer sampling has much the same advantages and disadvantages as snowballing. In addition, volunteer samples are *self-selected* which may systematically bias the sample in a particular direction. For example, those who volunteer may have a particular reason for doing so.

4.3 Responding to surveys

Response rates It's one thing creating a representative sample, it's quite another getting everybody in the sample to participate in the survey. The *response rate* – the percentage of the sample that participates – varies widely. For example, Shere Hite's *The Hite Report on the Family* (1994) based on questionnaires in magazines had a mere 3% response rate, whereas everybody Ann Oakley (1974) asked to take part in her research on housework agreed to do so.

summary

1. Social surveys are designed to provide information about particular populations.

2. They are based on samples which aim to represent the research population as a whole.

3. Whatever type of sample is used, there is no guarantee that it will be representative.

4. A high level of non-response can result in an unrepresentative sample.

There are many reasons for non-response. They include:

1 Failure to make contact because people have moved, are on holiday, in prison, working away from home or simply out when the researcher calls.

2 Contact is made, but the interview cannot be conducted because the person is ill, deaf, experiencing some personal tragedy or can't speak English.

3 The person refuses to participate. Reasons may include no time, no interest, sees no point in the research, is suspicious of, dislikes, or is embarrassed by the researcher.

Problems of non-response Does non-response make the sample unrepresentative? Does it bias the sample and produce systematic error? Often the answer is we don't know since little or nothing is known about those who do not participate. Sometimes information on non-participants does become available. This happened in the surveys attempting to predict the 1992 General Election result. Opinion polls underestimated the Conservative vote by 8.5%. Over half of this underestimate was due to those who refused to participate – they were much more likely to vote Conservative. This produced an unrepresentative sample and in large part accounted for the failure to predict the election result (*Horizon*, BBC TV, 1994).

Evidence such as this suggests that non-response can be a serious problem.

key terms

Social surveys Systematic collection of the same type of data from a particular population.

Sample A selection from the research population.

Sampling unit A member of the research population.

Sampling frame A list of members of the research population.

Random sample A sample which gives every member of the sampling frame an equal chance of being selected.

Systematic sample A systematic selection of people from the sampling frame, eg every 10th member.

Stratified sample A sample which attempts to reflect particular characteristics of the research population. The population is divided into strata in terms of age, gender etc, and the sample is randomly drawn from each stratum.

Quota sample A stratified sample in which selection from the strata is not random.

Snowball sample Members of the sample select each other.

Volunteer sample Members of the sample are self-selected, eg they choose to respond to a questionnaire printed in a magazine.

Response rate The percentage of the sample that participates in the research.

activity8 sampling

Item A *A stratified random sample*

We wish to study the career plans of university students and have sufficient funds to interview 125. Before selecting the sample, the sampling frame is stratified into departments, eg Physics and Chemistry, and years, eg students in their first year of study. There are 5,000 students in the university and the sample of 125 is one fortieth of this total. The example below shows the numbers of students randomly selected from years 1, 2 and 3 in the Physics department.

Source: Arber, 1993

Stratification by department and year

Department	Year	Number in year	Number in sample
Physics	1	120	3
	2	100	3
	3	100	2
Total		320	8

Item B *A volunteer sample*

Shere Hite's (1994) report on family life in three Western societies received a great deal of publicity. Some of its 'findings' were dramatic. More than one in four women 'have no memory of affection by their father'. Four out of ten fathers frighten their sons with their violent tempers. And 31% of girls and young women 'report sexual harassment or abuse by a male family member'.

Hite's findings were based on 3028 completed questionnaires. Her sample was a self-selected volunteer sample. Hite distributed 100,000 questionnaires, mainly in

Will the readership of Penthouse, a men's magazine, provide a representative sample?

magazines such as *Penthouse* in America, *Women Against Fundamentalism* in Britain and *Nouvelles Questions Feminists* in France. Her statistics come from the 3% who responded. She claims that self-selected samples are acceptable as long as the study is large enough.

Source: Kellner, 1994

questions

1 Why do you think the researchers in Item A decided to use a stratified random sample?
2 According to one critic, Hite's 'findings' are rubbish (Kellner, 1994). Discuss this claim with reference to a) her sampling procedure and b) the response rate.

Unit 5 *Questionnaires*

keyissues

1 What are questionnaires?
2 What are their advantages and disadvantages?

5.1 What are questionnaires?

Questionnaires are lists of questions. They are the main method for gathering data in social surveys. They are sometimes handed to or posted to the respondent – the person answering the questions – and he or she is asked to fill them in. This is known as a *self-completion questionnaire*. They are sometimes read out by an interviewer who records the answers. This is known as an *interview questionnaire* or a *structured interview*.

Comparable data In theory questionnaires produce data

which can be directly compared. Everybody is answering exactly the same questions and are therefore responding to the same thing. Any differences in the answers will therefore reflect real differences between the respondents.

This is fine in theory. However, it's easier said than done. As we shall see, the same questions worded in exactly the same way can mean different things to different people. And in the case of the structured interview there is the problem of *interviewer bias* – the effect an interviewer may have on respondents' answers. Imagine how the age, gender and personality of an interviewer might affect your answers on a sensitive subject such as sexual behaviour.

Quantifiable data Questionnaires are usually designed to generate data which can be easily quantified – put into numbers. Here is an example from *British Social Attitudes: the 17th Report* (Source: UK Data Archive, 2000). It shows the percentage of respondents who chose each option. Constructing questions in this way makes it easy to quantify the results.

A frank scene in a film shows a man and woman having sex. How would you feel about this being shown on one of the regular television channels?

	% agreeing
Should not be allowed to be shown at all	23
Only after midnight	18
Only after 10pm	35
Only after 9pm	18
Only after 8pm	3
Allowed to be shown at any time	2

Numerical data lends itself to statistical techniques. It makes it possible to discover whether or not there is a correlation – a statistical link – between two or more variables.

Operationalising concepts Questionnaires are designed to measure things. And to do this, those 'things' must be *operationalised*, ie put in a form which allows them to be measured. How, for example, do you measure the strength of religious belief? The example below is from the 1998

Belief in God, Britain, 1998 (%)

I don't believe in God.	10
I don't know whether there is a God and I don't believe there is any way to find out.	15
I don't believe in a personal God but I do believe in a Higher Power of some kind.	14
I find myself believing in God some of the time but not at others.	14
While I have doubts, I feel that I do believe in God.	23
I know God really exists and I have no doubts about it.	21
Don't know and no answer.	3

Source: UK Data Archive, 1998

British Social Attitudes Survey. It is an attempt to measure people's belief in God. Respondents were asked to choose the statement which best fits their beliefs.

Operationalising concepts is difficult, especially when sociologists themselves cannot agree on their meaning. For example, how do we operationalise concepts such as poverty and social class? Often concepts are operationalised in different ways in different studies which means the results are difficult, if not impossible, to compare. And the problem of comparability becomes even greater when we attempt to discover what respondents really mean when they answer questions. This problem will be looked at shortly.

Coding answers Answers to questions are *coded.* This means they are classified into various categories. When concepts, such as belief in God, are operationalised, the questionnaire can be pre-coded. The responses to the Belief in God questionnaire are pre-coded into seven categories. The researcher simply has to count the number of people who choose each category. Quantifying the data is easy.

It is more difficult to code a written answer. Consider the following.

Question   Do you believe in God?

Answer   It depends what you mean by God. Do you mean a God that just exists apart from this world? Or, do you mean a God that controls what happens in this world? Sometimes, I think I believe in the first type of God.

This answer is difficult to code. Researchers usually have a list of categories in terms of which written answers are coded. Often, however, written answers don't fit neatly into a particular category. For example, the above answer would not fit neatly into any of the categories in the Belief in God questionnaire.

Written answers are sometimes difficult to code. As a result, they are difficult to quantify.

5.2 Types of questions

Closed questions There are two main types of questions used in questionnaires – closed and open. In *closed questions*, the range of responses is fixed by the researcher. The respondent usually has to select one answer from two or more given alternatives. The questions above on sex on television and belief in God are examples of closed questions. Here is a different example in which the respondent is asked to rank the alternatives provided.

Which do you feel are the most important factors in choosing a university? Please rank the following in order of importance to you. Number them from 1 = most important, to 7 = least important.

Closeness to a town or city
Good academic reputation
Good chance of getting a job after graduation
Attractive campus
Good social facilities
Good accommodation
Availability of real ale

Source: Newell, 1993

Closed questions are relatively easy, quick and cheap to classify and quantify. They are pre-coded in the sense that the categories are set and the respondent simply has to choose one or rank some. However, the researcher has chosen the available responses and in this respect is imposing his or her choice of alternatives on the respondent. Look at the question above on choosing a university. Can you think of any 'important factors' not given? There is a way round this problem by adding 'other, please specify' which asks the respondent to add, in this case, any other reasons for choosing a university.

Open questions An *open question* asks the respondent to answer a question in their own words. Open questions give the respondent more freedom, but coding the responses can be difficult and time consuming. In many cases it might be difficult to fit responses into a particular category.

Most researchers see closed questions as suitable for simple, factual data such as age, gender and income level. Open questions are usually seen as more suitable for data on attitudes and values where respondents are required to express how they feel. An open question allows them to say things in their own way.

5.3 Types of questionnaires

Self-completion questionnaires
Self-completion questionnaires can be left with respondents either to be picked up later or posted back to the researcher. *Postal questionnaires*, as their name suggests, are mailed to respondents with a request to mail them back to the researcher. Usually most of the questions in self-completion questionnaires are closed and pre-coded.

Self-completion questionnaires have the following advantages and disadvantages.

Advantages
- Inexpensive – no interviewers to pay, cheap to classify results.
- As a result, often possible to survey a large sample.
- Fast and efficient analysis possible with pre-coded closed questions. Answers can be easily quantified and entered straight on to computers.

- Postal questionnaires allow a geographically dispersed sample to be contacted easily and cheaply.
- No interviewer bias – the interviewer does not influence the respondent's answers.

Disadvantages
- A relatively low response rate – often well below 50% for postal questionnaires. This may destroy the representativeness of the sample.
- Respondents may not understand the questions or follow the instructions.
- Answers may be incomplete, illegible or incomprehensible.
- Closed questions may seriously limit what respondents want to say.

Structured interviews
In a structured interview the interviewer reads out the questions and records the responses in writing, on audio-tape or on a portable computer.

Advantages
- Response rate usually much higher than for postal questionnaires.
- Interviewers can explain the purpose of the research, clarify questions and ask for further details. This can result in more information.
- Respondents who cannot read and write can be included in the survey.

Disadvantages
- More expensive – interviewers are usually paid.
- Cost increases if sample spread over a wide area.
- Interviewer bias.

