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
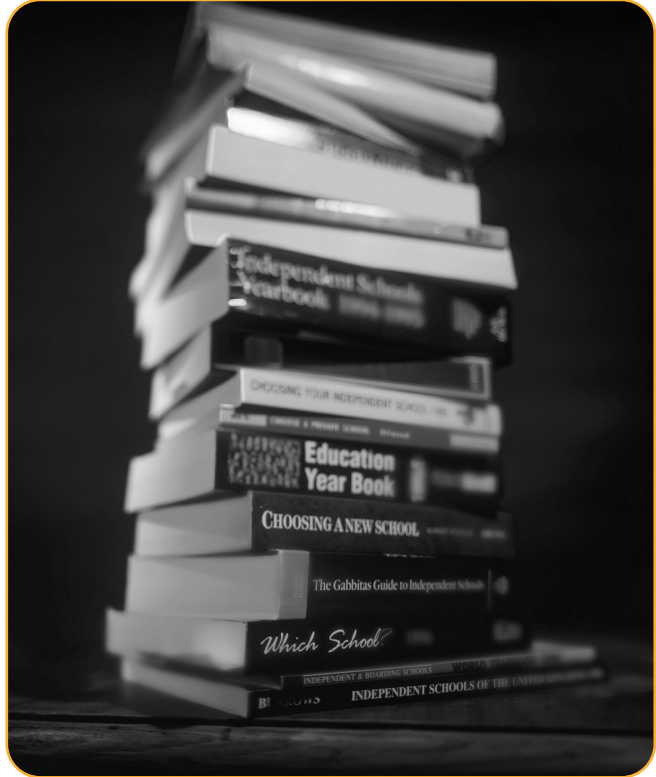
reports and statistics) and even the research of other sociologists.

Both these sources can be either of two types:

Quantitative data represents an attempt to *quantify* behaviour – to express it *statistically* or *numerically*. For example, we could count the number of people in the UK who wear glasses (if we had nothing else better to do) or the number of people who commit crimes each year. Quantitative data is usually expressed in one of three main ways. As a:

- **number**, for example, the number of people who live in poverty

- **percentage** (the number of people per 100 in a population), for

example, 30% of voters in Britain regularly vote Conservative

- **rate** (the number of people per 1000 in a population), for example, if the birth rate in Britain was 2, this means for every 1000 people in a population, two babies are born each year.

Data is often expressed as a rate or percentage because it allows **comparisons** between and within societies. For example, when comparing levels of unemployment between Britain and the USA, expressing unemployment as a simple (or *raw* as it is sometimes called) number wouldn't tell us very much, since the population of America is roughly five times that of Britain. Expressing unemployment as a percentage or rate allows us to compare 'like with like', in the sense we are taking into account the fact

⚠ Growing it yourself: who studies what?

For each of your A-level subjects, count the number of male and female students. Express this as a percentage for each subject.

Once you've done this, combine your data with the information collected by other students in your class to arrive at an overall picture of 'who studies what' at A-level in your school or college. In which subjects are:

- females in the majority?

- males in the majority?

- neither in the majority?

(The idea of a gendered curriculum is discussed in more detail in the education chapter).

one society has substantially more people than the other (so we might expect the larger society to, *numerically*, have more people unemployed – even though their unemployment *rates* might be broadly similar).

Qualitative data tries to capture the *quality* of people's behaviour (what they *feel*, for example, about a sociologist asking them if they wear glasses). Qualitative data, therefore, says something about the way people *experience* the social world. It's also used to understand the *meanings* people give to both their own behaviour and that of others.

For example, **Boyle** (*A Sense of Freedom*, 1977) studied the behaviour of a juvenile gang from the viewpoint of its members. **Goffman** (*Asylums*, 1968) on the other hand, tried to understand the experiences of patients in a US mental institution. Both, in their different ways, were trying to capture and express the *qualities* of people's behaviour in different situations.

As I have suggested, research methods don't simply involve thinking about data types (qualitative and quantitative) and

sources (primary and secondary); we also need to think about our reasons for choosing particular types and sources in our research – something that involves considering **methodological concepts**. Including:

- **Data reliability** relates to the 'nuts-and-bolts' of actually doing research; in other words, it mainly refers to the methods of data collection we use (such as interviews) and, more specifically, to the *consistency* of the data we collect. Data reliability is important because it suggests we can check the data we get from our research by repeating that research (or something very similar) to see if we get the same results.

Thus, data is reliable if similar results are gained by different researchers (or the same researcher at different times) asking the same questions to similar people. For example, a researcher may try to *cross-check* the reliability of a response within a questionnaire by asking the same question in a different way:

- How old are you?
- When were you born?

If they get two different answers, it is likely the data is *unreliable*.

