

6. Research methods

INTRODUCTION

As you may recall from the Introductory chapter, one of the key ways of distinguishing sociological knowledge from ‘everyday’ or common sense knowledge is that sociologists try – not always successfully it has to be admitted – to test their ideas (or ‘theories’) about how and why people behave as they do. This being the case, it follows that to test their ideas sociologists have to do research and, as luck would have it, in this chapter we’re going to examine two aspects of sociological research:

- **methods** – the various ways sociologists collect data and
- **methodology** – the different ways sociologists justify their use of different methods.

This distinction between *methods* (*what* you do) and *methodology* (*why* you do it) raises a couple of interesting possibilities in terms of the AS course because, on the one hand, it allows us to get involved in *doing sociology* (either in terms of AS Coursework or by completing the exercises embedded in this chapter) and, on the other, it allows us to stretch ourselves, academically, by reflecting on some of the less practical, more theoretical, areas surrounding such things as our *choice of research method* and *ethical questions* about who we study and how we study them.

Before we start to consider the range of research methods available to sociologists, we need to be clear about ‘the distinctions between primary and secondary data, and between quantitative and qualitative data’. In addition, it would be useful to briefly explain some *methodological concepts* relating to data, namely: *reliability, validity, representativeness* and *generalisability*.

Sociological methods



Preparing the ground

- **Primary data** involves information collected *personally* by a sociologist – who, therefore, knows exactly how the data was collected, by whom and for what purpose (you don’t, for example, have to trust that other people collected their data accurately). As we will see, sociologists use a range of research methods (such as questionnaires, interviews and observational studies) as *sources* of primary data.
- **Secondary data** involves information *not personally* collected by the researcher, but used by them in their research. Sources of secondary data include newspaper articles, books, magazines, personal documents (such as letters and diaries), official documents (such as government