5.4 Questions and answers

Constructing a questionnaire is not easy. The researcher must make sure that questions are clear and unambiguous. Where possible, words and phrases should be simple and straightforward. Leading questions, eg 'Don't you agree that …' should be avoided as they direct the respondent to a particular answer. Questions should be meaningful and relevant – there's not much point in asking people if they've enjoyed their holiday abroad if they've never been out of the country. And, most importantly, the questions must mean the same thing to all respondents. If they mean different things respondents are, for all intents and purposes, answering different questions. And this means that their answers cannot be directly compared.

Researchers sometimes use a *pilot study* to iron out problems with questionnaires. They test the questions on a relatively small number of people who share the characteristics of the main sample. A pilot study can be invaluable for removing ambiguity and misunderstanding. Yet all the preparation in the world cannot completely remove the basic problems of questions and answers.

What do answers mean? Are respondents telling the truth? Yes and no. Are they giving the answers they think the researcher wants? Sometimes. Do all respondents understand the questions? Not always. Do the questions mean the same to all respondents? Probably not. Do respondents' answers reflect their behaviour in everyday life? Maybe. Given all this, what appears to be a precise, reliable and efficient research method – the social survey – may be nothing of the sort.

Creating an impression Everybody plays the game of 'impression management'. They try to manage the impression of themselves which others form. This can shape their responses to a questionnaire and more particularly to a structured interview. Consider the following example.

Survey after survey has shown a high level of church attendance in the USA, far higher than for any comparable Western industrial society. Yet figures produced by the churches tell a somewhat different story. For example, surveys conducted by Gallup suggested that 35% of Episcopalians (a type of Christians) in the USA had been to church in the last 7 days, yet figures from the churches indicated that only 16% actually did so. Why the discrepancy? It appears that many respondents were concerned with giving the 'right' answer to the interviewer – they wished to appear upright, decent and respectable and regular church attendance was, to many, a way of giving this impression (Bruce, 1995).

Examples such as this suggest that researchers must know as much as possible about what questions and answers mean to respondents. Only then can they write appropriate questions and be in a position to interpret the answers.

Words and meanings For a questionnaire to do its job, questions have to have the same meaning for all respondents. The following example from the USA illustrates how easy it is for a question to be interpreted differently. A survey of reading habits produced the unexpected result that working-class respondents read more books than middle-class respondents. This result was largely due to the interpretation placed on the word 'book'. Unlike most middle-class respondents, those from the working-class included magazines in their definition of books.

This illustrates that the more researchers know about those they study, the better the questions they ask and the better their interpretation of the answers.

5.5 Theoretical considerations

Positivism Two research traditions – positivism and interpretivism – were introduced on pages 146-147. As noted, positivists tend to favour 'hard', quantitative data. Positivist sociologists attempt to measure behaviour by translating it into numbers. This makes it possible to use

statistical tests to measure the strength of relationships between variables. This may indicate causal relationships – that one variable causes another.

It is fairly easy to translate the answers to a questionnaire into numbers. This is particularly so with closed questions. As a result, positivists tend to favour questionnaires as a method of producing data.

Interpretivism By contrast, interpretivists are concerned with the meanings which guide and direct human actions. Many interpretivists would reject questionnaires as a means of discovering meanings. They argue that questionnaires, particularly those with closed questions, fail to give people the freedom to talk about their behaviour as they see it.

summary

1. Questionnaires are the main method for collecting data in social surveys.
2. In theory, questionnaires provide directly comparable data.
3. Closed questions are pre-coded. They produce data which is easy to quantify.
4. Answers to open questions can be difficult to code and quantify.
5. Self-completion questionnaires and structured interviews each have their advantages and disadvantages.
6. It can be difficult to discover what respondents' answers actually mean.

activity9 asking questions

Item A On the toilet

A study based in Bristol asked nearly 2,000 people to fill out a questionnaire on how many times they went to the toilet during the week and the shape, size, consistency and texture of their faeces. They were required to tick whether it was 'like a sausage or snake but with cracks on its surface' or 'fluffy with ragged edges' and so on.

Source: O'Connell Davidson & Layder, 1994

Item B Non-existent videos

The Video Recording Bill was passed by the Conservative government in 1984. Its aim was to place strict controls on 'video nasties'. Survey evidence was used to support the bill. Children were given a list of video titles and asked to indicate which they had seen. Forty per cent claimed to have seen at least one of the video nasties on the list.

Later, Guy Cumberbatch presented children with a list of fictitious titles such as 'I vomit on your cannibal apocalypse'. Sixty-eight per cent claimed to have seen at least one of these non-existent videos.

Source: Harris, 1984
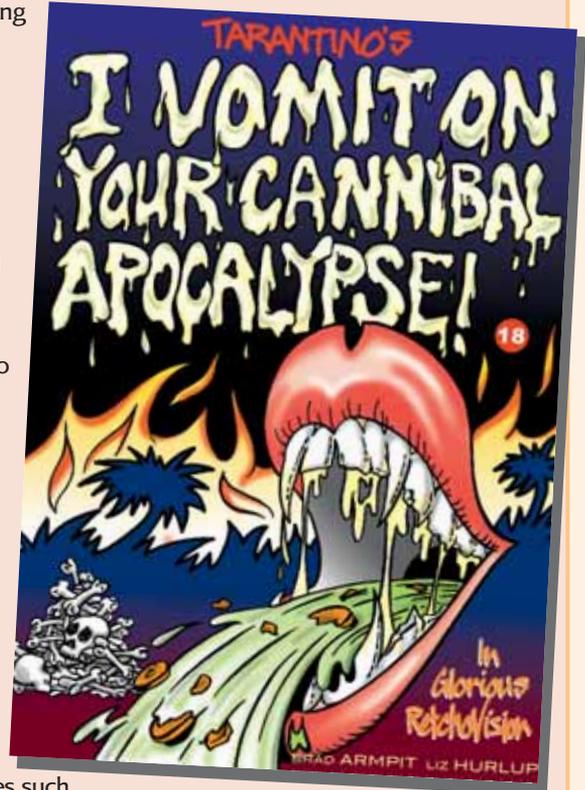
Have you watched this video?

Item C Saying one thing, doing another

In the early 1930s, Richard LaPiere, a social psychologist at Stanford University, travelled 10,000 miles across the USA with a young Chinese-American couple. At the time, there was widespread prejudice against Asians and there were no laws preventing racial discrimination in public accommodation. They visited 250 hotels, restaurants and campsites and only once were they refused service. After the trip, LaPiere sent a letter to all the places they had visited asking, 'Will you accept members of the Chinese race as guests in you establishment?' 92% said 'no', 7% said 'uncertain, depends on the circumstances' and only 1% said 'yes'.

Source: LaPiere, 1934

questions

1 Read Item A. Comment on the accuracy of the data which this questionnaire might produce.

2 What problems do Items B and C raise for interpreting answers to questionnaires?

Unit 6 *Interviews*

keyissues

1 What are the main types of interviews?
2 What are their advantages and disadvantages?

6.1 Types of interviews

Structured interviews As outlined in the previous unit, structured interviews are simply questionnaires which are read out by the interviewer who then records the respondent's answers. The same questions are read out in the same order to all respondents.

Semi-structured interviews Each interview usually has the same set of questions, but in this case the interviewer has the freedom to 'probe'. Respondents can be asked to clarify their answers, to provide examples, and to develop what they've said.

Unstructured interviews By comparison, unstructured interviews are more like an everyday conversation. They are more informal, open-ended, flexible and free-flowing. Questions are unlikely to be pre-set, though researchers usually have certain topics they wish to cover. This gives the interview some structure and direction.

Group interviews The interviews discussed so far involve two people – an interviewer and a respondent or interviewee. Group interviews involve the interviewer and a group of respondents – usually between 8 and 10 people. In some group interviews, the respondents answer questions in turn. In others, known as *focus groups*, participants are encouraged to talk to each other. They are guided rather than led or directed by the interviewer – for example, they are asked to discuss particular questions or topics.

Structured interviews – advantages and disadvantages

Why use different types of interviews? Each type has its strengths and weaknesses. Structured interviews have many of the advantages and disadvantages of questionnaires. They are particularly suitable for simple, straightforward, 'factual' information such as a respondent's age, gender, educational qualifications and occupation.

Structured interviews are seen as more likely to produce comparable data – since all respondents answer the same questions this should allow researchers to directly compare their responses and identify similarities and differences. Quantifiable data is more likely since questions can be structured to provide yes/no answers or choices between given alternatives. And, as structured interviews are more formal than other types, there may be less chance of interviewer bias.

However, structured interviews can place strict limitations on respondents' answers. This is particularly true of closed questions which force respondents to choose between pre-set alternatives. This prevents respondents from answering in their own words and in their own way.

Semi-structured interviews – advantages and disadvantages

This type of interview has many of the advantages of the structured interview. In addition, it allows the interviewer to probe – to jog respondents' memories, and ask them to clarify, spell out and give examples of particular points. This can add depth and detail to answers.

However, this gain is accompanied by a loss of standardisation and comparability (May, 2001). Although the basic questions are pre-set, probes are not, which results in non-standard interviews. This means that each interview is somewhat different. As a result, the data is not strictly comparable since, to some extent, interviewees are responding to different questions.

Group interviews – advantages and disadvantages

Focus groups are becoming increasingly common in sociological research. They have been used to study the effects of long-term imprisonment, victims of crime, conflicts within organisations and changes in working practices among steel workers (May, 2001; Walklate, 2000).

The results of focus group interviews are sometimes different from those of individual interviews. This does not mean that one is 'right' and the other 'wrong'. Interaction within groups affects people's opinions. Since much of our lives is spent in groups, it is important to obtain data from this source (May, 2001).

Some researchers find focus groups provide a rich source of qualitative data. In her study of victims of crime, Sandra Walklate (2000) claims that without the use of focus groups, many of the shades of meaning and subtleties of people's views would be lost.

Unstructured interviews – advantages

Unstructured interviews are often seen to have the following advantages.

Sensitive groups Some groups are less likely than others to provide information for researchers. They might be suspicious of outsiders, hostile towards them, afraid of them or simply uncomfortable in their presence. An

unstructured interview can allay these feelings as it provides an opportunity for understanding and trust to develop between interviewer and interviewee. This can be seen from the following example. Postal surveys were used in London to find out why people did not apply for welfare benefits to which they were entitled. The response rate was very low, due partly to fear and suspicion, a reaction often found amongst the frail and the elderly. Research indicated that a one-to-one interview was the most effective way of gaining information, in large part because interviewers were able to put respondents' minds at rest (Fielding, 1993).