- **Data validity** refers to the extent to which data gives a true measurement or accurate description of 'reality' (what is *really happening* in a situation). Data, it could be argued, is only useful if it actually *measures* or *describes* what it claims to be measuring or describing.

For example, if we were interested in the extent of crime in our society, we could use official crime statistics (a *secondary*

quantitative data source published by the government). We would need to be aware, however, the validity of these statistics may be limited since they only record *reported* crimes – and people may not report they have been a victim (for many possible reasons – such as a fear of reprisal from the criminal or the belief the police will not be able to trace the perpetrator, to name but two).

• **Synoptic link**: The validity of crime statistics links to theories of crime and deviance.

This example also raises questions relating to **representativeness**. Whatever type of data we use (primary or secondary, quantitative or qualitative), an important question to always consider is the extent to which the data accurately *represents* what it claims to represent (or what we believe it represents) – something we can think about in two basic ways.

• **Data representativeness** refers to the idea that any information we collect through our research is sufficiently comprehensive to accurately represent something. Using the crime statistics example introduced above, it can be argued these statistics are *unrepresentative* of all crimes committed – anything we say about 'crime' in our society needs to be qualified by the idea that some types of criminal behaviour may not be fully represented in the statistics.

• **Group representativeness** refers to the use of *samples* (explained in more detail below) in our research. In basic terms, if we are researching a small group (of students, for example) and, on the basis of this research, want to be able to say something about *all students*, we

need to ensure the characteristics of the group we study exactly match those of the larger group; in other words, we can use one, small, group to *represent* a much larger group – an idea that leads to the related concept of:

• **Generalisability**: If data can be *generalised* it means information we collect about a small group can be applied to larger groups who share the same general characteristics of the smaller group. In other words, if the small (sample) group is representative of the larger group anything we discover about the one can be generalised to the other. The usefulness of these two concepts – representativeness and generalisability – will become clearer in a moment when we consider them in more detail in the context of *sampling techniques*.

⚠️ Digging deeper

The different data types we have just identified each have their different uses and limitations, which we can briefly consider in terms of their respective *advantages* and *disadvantages*.

Primary data has a number of *advantages*:

• **Data control**: Because the researcher is responsible for collecting data they have complete control over how much data is collected, how it is collected and from whom it's collected.

• **Reliability**, **validity** and **representativeness**: Simply because you can exercise some measure of control over how data is collected doesn't, of course, guarantee its reliability, validity or representativeness (a badly designed piece of research can be none of these), but it is much easier for the researcher to consider

these concepts when they design and carry out the research themselves.

This type of data also has a few potential *disadvantages*:

- **Resources**: Primary data collection can be:
  - **Time consuming** – to design, construct and carry out, for example. If the group you are researching is large and you're interviewing them individually, this is going to take a great deal of time and resources.
  - **Expensive** – as in the above example, the cost of a researcher's time may be a factor in the design of the research, as will:
  - **Access** problems: Having designed a piece of primary research, you need access to the people you want to study – your plan to interview the 10 richest people in the UK, for example, comes to nothing when they refuse to be interviewed.

NO ENTRY

Surprisingly, not everyone welcomes being studied by sociologists.

- **Availability**: Sometimes it is *impossible* to collect primary data. In the above example, it is impossible because the people you want to research do not make themselves available for such research. In another (admittedly more extreme)

example, if you wanted to research the reasons why people commit suicide this would be difficult because your potential subjects are dead. In this instance, one way around the problem of availability may be the use of secondary data. **Emil Durkheim** (*Suicide: A Study In Sociology*, 1897), for example, used official statistics to test whether suicide rates varied within and between societies. By so doing, he was able to argue social factors, such as religious belief, were significant in the explanation of why people took their own life.

Secondary data *advantages* has the following:

- **Resources**: Because secondary data already exists (someone else has done the work of collecting it) there are advantages in terms of *time* and *money* – collecting primary data on national crime or unemployment statistics, for example, would be a daunting task. In some instances, *access* to data is much easier, although the researcher does rely on the availability/existence of such data.
- **Reliability**: Some (but not all) forms of secondary data are highly reliable – official statistics (those produced by the UK government, for example) are a good case in point.
- **Validity**: Again, while it is difficult to make generalisations, some forms of secondary data (biographies and personal documents such as diaries for example) provide highly valid data because they give detailed insights into people's behaviour.
- **Representativeness**: Where data is produced on a national level, by the

government for example, there is normally a high level of representativeness.

In terms of *disadvantages*, however, we can note:

- **Data control**: This may be difficult because secondary data is not always produced with the needs of sociologists in mind. The data's creator will have their own reasons for producing it and these may not coincide with sociological concerns, interests and agendas. The way governments, for example, measure social class may be different to sociological ways of measuring class.