Sensitive topics Unstructured interviews are also seen as particularly suitable for sensitive topics. Respondents may be more likely to discuss sensitive and painful experiences if they feel that the interviewer is sympathetic and understanding. Unstructured interviews provide the opportunity for developing this kind of relationship. Joan Smith's (1998) study about the family background of homeless young people produced detailed and in-depth information using unstructured interviews.

Respondent's viewpoint Structured and semi-structured interviews give respondents few opportunities to develop their answers and direct the interview into areas which interest them. The researcher has constructed the questions and, in the case of closed questions, the range of possible answers. In these respects the researcher has decided what's important.

An unstructured interview offers greater opportunity for respondents to take control, to define priorities and to direct the interview into areas which they see as interesting and significant. In this way, they have a greater chance to express their own viewpoints. And this can lead to new and important insights for the researcher.

Validity and depth If respondents feel at ease in an interview situation they will be more likely to open up and say what they really mean. Unstructured interviews can provide this opportunity. They are therefore more likely to produce valid data and to produce richer, more vivid and more colourful data. They also allow interviewers more opportunity to pursue a topic, to probe with further questions, to ask respondents to qualify and develop their answers. Because of this, the resulting data may have more depth.

Meanings and attitudes Many researchers see unstructured interviews as particularly suited to discovering meanings, values, attitudes, opinions and beliefs. People often take these for granted and find it difficult to spell them out. For example, what exactly are people's religious beliefs; what does music really mean to them; what do they really think about the welfare state? Unstructured interviews can explore such areas without the limitations of pre-set questions.

Meanings and opinions are not simple and clear-cut. There are shades of meaning. Opinions are not cut and dried, they are hedged with qualification. A skilled interviewer can encourage and enable people to spell out this complexity. Structured interviews with pre-set questions are unlikely to capture this range of meaning. However, not everybody agrees with this view. The British Social Attitudes Survey uses a very detailed structured interview and a self-completion questionnaire to discover attitudes on a range of issues.

Unstructured interviews – disadvantages

Interviewer bias Interviewer bias is unavoidable. To some extent the interviewer will affect the responses of the interviewee.

Interviewers are people with social characteristics – they have a nationality, ethnicity, gender, social class, age group and so on. They also have particular personalities – they may be shy or outgoing, caring or uncaring, aggressive or unaggressive. These social and psychological characteristics will be perceived in certain ways by interviewees and will have some effect on their responses. In some cases this may systematically bias the results.

A number of American studies have examined the effect of the social characteristics of interviewers and respondents. J. Allan Williams Jr (1971) claims that the greater the status difference between interviewer and respondent, the less likely respondents are to express their true feelings. He found that African-Americans in the 1960s were more likely to say they approved of civil rights demonstrations if the interviewer was Black rather than White.

Social desirability In general, people like to present themselves in a favourable light. This can result in respondents emphasising socially desirable aspects of their behaviour and attitudes in the presence of interviewers. As noted in the previous unit, Episcopalians in the USA tend to exaggerate the frequency of their attendance at church in order to appear upright and respectable (see page 158).

Respondents tend to be open about and even exaggerate aspects of their behaviour which they see as socially desirable, and to conceal or minimise aspects seen as undesirable.

Validity Do respondents tell lies? Is their memory hazy or faulty? Is what they say in interviews different from what they have done or will do? In some cases the answer is yes to all these questions. An instance has been given above in the case of church attendance. Voting intention is a case where people's intentions expressed in interviews and their actions at a later date are sometimes different. And there is evidence that some people tell downright lies, for example when recounting their sexual activity to an interviewer (O'Connell Davidson & Layder, 1994).

Comparability Interviews, particularly those at the unstructured end of the continuum, can develop in all sorts of directions. As a result, data from one interview to the next can vary considerably. This makes comparisons between data from different interviews difficult. It also means that generalisations should be treated with caution.

Coding and quantifying It is difficult to code and quantify much of the qualitative data produced by unstructured interviews.

6.2 The interview process

Books on research methods are full of advice on how to conduct effective interviews and how to avoid pitfalls and problems.

Non-directive interviewing The standard advice is to be *non-directive*, to avoid leading respondents and to allow them to express themselves in their own way. The idea is to minimise interviewer bias. It is important to establish *rapport* – a friendly and understanding relationship – while at the same time appearing sensible and businesslike. Interviewers should not be too familiar, they must maintain a certain distance or respondents will be unduly influenced. Probing is allowed, in order to get respondents to clarify or develop their answers, but it must be used with care as it can easily lead to bias (Fielding, 1993).

Active approaches Non-directive interviewing can result in an artificial situation which makes respondents feel uneasy. Some sociologists have found that non-directive approaches can be frustrating for both parties. Platt (1976) notes that respondents 'would have liked guidance on what I regarded as relevant, but I was anxious not to mould the data to my preconceptions by giving them any. This produced a few tortured interviews in which an unhappy respondent spoke at length on aspects of the research which it was probably clear were not of interest to me.'

There is some evidence that more direct and aggressive interviewing techniques can produce more information. Howard Becker (1971) used this approach with some success in his interviews with Chicago schoolteachers. He found that many of the teachers were prejudiced against working class and ethnic minority pupils, information they would not normally volunteer. However, by adopting an aggressive approach Becker states, 'I coerced many interviewees into being considerably more frank than they had originally intended'.

activity10 interviewing

Item A Interviewers

Item B Three interviews

Interview 1 An eight-year-old Black boy from Harlem in New York is interviewed by a 'friendly' White interviewer who presents him with a toy jet plane and asks him to describe it. The setting is formal. There are long silences followed by short two or three word answers, which hardly provide an adequate description of the plane.

Interview 2 Another Black boy from Harlem is interviewed. Again the setting is formal but this time the interviewer is Black and raised in Harlem. The boy responds in much the same way as the boy in the first interview.

Interview 3 The boy and the interviewer are the same as in the second interview. This time the interviewer sits on the floor, the boy is provided with a supply of crisps and his best friend is invited along. The change is dramatic. The boy is enthusiastic, talkative, and gives a detailed description of the toy plane.

Source: Labov, 1973

questions

1 You are being interviewed on a) your sexual behaviour and b) your views on race relations. Choose an interviewer for each interview from Item A. Explain your choices.

2 Explain the idea of interviewer bias using your answers to Question 1.

3 Suggest reasons for the similarities and differences between the three interviews in Item B.

Unit 7 *Observation*

keyissues

1 What are the main types of observation?

2 What are their advantages and disadvantages?

7.1 Participant observation

How do we really find out about the way of life of a group of people? One way is to join them – to participate in their daily activities and observe what they say and do. This research method is known as *participant observation*.

It was used by John Howard Griffin (1960) a White journalist who dyed his skin black in order to discover what it was like to live as a Black man in the southern states of America in the late 1950s. It was used by the anthropologist Bronislaw Malinowski who spent many years studying the Trobriand Islanders of New Guinea. He observed the most intimate details of their lives as he peered into grass huts gathering data for *Sex and Repression in Savage Society* (1927). And it was used by the sociologist Erving Goffman (1968) when he adopted the role of assistant to the athletics director in order to study the experience of patients in a mental hospital in Washington DC.

Ethnography

Participant observation is one of the main research methods used in *ethnography*. Ethnography is the study of the way of life of a group of people – their culture and the structure of their society. Often researchers attempt to 'walk a mile in their shoes' – to see the world from their perspective, discover their meanings and appreciate their experiences. Many argue that participant observation is the most effective method of doing this.

Participant observation gives researchers the opportunity to observe people in their natural setting as opposed to the more artificial contexts of the laboratory or the interview. It allows researchers to see what people do as opposed to what they say they do.

Participant observation has produced a number of classic ethnographies – Elliot Liebow's (1967) study of Black 'streetcorner' men in Washington DC; William F. Whyte's (1955) account of an Italian-American gang in Boston – and a range of anthropological studies of small scale non-Western societies from the Yanomamo of Amazonia (Chagnon, 1968) to the Mbuti of Zaire (Turnbull, 1961).

Gaining entry

Participant observation cannot work unless the researcher gains entry into the group and some degree of acceptance from its members. This can be difficult. Many groups don't want to be studied, especially those whose activities are seen as deviant or criminal by the wider society. However, as the following examples indicate, it is often possible to enter even closed groups.

For his research into casual sex between men in public toilets – the 'tearoom trade' – Humphreys (1970) acted as a lookout. By performing this useful and accepted role, he gained the trust of those he observed without having to join their sexual activities.

On other occasions, researchers have to participate more directly in order to gain entry. Dick Hobbs (1988) wanted to research the relationship between criminals and detectives in the East End of London. He agreed to coach a local soccer team when he discovered that Simon, a detective, was the father of one of the players. He developed a friendship with Simon who provided him with introductions and vouched for him (said he was OK). Hobbs also drank in *The Pump*, a local pub that was frequented by several detectives. These contacts enabled Hobbs to gain entry into the world of the detectives – he joined their conversations and observed their activities.

Sometimes researchers are forced into even greater participation to gain entry. Festinger (1964) found that the only way to observe a small religious sect was to pretend to be a believer and become a member of the sect.

The above examples are of *covert* research where the identity and purpose of the researcher are kept hidden. *Overt* research, where those being studied are aware of the researcher's role and purpose, has its own problems of access and acceptance. People often reject what they see as nosy, interfering outsiders, unless they are sponsored by a trusted member of the group who grants the researcher entry. This happened in Judith Okely's (1983) study of traveller-gypsies. Entry was a long and difficult process until she gained the friendship and trust of a family who had recently suffered a tragic death. The sympathetic and understanding relationship she developed with members of this family provided entry to the rest of the group.

Conducting research

Looking and listening Participant observation involves looking and listening. The general rule is to 'go with the flow' rather than forcing the pace and influencing people's behaviour. Since the aim is to observe people in their normal setting, the researcher must not disturb that setting. Blending into the background is usually recommended, though this is not always possible. For example, a participant observer in a classroom can stand out like a sore thumb. This can result in an 'artificial' lesson. However, it's surprising how soon he or she becomes invisible and taken for granted. In his study of a secondary school, Walford (1993) found that it took four weeks of observation before any class misbehaved. However, the situation changed rapidly after this time and Walford was soon watching 'mock wrestling' and chairs flying around the classroom!

Asking questions Watching and listening are not always adequate for the researcher's purposes. Sometimes a participant observer must take a more active role in order to obtain information. This usually involves asking questions. In such cases, the dividing line between participant observation and unstructured interviews is blurred. For example, William Whyte (1955) discussed his observations with Doc, the leader of the gang Whyte was studying, to the point where Doc became 'a collaborator in the research'.

The key informant Doc became a *key informant* – a member of the group who has a special relationship with the researcher and provides vital information. As noted earlier, Dick Hobbs developed a friendship with a detective called Simon. In Hobbs' (1988) words, Simon 'emerged as my principal police informant, granting me formal and informal interviews, access to documents, and introductions to individuals and settings that would otherwise be inaccessible'.