- **Reliability, validity and representativeness**: An important consideration with secondary data is whether it's simply one individual's view or it's representative of a range of views. Newspaper articles, for example, can be the personal, unsupported and unrepresentative, view of a single journalist. Similarly, historical documents may reflect the views of particular social classes (mainly because it was the upper classes who recorded their views).

Conversely, the only surviving record of an event provides a (valid) insight into that event, but without supporting evidence (a question of *reliability*) we can't be certain of its *representativeness*. In addition, the *authenticity* (has the data been faked?) and *credibility* (who produced it and for what reasons?) of secondary data may be difficult to check.

⚠ Growing it yourself: faking it?

With the development of the Internet, questions about the *authenticity* and *credibility* of secondary data have become increasingly important, for three main reasons:

- the volume of data involved

- relatively easy access to data (through search engines such as Google: www.google.co.uk) and

- the difficulty of checking the source of this data.

As a case in point, have a look at the following photograph – widely distributed on the Internet in 2004 – which shows US Presidential candidate John Kerry pictured at an anti-Vietnam War demonstration (the 1971 Register for Peace Rally). This picture was potentially damaging to Kerry's campaign because it associates him with the actress Jane Fonda, whose anti-war activities were considered by many (especially in the media) to be 'unpatriotic' and 'anti-American'.

However, the picture was actually a *fake* – source unknown – created by combining two separate – unrelated – pictures.

What steps could we take to check the authenticity and credibility of secondary data we collect from sources such as the Internet?

In small groups, identify the sort of checks we could make to ensure – to the best of our ability – secondary data is authentic and credible.

For example, we could identify and check the *source* of the data (in the above example, how credible is an *anonymous* source?)

Ken Light photographed Kerry preparing to give a speech at the Register for Peace Rally, 1971.

Owen Franken photographed Fonda speaking in Miami, 1972

Quantitative data has a number of *advantages*:

- **Quantification**: The ability to express relationships statistically can be advantageous if, in your research, you don't need to explore the *reasons* for

people's behaviour (for example, if you simply need to know the number of murders committed each year).

- **Examination of trends/changes over time**: Following from the above, quantitative data gives us an easy,

manageable, way of tracking social changes over time. For example, statistics on educational achievement over the past 25 years can show us changes in relative levels of achievement between boys and girls.

Module link: Changes in the relative levels of male and female educational achievement are explored in the Education chapter.

- **Comparisons**: Similarly, if we want to compare differences between two or more things, (such as middle class and working class family size within our society), quantitative data makes this relatively easy. Alternatively, *cross-cultural* comparisons (crime rates in different countries, for example) are similarly made possible through the use of quantitative data. Similarly '**before**' and '**after**' studies are a further type of comparison we can make using quantitative data. For example, we could examine, using statistical data, the effect changes in the law have had on patterns of divorce in our society by noting the number of divorces *before* a legal change and the number *after* the change.

  Module link: The relationship between divorce and legal change is explored in more-detail in the Family chapter.

- **Reliability**: Quantitative data tends to be more reliable than qualitative data because it's easier to *replicate* (repeat) the collection of such data. This is because *standardised questions* (questions that don't change) can be asked to different groups (or the same group at different times).

Some *disadvantages* of quantitative data might be:

- **Validity**: Quantitative data can't be easily used to explore issues in any great depth (as I have suggested, knowing the number of thefts in our society doesn't tell us anything about *why* people commit this crime).

- **Meanings**: Related to the above, quantitative data isn't designed to tell sociologists much – if anything – about how people *interpret* and *understand* social behaviour.

  For example while it might be possible to quantify 'the fear of crime' (counting the percentage of people who fear being a victim, for example), this type of data tells us nothing about *why* people may fear becoming a victim.

Qualitative data: In terms of *advantages* we can note:

- **Validity**: Because this type of data encourages *depth* and *detail* (in an interview, for example, people may be encouraged to talk at great length about themselves and their beliefs) we are more likely to gain a complete, true-to-life picture of whatever we are researching.

- **Meanings**: Qualitative data allows sociologists to explore the meanings people give to events and behaviour. While we can represent divorce statistically, for example, qualitative data allows us to explore how people feel and react to this situation.

- **Imposition**: If your research objective is to understand the meaning of people's behaviour, it follows you must allow people the scope to talk freely about that behaviour. If a researcher imposes their interpretation on a situation (by asking
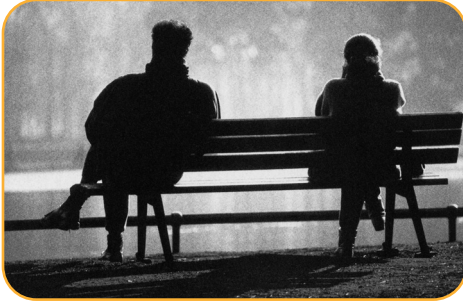
Qualitative data came tell us something about the meaning of people's behaviour.

direct, quantifiable, questions for example) then data *validity* will be affected because you are restricting people's ability to talk at length and in depth about what they believe.