Hanging around A good deal of participant observation is informal, unplanned and unstructured – it consists of 'hanging around'. In his study of pilferage from the docks in St Johns, Newfoundland, Mars (1982) wandered round the wharves and sheds chatting to the dockers, and hung round bars drinking with them in the evening.

Recording observations Recording the findings of participant observation can be a problem, especially when

the research is covert. Researchers usually write up the day's findings each evening whilst events are still fresh in their mind. In some cases the toilet has proved a useful place to make brief notes, which are written up in a more detailed form later (Festinger, 1964; Ditton, 1977). However, a lot relies on the researcher's memory which is inevitably selective.

In the field Participant observation can be a long process with a year or more being spent 'in the field'. It can require dedication, stamina and courage. Researchers are often cut off from the normal supports of family and friends, sometimes living a double life in an alien setting. And participant observation can be dangerous. For example, Haralambos (1994) was threatened with guns on more than one occasion during his research into African-American music on the south side of Chicago.

Many of the advantages and disadvantages of participant observation have been mentioned already. Some of the more important will now be summarised.

Advantages of participant observation

Validity What people say and what they do are sometimes very different, as indicated earlier in the units on questionnaires and interviews. Participant observation offers the chance to discover what people actually do, the chance to obtain valid data. For example, Haralambos (1994) observed African-Americans who a few hours earlier had said they disliked blues, singing and dancing to blues music and quite obviously enjoying themselves.

Insight Looking back on his observation of a street-corner gang in Boston, William Whyte noted, 'As I sat and listened, I learned the answers to questions that I would not have had the sense to ask if I had been getting my information solely on an interviewing basis'. This comment has been echoed by many participant observers. For example, during her observation of the Moonies, a religious movement, Eileen Barker (1984) handed out leaflets advertising a concert organised by the Moonies at the Royal Albert Hall. She found that trying to convince members of the public to take an interest actually helped to convince her that the concert was a worthwhile activity. Barker's participation provided an insight into the workings of religious sects – by selling the group's beliefs to others they are actually selling those beliefs to themselves.

Other research methods rely to a greater extent on prior knowledge. For example, to ask relevant questions in an interview you must already know something about the group under investigation. Participant observation can provide the kind of insight, fresh information and new directions for research which are less likely to come from other methods.

Insider's view Many supporters of participant observation argue that it offers the best opportunity to discover how people see the world in which they live. Other research methods are more likely to reflect the priorities of the researcher to the exclusion of those of the researched. For example, the designer of a questionnaire has decided what is relevant and significant and this may bear little relationship to the lives of those being studied.

By watching and listening, a participant observer has the chance to discover the priorities and concerns, the meanings and definitions of people in their everyday situations. There may therefore be less likelihood of distorting people's view of the world.

Practicality Sometimes participant observation may be the only method with any chance of success. Some groups are closed to outsiders – their members reject requests for information. Such groups may include those involved in criminal activity, those whose behaviour is regarded as deviant by the wider society (eg, certain religious sects) and those who are hostile to the wider society (eg, some members of ethnic minority groups). Under these circumstances, joining the group, participating in its members' activities, obtaining their cooperation and even their trust, may be the only way of obtaining information.

Disadvantages of participant observation

Time, money and personal cost As already noted, participant observation can involve personal cost – stress and even danger. And costs in terms of time and money can be considerable – some researchers spend years in the field. However, given the quality of information that participant observation can produce, many would see these costs as reasonable.

Loss of objectivity The personal involvement which participant observation demands can reduce objectivity. An observer can identify so strongly with a group that the behaviour of its members is invariably seen in a positive light. In rare cases, this identification is carried to its extreme – observers 'go native', join the group and never return to their former lives.

Conversely, researchers can view those they observe in a negative light. Something of this can be seen from the Policy Studies Institute study of policing in London. At times researchers had to walk away from situations when they found the behaviour of the police racist and offensive. This does not necessarily result in a biased view, but it does little to encourage objectivity.

Changing behaviour Would you change your behaviour if a participant observer joined your social circle? The answer is yes, even if you weren't aware you were being observed. This is how 'Doc', William Whyte's main informant in the streetcorner gang, saw the effect of participant observation on his own behaviour. In Doc's words, 'You've slowed me up plenty since you've been down here. Now, when I do something, I have to think what Bill Whyte would want to know about it and how I can explain it. Before, I used to do things by instinct' (Whyte, 1955).

Given the importance of observing everyday life in its

normal setting, do comments like this invalidate the findings of participant observation? While recognising the problem, many researchers would say no. After a while most people get used to an observer and carry on more or less as normal. This is how David Hargreaves (1967) saw his effect as a participant observer in a boys' secondary school. 'Initially my presence caused changes in the boys' behaviour though once they became accustomed to me, they behaved normally.'

Replication Participant observation studies are difficult, if not impossible, to replicate – repeat under the same or very similar conditions. There are various reasons for this. Participant observation is often unsystematic – there are no fixed procedures; things happen and the observer tags along.

Participant observation relies heavily on the personal qualities of the researcher. To some degree, these qualities will affect how well they get on with those they observe, what they see and how they interpret it. And this reduces the chance of replication, as the following example suggests. In the late 1920s, Robert Redfield (1930) studied the village of Tepoztlan in Mexico. He found a close-knit society characterised by cooperation and a strong sense of belonging. Seventeen years later, Oscar Lewis (1951) studied the same village. He pictured a society divided by fear, envy and distrust. Maybe the differences were due to changes during the intervening years but, more probably, they reflect differences between the two observers.

Generalisation Sample sizes in participant observation studies are small. The researcher can't be everywhere observing large numbers of people. In view of the small numbers, it is not possible to generalise from the findings of participant observation. However, these findings can be used to refute or support generalisations from larger studies. Or they can produce fresh insights which can then be investigated on a larger scale.

Ethical questions All research involves ethical issues – questions of right and wrong. Participant observation, particularly when it is covert (hidden), brings these issues centre stage. According to the British Sociological Association, sociologists should explain the purpose of their research to those they study. However, these are guidelines rather than hard and fast rules (Hornsby-Smith, 1993).

Many sociologists would justify covert research under particular circumstances. For example, Nigel Fielding (1993) justified his covert observation of the National Front 'on the basis that this racist group was particularly hostile to sociology'. Laud Humphreys (1970) argues that covert participant observation is the only practical way to observe the 'tearoom trade' – casual sexual encounters between gay men in public toilets. He justifies his research because it destroys various harmful myths – for example, straight people are not drawn into gay sex – and it shows that gays are *not* a threat to society and that extensive police surveillance is therefore unnecessary.

Theoretical considerations

Positivism From a positivist viewpoint, participant observation has its uses. It provides information which can be used to construct relevant and meaningful questions for a questionnaire. And this will produce quantifiable data.

However, as an end in itself, a participant observation study is not particularly useful. It produces little if any quantifiable data. And the numbers observed are small – too small to provide a representative sample which can form a basis for generalisations.

Interpretivism As noted earlier, participant observation gives the researcher an opportunity to capture the 'insider's view' – to see the world from the point of view of those being observed. Interpretivists are concerned with the meanings and definitions which direct action. Often these meanings and definitions are taken for granted. People are not aware of them. Observing their behaviour provides an opportunity for the researcher to interpret these taken-for-granted meanings. As a result, interpretivists tend to favour participant observation as a method for collecting data.

7.2 Non-participant observation

The researcher need not participate to observe people's behaviour. A *non-participant observer* is like a birdwatcher in a hide, observing behaviour without joining in. For example, a researcher may secretly observe children's behaviour in a school playground from an upstairs room in the school. They may use a *behaviour schedule* – a checklist of activities which are noted as and when they occur.

Compared to participant observation, non-participant observation has a number of advantages and disadvantages.

Advantages

- The observer is less likely to influence the group, especially if group members are completely unaware of his or her presence.
- Researchers have more opportunities for using research aids such as behaviour schedules and notebooks.

Disadvantages

- As non-participants, researchers have fewer opportunities for discovering the meanings which direct the actions of those they observe.
- As a result, researchers are more likely to impose their own interpretations and meanings on to behaviour they observe (O'Connell Davidson & Layder, 1994).

key terms

Participant observation The researcher participates in the activities of those he or she is observing.

Ethnography The study of the way of life of a group of people. It often involves an attempt to see the world from their point of view.

Covert research The identity of the researcher and purpose of the research are hidden from those being studied.

Overt research The identity of the researcher and purpose of the research are made clear to those being studied.

Key informant A member of a group being observed who develops a close relationship with the researcher and helps them by answering questions, introducing them to other members, and so on.

Non-participant observation The researcher observes, but does not participate in the activities of those being studied.

Behaviour schedule A checklist of activities which are noted on the schedule when they occur.

summary

1. Many researchers argue that participant observation is the most effective method of seeing the world from the perspective of those being studied.

2. Participant observation involves looking and listening.

3. The advantages of participant observation include:
   - The chance to discover what people actually do
   - The chance to gain new insights
   - The opportunity to take the insider's view
   - Practicality – it may be the only method with a chance of success.

4. The disadvantages of participant observation include:
   - Time, money and personal costs
   - A possible loss of objectivity
   - The possibility of changing the behaviour of those observed
   - Difficulties in replicating research
   - Small samples, therefore not possible to generalise
   - Ethical problems, particularly with covert observation.

5. Non-participant observation is less likely to affect the behaviour of those observed. But, it provides fewer opportunities for discovering the meanings which direct their actions.

activity11 participant observation

Item A Just hang around

The following extract is taken from William Whyte's participant observation study of an Italian-American gang.

Sometimes I wondered whether just hanging on the street corner was an active enough process to be dignified by the term 'research'. Perhaps I should be asking these men questions. However, one has to learn when to question and when not to question as well as what questions to ask.

I learned this lesson one night in the early months when I was with Doc (the gang leader) in Chichi's gambling joint. A man from another part of the city was regaling us with a tale of the organisation of gambling activity. I had been told that he had once been a very big gambling operator, and he talked knowingly about many interesting matters. He did most of the talking, but the others asked questions and threw in comments, so at length I began to feel that I must say something in order to be part of the group. I said: 'I suppose the cops were all paid off?'

The gambler's jaw dropped. He glared at me. Then he denied vehemently that any policemen had been paid off and immediately switched the conversation to another subject. For the rest of that evening I felt very uncomfortable.

The next day Doc explained the lesson of the previous evening. 'Go easy on that "who", "what", "why", "when", stuff, Bill. You ask those questions, and people will clam up on you. If people accept you, you can just hang around, and you'll learn the answers in the long run without even having to ask the questions.'