Qualitative data may avoid this type of problem (although it may create a different kind of *imposition problem* which we'll examine in more detail when we consider different research methods).

Some *disadvantages* of qualitative data we can note are:

- **Reliability**: Qualitative research is difficult (if not impossible) to exactly repeat (think, for example, about how difficult it would it be to exactly repeat even a very recent conversation you've had with somebody). In addition, with something like historical data we may have no reliable way of knowing if our data source is representative of anything more than the views of a single individual.

- **Data overload**: Qualitative research tends to produce masses of data, much of which will be irrelevant in terms of achieving the research objective. With something like an interview, the problem of how to interpret or represent the data may also occur. Do you as a researcher report

everything someone says or do you edit the data (and risk imposing your interpretation on the information)?

- **Comparisons**: Qualitative data makes measuring and comparing behaviour very difficult, mainly because the data can't be easily standardised.

To complete this section, we can look briefly at the concepts of reliability and validity.

Data reliability is an important research consideration since, if data is unreliable, any conclusions we draw from it are going to be fairly limited (if not useless). For example, if I attempt to draw conclusions about the state of education in Britain on the basis of a couple of interviews I conducted 'down the pub' with whoever happened to be present at the time, it's probable such data will be unreliable as a guide to what is really happening in the educational system.

In general terms, therefore, data reliability is affected by such things as:

- **Bias**: Are there opportunities for the researcher (consciously or unconsciously) to distort the data collection process?

- **Standardisation**: Is everyone in the group you are researching asked the same questions in the same way? If they are not, how easy would it be to check data reliability by repeating this research?

- **Consistency**: Will, for example, the same question asked of the same person in similar circumstances, produce the same answer?

- **Replication**: For example, if another sociologist attempted to repeat my 'down the pub' research, would similar results be achieved? If not, then my research would not be very reliable . . .

Data validity is a useful concept because it reminds us to think about the *accuracy* – or otherwise – of different data types (primary, secondary, qualitative and quantitative). While some forms of data (such as official statistics) may be reliable, their validity may be questionable for two reasons.

- **Representativeness**: They may not apply to everyone in a particular group. In the UK, for example, we need to be aware 'unemployment statistics' only represent those who are registered for unemployment benefit with the government – not everyone who doesn't have a job.

- **Depth**: They may lack the depth and detail required to accurately represent the views of a particular individual or group.

Discussion point: questionable validity?

If we wanted to compare changes in the level of unemployment in our society over the past 30 years, could we validly use government statistics for this purpose?

You might like to consider the following when researching/discussing this question.

- Have definitions of 'unemployment' changed over time? Are we comparing like with like?
- Does the definition of 'unemployment' involve counting everyone who wants to find a job, but can't?
- Are there ways governments can 'hide' unemployment (by, for example, defining someone as 'unfit for work'). If so, can you identify what some of these ways might be?

In this opening section we have introduced a range of concepts relating to sociological methods and methodology that you need to understand, by way of familiarising yourself with this particular area of the course. In the following sections we can start to locate and apply these ideas as part of our overview and investigation of the research process.

The research process

Introduction

In this section – and the following two sections (Sampling and Research Methods respectively) – we're going to focus on the idea of social research as a *process*; that is, as something *planned* and *organised*. This opening section, therefore, looks at how the research process can be *systematically organised*.

Sociological research

⚠ Preparing the ground

In the main we are concerned here with outlining the research process (or at one version of it), but before we look at this process in detail, we need to be clear about a number of research concepts:

- **Hypothesis**: This is the starting point for some forms of research and, although there are various types of hypothesis we could use, it is easiest to think of a hypothesis as a question or statement we want to answer. In this respect, a hypothesis has one very important characteristic, namely, we should be able to *test* it (to discover if

it is true or false). A hypothesis, therefore, involves testing a possible relationship between two or more things.

For example, imagine we are interested in researching 'why people steal'. As it stands, this question would be difficult to answer because it doesn't specify a relationship between 'people' and 'stealing' that can be tested. What we need to do, therefore, is create a hypothesis – along the lines of 'Poverty makes people steal' – that can be tested.

- **Research question**: Not all sociologists want to test their ideas using a hypothesis. Some researchers begin with a research question – something the sociologist wants to answer by collecting evidence. Although not directly tested, a research question can be supported (or not as the case may be) through research.

An example of a (not very useful it has to be admitted) research question might be: 'What are people's attitudes to stealing?'. All we are trying to do, using this type of research question, is gather evidence on the views of people about a particular form of behaviour.

- **Operationalisation**: Whether research starts with a hypothesis or a research question, the researcher will have to *define, test* or *measure* the various elements involved in their hypothesis/question – and this is where the concept of *operationalisation* comes into the equation.