Source: Whyte, 1955

Whyte's research was carried out in the Italian-American community of South Boston. Many east coast American cities have large Italian communities. This picture shows 'Little Italy' in New York.

Item B *In the classroom*

The following extract is taken from David Hargreaves's study of an all-boys secondary school in England. He sat at the back of the classroom to observe lessons. Later, he talked to some of the boys about the behaviour of the teachers. This is what they said.

'When you're in he tries to act calmly as though he's a little angel and all that.'

'They put on a show for you. They put the good act on, smiles and all that.'

'Like if Mr O's getting mad 'cos someone's ripped a book or something, but if you're in he seems to drop it. If you weren't there, he'd get real mad.'

Source: Hargreaves, 1967

Item C *In the pub*

Dick Hobbs's research involved much heavy drinking in pubs and he experienced some of the dangers of 'going native'. He writes: 'I often had to remind myself that I was not in a pub to enjoy myself but to conduct an enquiry and repeatedly woke up the following morning with an incredible hangover facing the dilemma of whether to bring it up or write it up'.

Source: Hobbs, 1988

Item D *Backstage*

As part of his research, Rubenstein completed police training and rode as an 'armed observer' in patrol cars in Philadelphia – and perhaps that degree of involvement has helped to produce what will surely become a classic. His *City Police* is an insider's view of backstage police behaviour. In microscopic detail, Rubenstein takes us into the policeman's world. The information he collected on violence and corruption could only have been gained by a trained observer who was accepted by the policemen.

Source: *Punch*, 1979

questions

1 Item A points to one of the main problems of participant observation. What is this problem and how is it usually dealt with?

2 What are the advantages and disadvantages of participant observation indicated by Items B, C and D?

Unit 8 *Secondary sources*

keyissues

1 What are the main secondary sources of data?

2 What are the advantages and disadvantages of using these sources?

Primary data So far, this chapter has been mainly concerned with *primary data* – data produced by researchers using methods such as questionnaires, interviews and observation. Primary data is new data that did not exist before the research began.

Secondary data There is a vast range of existing information which is available for sociological research. It includes letters, diaries, novels, autobiographies, legal documents, parish records, official statistics, newspapers, magazines, television and radio programmes, recorded

music, films, photographs and paintings. These sources of information are known as *secondary sources* and the data itself as *secondary data*.

This unit looks at a number of secondary sources and assesses the usefulness of secondary data.

8.1 Official statistics

Sources of official statistics

Official statistics are numerical data produced by national and local government bodies. They may be a by-product of the normal workings of a government department. For example, the claimant count measure of unemployment – a measure of unemployment based on the number of people who claim unemployment-related benefit – is a by-product of administering the benefit system. Or official statistics may result from research designed to produce them – for example, the Labour Force Survey collects information on unemployment from a quarterly survey of 60,000 households.

Official statistics cover a wide range of behaviour including births, deaths, marriage and divorce, the distribution of income and wealth, crime and sentencing and work and leisure. The following are among the main sources of official statistics.

1 **Government departments** Departments such as Children, Schools and Families and the Home Office regularly request information from organisations such as local tax offices, social services departments, hospitals, job centres and police stations. This information is then processed and much of it published.

2 **Surveys** The Office for National Statistics is the government agency responsible for compiling and analysing many of the UK's economic, social and population statistics. Surveys are a major source of statistical data. Every ten years the Office for National Statistics carries out the Census of the Population which covers every household in the UK. Each head of household must, by law, complete a questionnaire that deals with family composition, housing, occupation, transport and leisure. Other large scale surveys include the annual General Household Survey based on a detailed questionnaire given to a sample of nearly 12,000 people and the New Earnings Survey based on a 1% sample of employees drawn from Inland Revenue PAYE records.

Using official statistics

Official statistics provide a vast array of quantitative data. However, sociologists cannot accept them at face value – they must use them only with care and caution. It is essential to bear the following points in mind.

How are official statistics constructed? Sociologists must know how official statistics are constructed in order to assess the quality of the data they provide. The example of unemployment statistics shows why.

As noted earlier, there are two main sources of data for unemployment statistics – the benefit system and social surveys. And there are two main definitions of unemployment – the claimant count definition which uses data from the benefit system, and the International Labour Organisation definition which uses data from the Labour Force Survey. Although both measures show broadly the same levels of and trends in unemployment, there are differences.

Sociologists using official statistics on unemployment should be aware of how these statistics have been constructed. This applies to all official statistics, no matter what the topic.

Who decides what statistics are collected and published?
Official statistics are government statistics. Elected representatives and government officials decide what information is important and useful and, on this basis, what data to collect and publish. And, maybe more importantly, they decide what *not* to collect and publish.

These decisions may be 'political'. They may reflect the concerns and priorities of government rather than a desire to provide sound and reliable information. For example, Muriel Nissel, the first editor of *Social Trends*, an annual publication of the Office for National Statistics has written, 'From time to time, there has been great pressure on directors of statistics in departments to withhold or modify statistics, particularly in relation to employment and health, and professional integrity has forced some to threaten resignation' (Nissel, 1995).

Are official statistics politically biased? Does the actual construction of statistics reflect government interests? Are they shaped to present the government of the day in a favourable light? The following evidence suggests that in some cases this might happen.

According to the Labour Party, Conservative governments changed the method used to count unemployment over 30 times between 1982 and 1992. And in practically every case, these changes resulted in a drop in the official level of unemployment (Denscombe, 1994). At best, some would argue, this is politically convenient, at worst it is outright fiddling to present the government in a better light.

Do official statistics provide valid measures?

Do official statistics really measure what they claim to measure? For example, do the annual crime statistics produced by the Home Office provide an accurate measurement of crime? Even the Home Office accepts that the answer is no. Similar criticisms can be made for a range of official statistics from unemployment and suicide to the distribution of income and wealth.

The problem of validity was examined with reference to suicide statistics in Activity 4. It is looked at again in terms of crime statistics in Activity 12.

Advantages of official statistics Despite the above warnings, official statistics can be very useful for sociological research. They have the following advantages.

- Published statistics are readily available and cost little or nothing to use.
- Care is taken to select representative samples and sample sizes are often large. Surveys as large as the General Household Survey are usually outside sociologists' research budgets.
- Many government surveys are well planned and organised with detailed questionnaires or interview schedules. As such, they meet the standards of sociological research.
- Surveys are often conducted regularly, for example on a fortnightly, monthly, annual or ten yearly basis. This can allow for comparisons over time and the identification of trends.
- Sometimes official statistics are the only major source of information on a particular topic.

Perspectives on official statistics

A positivist view From this perspective (see pages 146-147), official statistics are a potentially valuable source of quantitative data. They have their faults but, in may cases, they provide measures of behaviour that can be used to investigate possible cause and effect relationships.

An interpretivist view From this perspective (see page 146), official statistics are not 'facts', they do not represent some objective reality 'out there' in the real world. Instead, they are definitions and meanings in terms of which people construct social reality. The job of the sociologist is to discover these meanings and how they are constructed. For example, an interpretivist sociologist would not use suicide statistics to explain why people commit suicide. Instead, they would ask why certain kinds of death are defined as suicide. In this sense, suicide is a meaning (see page 146).

Take crime statistics. The question is not whether they are accurate or inaccurate. A crime is simply a meaning given to an event. And the job of the sociologist is to understand how this meaning is constructed.

A Marxist view From a Marxist viewpoint, official statistics are an aspect of ruling class ideology. Generated by government departments and agencies, official statistics derive from questions asked by, information processed by, and results either suppressed or made public by a state which represents the interests of the capitalist class. As such, they provide information which helps to maintain and justify the power of capital and disguise the reality of exploitation and oppression.

key term

Official statistics Statistics produced by local and national government, government agencies and organisations funded by government.

summary

1. Sociologists using official statistics should be aware of how those statistics have been constructed.
2. Decisions on what statistics to collect and publish may be politically biased.
3. In some cases, official statistics fail to produce valid measures.
4. Official statistics can provide valuable data for sociological research.
5. Positivists see official statistics as a potentially valuable source of quantitative data. Interpretivists see official statistics as meanings in terms of which people construct their social reality. Marxists see official statistics as an aspect of ruling class ideology.

activity12 crime statistics

Item A Ethnicity and crime

In 2005, Black Caribbeans and Black Africans made up around 3% of the UK population, but 15% of the prison population.

The police rely on the public to report crimes to them. Evidence indicates that White people are more likely to report Black rather than White suspects. Black males were five times more likely to be stopped by police under stop and search powers. If arrested for the same offence, Blacks were more likely to be charged than their White counterparts. And if found guilty of the same offence, Black people were more likely to be sent to prison.

Research indicates that statistics which link ethnicity and crime result from a series of decisions based on prejudice and discrimination. This is why so many Black people end up in prison.

Source: May, 2001 and Prison Reform Trust, 2006

Stop and search in Brixton, South London

Item B *The social construction of crime statistics*

Excluded from crime statistics | Included in crime statistics

All criminal acts committed

Not observed ← → Observed by public or police

Not reported ← → Reported to police

Not taken seriously ← → Taken seriously by police

Not detected ← → Detected

Not charged ← → Charged

Not guilty ← → Found guilty
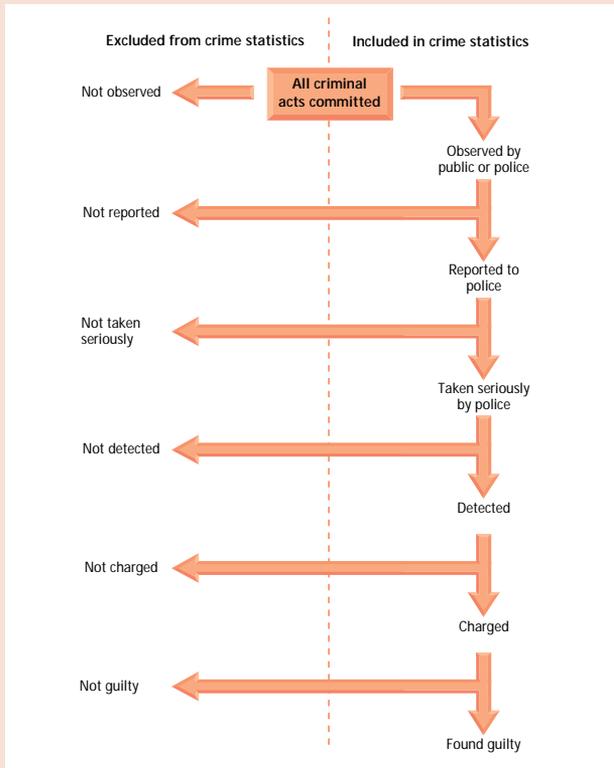
questions

1 a) What are the statistics in Item A actually measuring?

   b) Do they indicate a link between ethnicity and crime?

2 Look at Item B.

   a) Why does it suggest that crime statistics must be treated with caution?

   b) Item B assumes that there are such things as 'criminal acts' which are either included in or excluded from official statistics. Criticise this view.

8.2 Documents

The term *documents* covers a wide range of written and recorded material. It includes letters, diaries, memoirs, autobiographies, novels, newspapers, advertisements, posters, photographs and radio and television broadcasts.

This section looks at some of the ways sociologists have analysed documents. Ray Pawson (1995) distinguishes three main types of analysis, 1) formal content analysis, 2) thematic analysis and 3) textual analysis.

Formal content analysis

This method attempts to classify and quantify the content of a document in an objective manner. Say you were interested in the portrayal of gender roles in children's fiction published during the last five years. You could take a sample of the books and analyse each in terms of the same pre-set categories. For example, which activities are shared by girls and boys and which are limited to one or the other. The results are then quantified and interpreted. If, for example, preparing food and taking care of younger brothers and sisters is limited to girls, then it could be argued that gender roles remain distinct.

Critics accept that formal content analysis can often effectively measure simple straightforward aspects of content – see the example in Activity 13, Item A. However, they argue that it says little about the meaning of a document, either in terms of its meaning to the audience or the meaning the producer intends to communicate.

Thematic analysis

This approach looks for the motives and ideologies which are seen to underlie documents. For example, a news broadcast may reflect the interests of powerful groups in society. The job of the researcher is to uncover this underlying ideology. The Glasgow University Media Group combined content and thematic analysis in their analysis of TV news broadcasts in the 1970s and 80s. They made a strong case that there is a pro-management, anti-union bias in the reporting of industrial disputes.

However, there are a number of problems with thematic analysis. Who is to say that the sociologist's interpretation of the underlying ideology is correct? And if it is correct, does the existence of such ideology matter? Readers of *The Sun*, for instance, may see through or ignore or be unaware of its right-wing views. This may well explain why a significant minority of *Sun* readers regularly vote Labour.

Textual analysis

Rather than looking for underlying ideologies, this method involves a close examination of the 'text' of a document to see how it encourages a particular reading and creates a particular impression. Ray Pawson (1995) gives the following example from a newspaper headline, GIRL GUIDE, 14, RAPED AT HELLS ANGELS CONVENTION. This is an example of the 'innocent victim'/'wicked perpetrator' pair which creates the impression of two extremes, one good, the other evil. It is one of the many

tricks of the trade used to convey particular messages.

As with thematic analysis, the problem with textual analysis is reading things into the text which may have little or nothing to do with the intentions of the producers or the interpretations of the audience.

Audience research

Some researchers argue that the focus of document research should be the audience. From this viewpoint, the audience is not made up of passive consumers who are brainwashed by underlying ideologies or swayed by textual 'tricks of the trade'. Instead, it sees audiences actively negotiating the meaning of messages with the outcome of negotiation ranging from acceptance to indifference to opposition (Pawson, 1995).

The news game But finding out how audiences respond is far from easy. Jenny Kitzinger's use of the 'news game' provides a novel and interesting alternative to the methods examined so far. Small 'audience groups' averaging three people from different social backgrounds were given a set of 13 photographs taken from TV news items and documentaries about AIDS. The groups were asked to select pictures and use them to write a news report on AIDS. Kitzinger (1993) concluded from this exercise that audiences are selective in their interpretation of news. They highlight certain views and modify or oppose others. They are able to 'read between the lines' of news reports, to uncover dominant themes and to construct alternative accounts which draw on their personal experience and political beliefs. This gives some indication of the variety and complexity of audience responses.

The 'news game' was first used by Greg Philo to study audience response to the media and the miners' strike of 1984/85. It represents an important change of direction – from the document, to the document in relation to the audience.

Audience understandings In more recent research, Greg Philo and David Miller (2002) examined BBC and ITN TV news broadcasts of the Israeli/Palestinian conflict. The broadcasts focused on images of violence and the bleak prospects for peace. The researchers' audience sample included 300 young people aged 17-22. The responses of this sample show how TV news affected their knowledge and understanding of the conflict.

News broadcasts made little reference to the history and background of the Israeli/Palestinian conflict. Broadcasts referred to 'occupied territories' but provided no explanation of what they were. Only 9% of the young people sampled knew it was Israelis occupying Palestinian land, 71% had no idea what the term meant, and 11% actually thought it was the Palestinians occupying Israeli land. Broadcasts showed Palestinians burning the American flag and mentioned their distrust of American peace proposals. There was little or no mention of why. For example, there was hardly a reference to the fact that the USA supplied some three billion dollars of aid to Israel

each year, much of it in military hardware. When asked to explain Palestinian distrust of the Americans, 66% of the sample had no idea, 24% thought America 'supported' Israel and only 10% mentioned money and arms (Philo & Miller, 2002).

This study shows the importance of audience research. Sociology is the study of people in society. When researchers examine 'documents' such as TV news, a major concern is how they affect members of society. And this requires researchers to discover the meanings people give to those documents and the understandings they draw from them. To do this they must 'ask the audience'.

Historical documents

For studying the past, historical documents are often the major and sometimes the only source of information. Max Weber's classic study *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* could not have been written without a range of historical documents. For example, he illustrates the spirit of capitalism with quotes from two books by Benjamin Franklin, *Necessary Hints to Those that would be Rich* (1736) and *Advice to a Young Tradesman* (1748). Weber builds a strong case for the religious basis of the capitalist work ethic by quoting from the speeches and writings of ministers such as John Calvin (1509-1564).

Geoffrey Pearson's *Hooligan: A History of Respectable Fears* (1983) provides a more recent example of the use of historical documents. Pearson looks back to Victorian England and forward to today to show that 'for generations Britain has been plagued by the same fears and problems'. He looks at 'hooliganism' – street crime and violence – the moral panics it generates and its 'discovery' time and time again as something new, in contrast to the 'good old days'. Pearson builds up a substantial case for this argument with a range of historical documents which include newspapers, magazines such as *Punch* and *The Teacher's World*, contemporary novels and government reports.

Using historical documents Historical documents are often a long way from the objectivity which sociologists strive for. They are usually biased, prejudiced, one-sided and concerned with putting over a particular point of view. However, as long as researchers take them for what they are, historical documents provide a rich and valuable source of data. Thus Lord Ashley's announcement in the

House of Commons in 1843 that, 'the morals of the children are tenfold worse than formerly' (quoted in Pearson, 1983) cannot be seen as a balanced assessment of juvenile morality. However, for Pearson's study of 'respectable fears', it is a very useful piece of data since it exemplifies a fear that has recurred throughout the past two centuries.

Historical documents bring their own problems of interpretation because they are from a different era, a different culture, and those who produced them are often dead. Add to this the fact that interpretation relies heavily on the researcher's viewpoint and background and it is clear that there is plenty of room for disagreement. For example, J. Berger argued that a number of paintings from the 17th and 18th centuries showed how art patrons at the time were very concerned with material possessions. He saw this concern as linked to the rise of capitalism. However, as Berger himself notes, this interpretation was hotly disputed by an art critic (discussed in Macdonald & Tipton, 1993).

Assessing historical documents John Scott (1990) provides four 'quality control criteria' for assessing documents which are particularly applicable to historical documents.

Authenticity The first refers to authenticity. Is the document genuine or a forgery? As the famous 60 volume *Hitler Diaries* which surfaced in 1983 showed, forgeries can fool even top historians. Or, is the document an original or a copy? For example, the writings of Roman historians have been copied and recopied by hand. How true to the originals are the copies?

Credibility Is the author of the document 'sincere' or does he or she distort the evidence in order to mislead the reader? There are plenty of examples of distortion, deceit and outright lies in documents. Former US President Nixon denied all knowledge of the illegal break-in at the Democratic Party's headquarters which became known as the Watergate Affair. This lie appeared in TV and radio broadcasts by Nixon and his officials, and in White House press releases.

Representativeness To what extent is the document representative? For example, is a newspaper article typical of the articles which appear in that particular newspaper? The question of representativeness is particularly important in the case of historical documents as many have been lost or destroyed. Those that remain may be untypical. For example, a study of witchcraft in 17th century New England was based on court records relating to 114 suspects. The researcher believes that these surviving records are only the 'tip of the iceberg', a 'tip' which may well be unrepresentative (discussed in O'Connell Davidson & Layder, 1994).

Meaning What does a document mean? This ranges from

activity13 *analysing documents*

Item A *Content analysis*

Television programmes containing reference to or depiction of disability

Genre	Number of programmes	Percentage of total programmes	Number with disability	Percentage of total with disability
News	221	27	54	42
Current affairs	28	4	0	0
Documentary	155	19	21	16
Magazine	70	9	20	16
Informational	59	7	4	3
Debate	15	2	2	2
Religious	9	1	2	2
Quiz	24	3	3	2
Music/dance	38	5	0	0
Educational	5	0.6	2	2
Game show	44	5	0	0
Chat show	24	3	4	3
Sport	36	4	1	1
Special broadcast	46	6	12	9
Special interest programme	3	0.4	3	2
Other	27	3	0	0
Total	804	99	128	100

Source: Cumberbatch & Negrine, 1992

Item B *Newspaper headlines*

We must help the innocent AIDS victims

Agony of innocent mum

CURSE HITS ORDINARY FAMILIES

EXPRESS GOES INTO ACTION TO PROTECT THE INNOCENT

Now innocents demand millions

FURY OF THE INNOCENTS

Innocent AIDS victim leaves legacy of hope

The AIDS innocents

Trauma of youngsters facing prejudice in the playground

Innocent victims face cash blow

An innocent victim tells of his agony

These headlines refer to men and women infected with the AIDS virus through blood transfusions, and mother to child transmission in the womb.

Source: Kitzinger, 1993

the literal meaning of the text – can the researcher 'literally' understand it, eg can the researcher read a text in Anglo Saxon English – to higher level interpretations of meaning and significance. As the previous section on analysing documents has indicated, questions of meaning will never be settled.