If you think about the 'poverty' hypothesis I have just outlined, to test it the researcher would have to be clear about such questions as:

- How is 'poverty' defined?
- How is 'stealing' defined?

- How are 'people' defined (not literally, in this case, but in terms of different groups, perhaps)?
- How can we test or measure the relationship between poverty and stealing (in other words, what *indicators* can we use to test this relationship)?

Our answers to these – and similar – questions will determine how we plan and organise our actual research.

Digging deeper

So far we have outlined some important ideas relating to sociological research and we can take this further by looking at how we can organise the research process as a whole. We can do this by focusing on the way hypothesis-based research can be organised, for no better reason than this is the way you are expected to think about the organisation of any coursework (AS and/or A2) you may do as part of this course. In this respect, a classic example of how to organise social research is one suggested by **Karl Popper** ('The Logic of Scientific Discovery', 1959) which he called the **Hypothetico-Deductive Model** of scientific research, the basis of which we can generally explain in the following terms.

- '**Hypothetico**' means 'starting with a hypothesis'. For Popper, the research process revolves around the ability to develop and clearly state *testable* hypotheses.
- **Deduction** (or to give it its proper name, *deductive logic*) is a way of making authoritative statements (proofs) about what is *not known* by a thorough analysis of what *is known*. The ability to make

deductive statements is a powerful tool because it is the basis for drawing logical conclusions about *specific events* from *general events*.

To simplify this idea, think about a fictional detective such as Inspector Morse. He solved crimes by *systematically* investigating a case, collecting and analysing facts and, on the basis of these facts, identifying the guilty party. This is an example of *deduction* because he proves something specific that was not initially known (the identity of a murderer) on the basis of general observations about things that were initially known (the facts of the case, the clues identified and so forth).
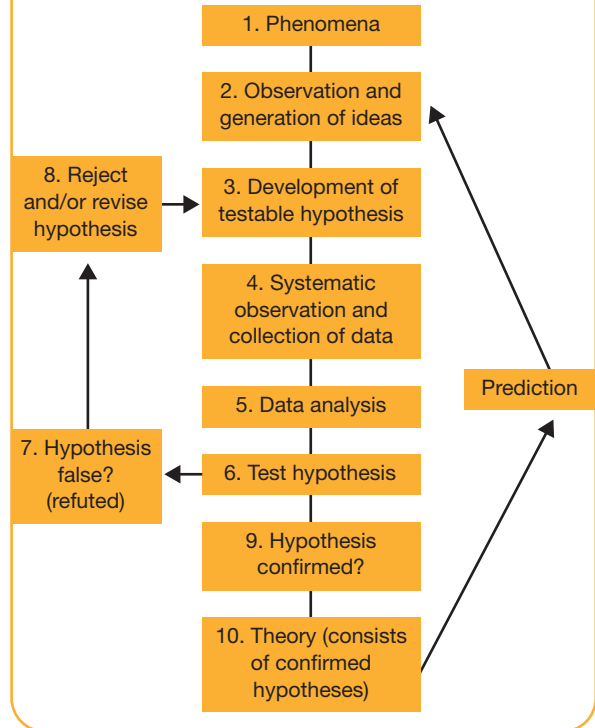
- A **model** is a small-scale *representation* of something (such as, in this instance, a research process) that helps clarify the relationship between the things involved by describing them in simplified terms. In this case, **Popper's** model suggests the various steps to follow in order to 'do research' and, as such, helps us to organise the actual research process.

Have a look at the diagram opposite that describes Popper's research process model.

We can briefly explain each of these 'steps in the research process' in the following way.

- **Phenomena**: All research starts somewhere – usually with the researcher choosing something to study (which, this being sociology, can be just about anything – we can use the example of 'crime' for the moment). However, in order to actually do research we have to narrow our initial ideas down to something more specific.

- **Observation and the generation of ideas**: The researcher starts to focus their initial interest onto something manageable. For

The Hypothetico-Deductive Model

1. Phenomena
2. Observation and generation of ideas
3. Development of testable hypothesis
4. Systematic observation and collection of data
5. Data analysis
6. Test hypothesis
7. Hypothesis false? (refuted)
8. Reject and/or revise hypothesis
9. Hypothesis confirmed?
10. Theory (consists of confirmed hypotheses)
Prediction

example, as we think about researching 'crime' we might read previous research and decide on a specific topic to research – the fear of crime, perhaps?

- **Development of testable hypothesis**: At this stage we are ready to develop a hypothesis to test. This provides both a focus for research and a clearly defined objective for data collection. For example, our hypothesis might be something like 'Do women have a greater fear of crime than men?'