Item C First World War posters
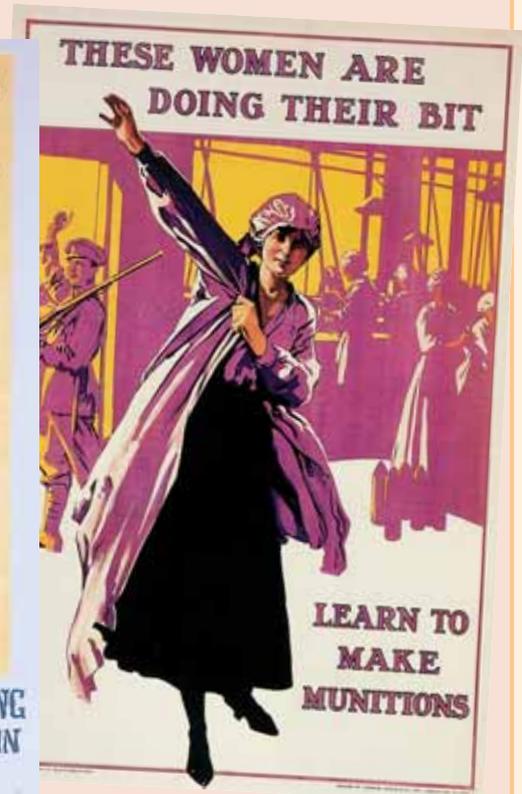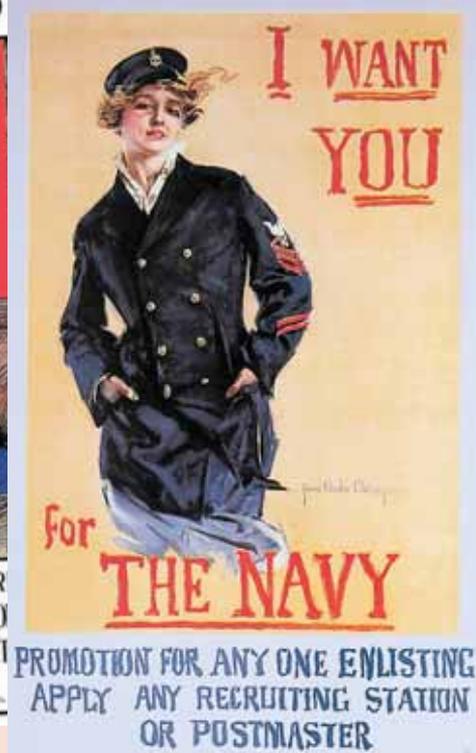
Item D The Israeli/Palestinian conflict

Palestinian boy with a slingshot hurling stones at a Jewish settlement in the occupied territories

questions

1 a) What does Item A tell us?

   b) What further information might be useful?

2 Analyse the headlines in Item B using thematic and textual analysis.

3 What use might a sociologist studying gender make of the posters in Item C?

4 a) What additional information would you need in order to understand what's going on in Item D?

   b) Do you think most young people in the UK have this information? Explain your answer.

summary

1. There are three main methods for the analysis of documents – formal content analysis, thematic analysis and textual analysis. In each case, the analysis is conducted by the researcher.

2. In recent years, the focus has moved towards audience research. The emphasis here is on how audiences interpret documents.

3. For studying the past, historical documents are often the major and sometimes the only source of information.

4. Historical documents are usually biased and one-sided but this does not necessarily detract from their usefulness.

5. Historical documents can be assessed in terms of their authenticity, credibility, representativeness and meaning.

activity14 historical documents

Item A   The diaries of a cabinet minister

Richard Crossman was an MP and cabinet minister in the Labour government of 1964-1970. His political diaries were published after his death in 1975.

Memory is a terrible improver – even with a diary to check the tendency. And it is this which makes a politician's autobiography so wildly unreliable. But if I could publish a diary of my years as a minister without any editorial improvements, as a true record of how one minister thought and felt, I would have done something towards lighting up the secret places of British politics and enabling any intelligent elector to have a picture of what went on behind the scenes between 1964 and 1970.

Of course the picture which this diary provides is neither objective nor fair – although as a lifelong political scientist I have tried to discipline myself to objectivity. In particular, I have tried to avoid self-deception, especially about my own motives; the tendency to attribute to others my own worst failings; and the temptation to omit what might make me look silly in print. I have been urged by many to remove all the wounding passages about colleagues or officials. I have not done so because it would make the book untrue, and I hope that when some of them find me intolerably unfair, they will recall the follies and illusions I faithfully record about myself. A day-by-day account of a Government at work, as seen by one participant, is bound to be one-sided and immensely partisan. If it isn't, it too would fail to be true to life.

Source: Crossman, 1975

Item B   Images of Africans
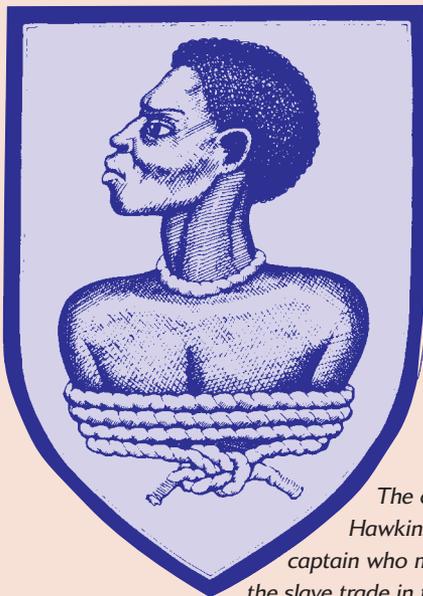
The crest of Sir William Hawkins, an English sea captain who made a fortune from the slave trade in the 16th century.

A bill of sale

This advert for Pears soap was actually painted on a rock in the Sudan by invading British forces.
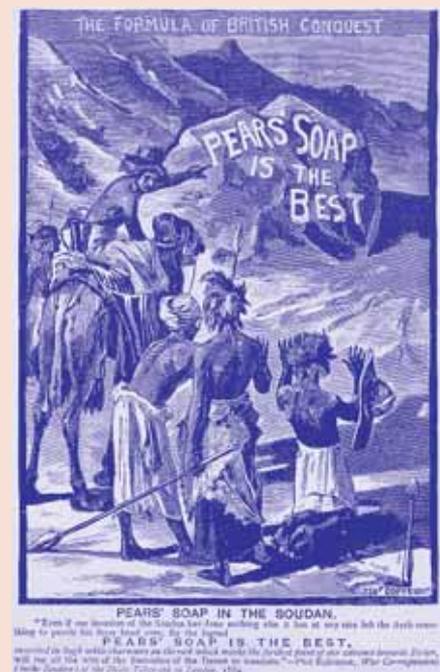
questions

1 With some reference to Item A, suggest why diaries might be preferable to autobiographies as a source of information.

2 a) Provide a sociological interpretation of the documents in Item B.

b) Critically assess your interpretation.

Unit 9 *Types of research*

keyissues

1 Why use different types of research?
2 What are their strengths and weaknesses?

This chapter has already looked at three types of research – experiments, social surveys and ethnography. This unit looks at several more.

9.1 Life histories

As their name suggests, *life histories* are accounts of people's lives which they tell to researchers.

Something of the flavour and significance of life histories can be obtained from a brief discussion of *Cheyenne Memories*, the life history of John Stands In Timber (1884-1967) as told to the anthropologist Margot Liberty. He was a member of the last generation who experienced the traditional way of life of the Cheyenne Indians during the 19th century.

The Cheyenne were a non-literate society, so oral accounts are particularly important. Stands In Timber's account of his life and the history and culture of his people is given from the Cheyenne point of view. In Margot Liberty's words, 'John has given us the history of the Cheyennes as they themselves recall and interpret it' (1967). Much of the material is new, that which isn't confirms, complements and amplifies 19th century ethnographic accounts.

Advantages Life histories have illuminated many areas of social life. For example, *The Polish Peasant in Europe and America*, a five volume work first published from 1918 to 1920, included an extensive life history of a Polish peasant which provided many valuable insights into the experience of migration from Poland to the USA (Thomas & Znaniecki, 1958). *The Jack Roller* (Shaw, 1930) is a story, written in his own words and from his own point of view, of a young American 'jack roller', the 1930s equivalent of today's 'mugger'. It is this first-hand account of people's experience of their life as they see it which many researchers regard as the main value of the life history. It can provide insights and information which are not obtainable from any other source, as Stands In Timber's life history shows. It can give a picture of the process and development of social life over time. It can also serve as a basis for confirming or questioning other interpretations and accounts. And it can direct researchers into new areas and encourage them to ask new questions.

Disadvantages However, as the title *Cheyenne Memories* suggests, the life history is heavily dependent on people's memory which is inevitably patchy and selective. To some

extent, it will also reflect their attitudes and opinions. Some would see this as a serious criticism of the life history. For example, Stands In Timber has been criticised by other members of his tribe for being too pro-Crow – the Crow are traditional enemies of the Cheyenne.

A further criticism concerns the researcher. There is a temptation for researchers to lead the respondent as life histories are recounted, particularly when areas of interest to them are touched upon. For example, Margot Liberty (1967) writes, 'My tendency was at first to press him for stories. I soon found it far better to trust his own instinct. Where he did not volunteer material freely he usually had little to say.'

While accepting many of the criticisms of life histories, supporters argue that they are far outweighed by the valuable information that a good life history can provide.

9.2 Case studies

A case study is a study of one particular case or instance of something. It may be a study of a particular school, factory or hospital, or a study of a single individual such as a manual worker, a mother with dependent children, or a retired person. The life history is an example of a case study. Using examples from the previous section, it is the study of one Cheyenne Indian or one Polish peasant.

Case studies have a number of advantages.

- By focusing on a particular case, they can provide a richer and more detailed picture than research based on large samples.
- This may result in new insights and fresh ideas.
- Case studies can provide useful information for a larger research project. For example, the experiences of one retired person could be used in a questionnaire in order to discover how far they apply to other retired people.
- There is a better chance of a questionnaire or interview being relevant and meaningful if it is based, at least in part, on a case study.
- Theories can be tested to see whether they apply in particular situations. Sociologists at Lancaster University tested the theory of secularisation (the idea that religion is becoming less important in modern societies) by conducting a case study of religion in a single town – Kendal in the Lake District.

Some of the advantages of case studies can be seen from Macbeath and Mortimore's (2001) study of school effectiveness. They used case studies of a small number of schools in addition to a large-scale social survey. The case studies helped them identify key themes to explore in their survey, allowed them to check that their survey findings held true in particular schools, and added depth to their quantitative data.

Case studies have sometimes been criticised as limited and unrepresentative. Since they are one-off instances, they cannot be used as a basis for generalisation. However, this is their strength. They are a valuable warning to rash and sweeping generalisations. A single case study can call into question the findings of a much larger study.

activity15 bullying – a case study

The only thing that prevented me from enjoying my first year at high school was one person in my class who started to bully me. This led to several other people following his example and my life became sheer misery. At first, I was upset but able to cope with it, then I became angry and distressed. I couldn't sleep for worrying about the next day. It would be name-calling, stone-throwing and threatening. It all got too much and I decided to tell my Mum and Dad. We all agreed that I had to tell the teacher. The next day, though worried, I did.