As we noted earlier, at this stage the researcher needs to think about how to *operationalise* the various concepts in the hypothesis that require definition, testing or measurement. In the social world, of course, many of the things we want to research don't physically exist ('fear', for

example). We need, therefore, to think about *indicators* of their existence that *can* be physically measured (in this example we might use indicators such as the *precautions* people take to avoid becoming a victim).

- **Systematic observation and data collection**: The researcher starts to think about who they are going to research (their *sample*) and the research method(s) they will use (both of which we'll consider in more detail later).

- **Data analysis**: Once data have been collected they have to be analysed. This may take a couple of forms:
  - **technical**
    - checking to ensure sufficient data have been collected
    - checking the sample used has remained representative
    - making decisions about whether to include or discard irrelevant data

- **interpretive**, which involves making decisions about the meaning of data collected.

- **Testing the hypothesis**: This involves deciding – on the basis of our data analysis – whether or not the tested hypothesis has either been:
  - **Falsified**: If the hypothesis is false (step 7), a decision has to be made (step 8) about whether it should be totally rejected or whether it can be revised and re-tested (a return to step 3).
  - **Confirmed**. If the hypothesis is confirmed (step 9) it contributes to the final stage in the research process, namely:

- **Theory development**: In everyday language, a *theory* normally means something that has not been tested ('It works in theory, but not in practice', for example). Sociologically, however, a theory consists of tested and confirmed

⚠ 🌱 Growing it yourself: hypotheses and operationalising concepts

Working individually or in small groups, look at the following list of potential research areas and select one (if none of the these appeal, think of an area of social behaviour you could research). For your chosen area:

1. identify a testable hypothesis

2. identify the concepts to operationalise in order to test the hypothesis.

Domestic labour	Childhood	Parental socialisation
The school curriculum	Equal opportunity laws	Male/female work roles
Deviance in the classroom	Religious beliefs	The media and drug use
Attitudes to HIV/AIDS	People's political attitudes	Defining poverty

hypotheses used to predict the behaviour originally observed (step 1).

Sampling

Having outlined an example of research design and the general processes it involves, we can begin to focus our attention on some specific aspects of research design, beginning with the concept of *sampling*.

Preparing the ground

The first thing we need to do is identify and explain a few sampling related ideas.

- **Target (or general) population**: When starting a piece of research, we always have in mind a group to study – these people are our *target* or *general population* – in other words, they're everyone in the group we're going to research. Examples of target populations might be:

1. A **small** group

    Perhaps 10 or 12 people in all, who meet regularly in your local park.

2. A **large** group

    The 70,000 fans who attend Manchester United's home games.

    With the first group, their behaviour might be relatively easy to research because the target population is small. Whether this research involves observing the group, asking them questions or participating in their behaviour, the *size* of the group makes it relatively easy to manage the research.

    With the second group, however, things might be more difficult, since its size is going to make it hard to observe or

question everyone personally. This, therefore, is where the concept of sampling comes into its own and we need to outline a few basic ideas relating to this concept:

- A **sample** is a relatively small proportion of the people who belong to the target population. For example, in the case of football fans, the researcher might choose 1000 Manchester United fans to research and, by studying their behaviour, try to say something about the characteristics or behaviour of all fans in the target population.

- **Sample size**: Rather than think in terms of size (is a 90% sample too large or a 10% sample too small?) a more significant question is 'how *representative* is the sample?'

- **Representativeness**: This idea is more important than the size of your sample because it relates to the question of whether or not the characteristics of the people selected for the sample accurately reflect the characteristics of the target population. If the sample group is representative then anything discovered about them can also be applied to the target population – regardless of how many – or how few – people are in the sample.

- **Generalisation**: This concept describes the idea the things we discover about the people in our sample can also be applied to the people in our target population. If our sample is *representative*, therefore, we can generalise the behaviour of this group to our target population. In other words, we can make statements about a group we *haven't* studied (our target population) based on the behaviour of a group we *have* studied.

Having identified some general sampling concepts, we can move on to an examination of the *sampling process* (and, more specifically *sampling techniques*) by looking at a couple of useful ideas.

- **Sampling frame**: To construct a representative sample researchers will normally need some way of identifying everyone in their target population so an accurate sample can be drawn (this is not always the case, however, for reasons we'll examine in a moment). A sampling frame (such as a list of names and addresses), therefore, is used to uniquely identify everyone in our target population. Examples of sampling frames might be:

  - **electoral register**: a list of everyone eligible to vote

  - **school registers**: lists of children attending school

  - **professional membership lists**: organisations such as the British Medical Association (BMA) keep a register of all doctors in Britain

  - **company payroll**: a list of all employees in a company.

For many types of sampling (there are important exceptions) a sampling frame is required because:

- if a researcher can't identify everyone in their target population their sample may not be representative of that population

- for a researcher to contact people in their sample, they will need to know who they are.