The teacher was very sympathetic and said it must stop. We had lunch meetings to discuss the problems. The bullies were very surprised that they were included instead of being punished. We discussed my feelings at being bullied and we would agree on some plan of action so that I would get support from my friends. Once the bullies realised that they were being included, the bullying ceased.

Source: Donnellan, 1994

question

Using examples from this activity, suggest some advantages of the case study approach.

9.3 Longitudinal studies

How can you show what a person looks like? One way is to produce a photograph. This is similar to most sociological research which consists of a snapshot, a one-off investigation of an aspect of social life. Another way of showing what a person looks like is to produce a series of photographs taken at different points in their lifetime. This shows how their appearance changes and develops. The equivalent in sociology is the longitudinal study which examines the same group of people over a fairly long period of time.

As the following example shows, longitudinal studies can provide important insights. Each year from 1991 to 1995, 1125 young people in Merseyside and Greater Manchester filled in a confidential questionnaire about their attitudes to and use of illegal drugs. At the start of the research, members of the sample were aged 14, by the end, aged 18. The study was carried out by a team of sociologists led by Howard Parker (1998). Parker was interested in the extent of illegal drug use within this age group and whether sensational media reports about widespread drug abuse were accurate. The questionnaire was concerned with the types of drugs taken, reasons for the first use of drugs, how drug use changed over time and why some people refused to take drugs.

Parker's team found that cannabis was the most frequently used illegal drug. It was also the first drug that most of the sample experimented with. Working-class young people were more likely to experiment at an early age, though by 18 the middle class had caught up. There were few differences between boys and girls. By aged 18, 20-25% of the sample were regular users.

Advantages As these findings suggest, the strength of the longitudinal study is its ability to examine developments over time. By studying the same group, ie by keeping the same sample, the researcher can be sure that any changes in attitudes and behaviour are not simply due to changes in the makeup of the sample.

Disadvantages But keeping the same group is one of the main difficulties with longitudinal studies. The National Child Development Study has attempted to follow the lives of every child born in Britain between 3rd and 9th March 1958. Follow-up surveys were conducted in 1965, 1969, 1974, 1981, 1991 and 1999 to trace developments in health, education, family life, career and so on, and to try to establish links between these changes and factors such as class, gender and ethnicity. The survey began with 17,400 children but by 1999 researchers were able to contact only 11,400 members of the original sample.

Reasons for this *sample attrition* included death, emigration, refusal to participate and failure to trace. The result is not just a smaller sample but, in all probability, a less representative one.

Researchers are aware of this and attempt to minimise the problem of sample attrition. This can be seen from the lengths that some go in order to trace members of an original sample. Parker's team sent letters, follow-up letters, further reminders and even Christmas cards to their sample. If none of these worked they actually went from door to door tracking their 'lost' respondents. The National Child Development Study has adopted a similar approach, contacting relatives, visiting workplaces and searching telephone directories and electoral registers. As this suggests, longitudinal studies can cost a great deal of time and money. Few organisations have the resources to fund an investigation which continues for twenty years or more.

9.4 The comparative method

Comparative studies make comparisons between different societies, between different groups within the same society, and between societies and groups over time.

Durkheim's study of suicide is an example of a comparative study (see page 146). He compared suicide rates in different European societies, eg Italy, England, France and Denmark, at different time periods, eg 1866-70, 1871-75, 1874-78. He also compared suicide rates for different groups within society, eg rates for Protestants compared to Catholics, city dwellers compared to rural dwellers, and married compared to unmarried people.

The comparative method helps sociologists to investigate what causes what. For example, Durkheim's study suggested that religion may be a factor affecting the suicide rate. His figures indicated that the suicide rate for

activity16 Britain and France

Item A Similarity – production technology

Fawley oil refinery, Hampshire

Item B Difference – nationality
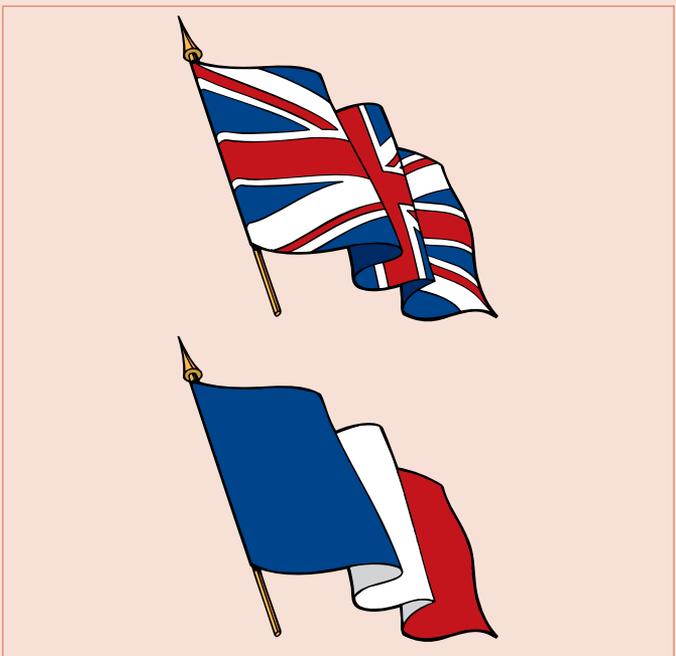
Britain and France

Duncan Gallie compared workers in oil refineries in Britain and France. Would the same kind of production technology – in this case the technology used in oil refineries – lead to the same kind of behaviour at work? Gallie found important differences between British and French workers, for example there were far more strikes in the French refineries.

Source: Gallie, 1978

question

How might the comparative method be useful for explaining behaviour at work?

Protestants *within* particular societies was higher than the rate for Catholics. The same applied to comparisons *between* societies – the suicide rate for Protestant countries was significantly higher than the rate for Catholic societies.

A natural laboratory The comparative method is the nearest most sociologists get to the laboratory method of the natural sciences. Unlike laboratory experiments, variables in the real world cannot be systematically manipulated and controlled. However, it is possible to find 'natural' laboratories which allow the influence of variables to be estimated.

Europe provided a natural laboratory for Durkheim. He found a statistical link between suicide rates and religion between European societies, within those societies, and over different time periods.

Cross-cultural studies Is social inequality universal – ie, is it found in every society? Is a division of labour based on gender natural – ie, is it natural to have male jobs and female jobs? These are important questions, particularly for those concerned about social inequality. Cross-cultural studies – studies based on a number of different cultures – help to answer this type of question. For instance, if cross-cultural evidence indicated that, in some societies, gender has little or no influence on job allocation, then this suggests that any influence of gender on the division of labour is based on culture rather than nature.

Evaluation The comparative method has some obvious strengths. It provides a natural laboratory for researchers to estimate the influence of variables. It allows researchers to look at the effect of culture on behaviour.

But cross-cultural research has inbuilt problems. How, for example, can a Western researcher understand non-Western cultures? When he or she compares marriage in various cultures, are they comparing like with like? Does marriage mean the same thing in different societies, does it involve the same rights and responsibilities? Despite these problems, the comparative method holds considerable promise (May, 2001).

9.5 Triangulation and methodological pluralism

The types of research outlined in this unit may draw data from various research methods and various sources. For example, a case study might be based on participant observation or interviews, on primary or secondary data, on quantitative or qualitative data. Sometimes, different kinds of data and research methods are combined within a single study.

Triangulation Some researchers combine different research methods and different types of data in order to check the validity and reliability of their findings. This is known as *triangulation*. For example, if participant observation and

activity17 methodological pluralism

Our research on victims of crime was based on methodological pluralism. This approach favours neither qualitative or quantitative research methods. It is a position which recognises that different research techniques can uncover different layers of social reality and that the role of the researcher is to look for confirmations and contradictions between those different layers of information.

So, for example, for the first stage of our data-gathering process we walked round our two research areas with police officers, we frequented the public houses, and we engaged in in-depth interviews with a variety of people working in the localities.

Then, on the basis of this information, we produced a criminal victimisation survey questionnaire and conducted a survey in each area, and, on the basis of this experience, moved into focus group discussions with survey participants. So, as a research process, we were always moving between quantitative and qualitative data looking for ways of making sense of the different layers of social reality which were being revealed to us.

Source: Walklate, 2000

Victims of crime

question

According to this extract, what are the main advantages of methodological pluralism?

interviews produce conflicting findings, this raises questions about the validity of the data. This often leads to further research to re-examine the original findings.

Methodological pluralism Other researchers combine different research methods and different types of data in order to build up a fuller picture of social life. This approach is known as *methodological pluralism*.

It recognises that each method and type of data has its particular strengths and weaknesses. Combined they are seen to produce a more comprehensive and rounder picture of social reality. And their combination can also provide new insights and new directions for research.

Some of the strengths of methodological pluralism can be seen from Eileen Barker's (1984) study of the Moonies – the Unification Church. She conducted in-depth interviews, each lasting 6-8 hours, with a number of Moonies. The interviews dealt with their background, why they became a Moonie, their life in the church and the meaning of

religion as they saw it. Barker also lived as a participant observer in several centres with the Moonies at various times during the six years of her research. This enabled her to gain the trust of many members of the church, resulting in information which would not have been given to an outsider. Two years after the start of her research, she constructed a large (41 page) questionnaire based on her findings from interviews and observation. This provided information from a larger sample and was intended to reveal 'social patterns, trends and tendencies and gain a more reliable understanding of regularities between variables – of "what goes with what" '.

Barker claims that combining different methods of investigation gave her a much fuller picture than any one method or data source could have provided.

key terms

Life history An account of an individual's life as told to a researcher.

Case study A study of one particular case or instance of something.

Longitudinal study A study of the same group of people at various times over a period of years.

Sample attrition The reduction in size of a sample during a longitudinal study.

Comparative studies Studies which make comparisons between different societies and different groups within the same society.

Cross-cultural studies Studies based on a number of different cultures. Studies which compare different cultures.

Triangulation Combining different research methods and different types of data in order to check the validity and reliability of findings.

Methodological pluralism Combining different research methods and different kinds of data in order to build up a fuller picture of social life.

summary

1. Life histories provide a first-hand account of people's life experience as they see it. This can result in valuable insights. However, life histories are dependent on people's memory which is often patchy and selective.

2. Case studies focus on a particular case. This can provide a rich and detailed picture. A single case study can call into question the findings of a much larger study.

3. The main strength of the longitudinal study is its ability to examine developments over time. The main problem is sample attrition – the steady loss of sample members.

4. The comparative method provides a 'natural laboratory' within which the influence of variables can be estimated. It allows researchers to examine the effect of culture on behaviour. The main difficulty for researchers is understanding different cultures.

5. Triangulation provides a check on the validity and reliability of research findings.

6. Methodological pluralism builds up a fuller picture of social life.