However, just because a sampling frame exists, it doesn't mean a researcher will automatically have access to it. It is possible access may be denied for:

- **Legal reasons**: A school, for example, may not give a researcher access to their registers.

- **Confidentiality**: A business organisation may not give a researcher access to their payroll records.

- **Secrecy**: Religious groups, political parties and criminal gangs may not want to be studied.

⚠️ Digging deeper

As a general rule of thumb, researchers try to make their sample representative of the target population. However, there are times when they might deliberately choose *not* to draw a representative sample.

Non-representative samples: For some types of research the sociologist might *not* want to make generalisations about a very large group based only on a sample of that group. They might, for example, simply be interested in the behaviour of the group itself, rather than what they may or may not represent. Examples of this type of sampling include:

- **Case studies**: The objective here is to study, in great detail, the characteristics of a particular group (or case, as you might not be too surprised to hear it called).

Although a case study is, technically, an example of a research method (see below), we can use it to illustrate how a non-representative sample might work.

For example, a case study might involve joining a gang of young women, living among a group of monks or studying the prescribing practices of doctors in a particular part of the country. The researcher is *not* particularly concerned

about whether the group being studied is representative of all other, similar, groups. In effect, therefore, the sample in this type of research *is* the target population. This is a perfectly acceptable form of research – just as long as the researcher doesn't try to generalise their findings.

- **Opportunity samples**: This type of non-representative sample has two main sub-divisions.

  - **Best opportunity** samples involve deliberately choosing a sample to provide the *best possible opportunity* to show whatever you are testing is true. If your research shows the hypothesis you're testing to be false for this group, there's a high probability it will be false for any other related groups.

    Goldthorpe, **Lockwood** et al's study *The Affluent Worker In The Class Structure* (1965) used this technique to test whether or not the working classes were 'becoming middle class'. Their best opportunity sample consisted of highly paid car assembly workers who they chose to study on the basis that if any working-class group was likely to show lifestyles indistinguishable from their middle-class peers it would be this group of 'affluent workers'.

  - **Snowball samples**: So called because, just as a snowball rolling downhill gets larger and larger as it picks up more snow, a snowball sample picks up more and more people to be in the sample over time. A basic example of the technique for this type of sample might be as follows.

    The researcher identifies someone in the target population who's willing to

be part of their research. This person then suggests another two or three people (perhaps more) who are also willing to participate in the research. These people, in turn, suggest further possible participants until the researcher has a sample they can use for their research. Clearly, this technique isn't going to produce a representative sample, but it may be the best that can be achieved in certain situations.

⚠ Growing it yourself: sampling frames

Identify an appropriate sampling frame for the following and briefly comment on how easy/difficult/impossible it would be to access the sampling frame.

- The voting intentions of people in Dorset
- Families with new-born babies in your home town
- Registered drug addicts in Newcastle
- Students in your school/college
- British Members of Parliament

Types of sampling

⚠ Preparing the ground

In this section we can examine some different types of sampling techniques available to sociological researchers, beginning with simple random sampling.

Simple random sampling

One of the most basic (simple) forms of sampling, is based on the probability the random selection of names from a sampling frame will produce a sample representative of a target population. One important characteristic of this type of sampling is that, for it to be truly random, everyone in the target population must have an equal chance of being chosen for the sample.

A simple random sample, therefore, is similar to a lottery:

- everyone in the target population is identified on a sampling frame
- the sample is selected by randomly choosing names from the frame until the sample is complete.

For example, a 20% sample of a target population of 100 people would involve the random selection of 20 people.

A lottery is a type of simple random sample . . .

Growing It yourself: a simple random sample

Take the name of every student in your class from the register, write all the names on separate pieces of paper and put them in a box. If you then draw out a percentage of names at random you will have constructed your simple random sample.

How representative of your class was the sample you created (for example, does it accurately reflect the relative percentages of males and females in the class)?

Systematic sampling

A variation on the above – normally used when the target population is very large – is to select names for your sample *systematically*, by taking the sample directly from a sampling frame. For a 25% sample of a target population containing 100 names, a systematic sample would involve choosing every fourth name from your sampling frame.

Growing it yourself: a systematic sample

Using your class register as a sampling frame, construct a 25% sample by selecting every fourth name.

How similar/different is this sample from your simple random sample?

Stratified random sampling

If you have done the two previous exercises you will probably have identified a potential problem with samples created using these techniques – if the target population is *not homogeneous* (that is, it doesn't consist of

people who are roughly the same in terms of the characteristics important to your research) a *biased* sample can easily occur. This can happen if your target population consists of a range of smaller groups, the views of which are all important to you. Stratified random sampling, therefore, is designed to avoid problems of possible under-representation, while retaining the idea of selection based on chance.

The technique here is to divide (or *stratify*) your target population into groups who's characteristics are known to you – for example, males and females – and treat *each* group as a random sample in its own right.
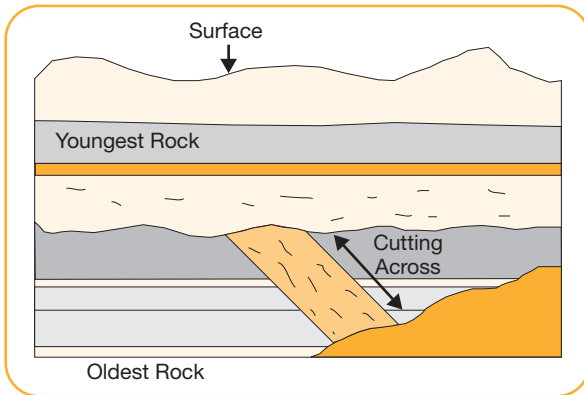
Example of rock strata
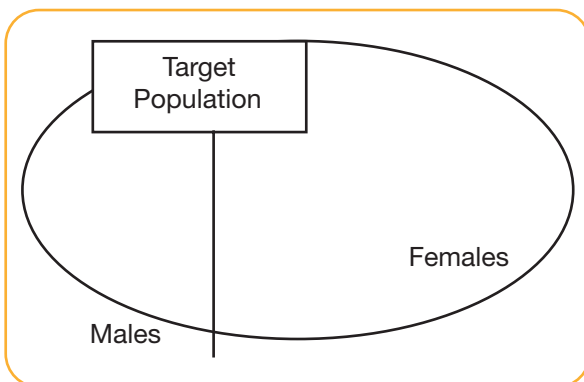
Example of sample strata [diagram]

For example, imagine our target population consists of 100 people, 80

females and 20 males and we need a 10% sample. To exactly represent the gender balance of the target population we would need a sample of eight females and two males, which we might get by chance – but it's easier to give chance a helping hand by splitting our target population into two groups – the 80 females and the 20 males – and then selecting 10% of each (eight females from the 'female only group' and two males from the 'male only' group). If we then combine the two samples we get a fully representative final sample.

⚠ Growing it yourself: stratified sampling

Choose a group (such as your class) and identify known characteristics important to your research (gender, for example). Construct a 20% stratified random sample based on the above example.

Compare the results from your stratified sample with those gained from your simple random and systematic samples. Which type of sample gave the most representative outcome?

Stratified quota sampling

The basic principles of this type of sampling are the same as for stratified random sampling (the division of the main sample into smaller samples on the basis of some known characteristics, such as age or gender). The main difference, using the previous example, is that when you actually select 'eight females from the "female only" group and two males from the "male only" group' these represent your 'quota'. Once you've filled your quota of females – by asking (rather than randomly selecting) each

female in turn if they would be willing to help with your research – then no more can be selected. The technique is non-random (but probably random enough for sampling purposes) because not everyone in the target population has an equal chance of being selected for your sample.

⚠ Growing it yourself: quota sampling

As in the previous exercise, instead of selecting people randomly you will simply ask them if they will be in your sample. One difference you should note, therefore, is that any absent students cannot be selected for your sample (unlike with the stratified random version).

Opportunity ('snowball') sampling

We looked earlier at the idea of non-representative sampling and mentioned briefly the idea of opportunity or snowball sampling. As we noted, it is not always possible for a researcher to get hold of a sampling frame for a target population and they may know nothing about the characteristics of their target population (which rules out stratified sampling).

Therefore, the researcher may need to resort to unrepresentative means to construct a sample. This technique, as I have previously noted, is not ideal but it may represent the only way a researcher can construct a sample for their research. For example research into 'secretive' organisations that refuse to disclose details of their membership to 'outsiders' would make it impossible to construct a representative sample.

Thus, when **Roy Wallis** wanted to study a religious group called The Church of

Scientology ('Scientologists'), the Church leaders refused to cooperate with his requests for information about membership. In order to carry out his research, Wallis was forced to find ex-members who could put him in touch with current members and, in this way, he was able to build up a (non-representative) sample of Church members to study. **Charlton**, **Panting** and **Hannah** ('Mobile Phone Usage and Abusage', 2001) on the other hand, simply used an opportunity sample of schoolchildren in the absence of any available sampling frame.

⚠ Growing it yourself: opportunity sampling

In small groups, identify situations in which a researcher may be forced to use opportunity sampling (for example, I've already noted how it might not be possible to research an organisation that refuses to disclose its membership in any other way – are there examples of other types of organisation that might not disclose their membership to a researcher?).

As a class, combine, discuss and record the examples identified in your groups.

Cluster sampling

This type of sampling is usually done when a target population is spread over a wide geographic area. For example, an opinion poll on voting behaviour may involve a sample of 1000 people representing the 35 (or so) million people eligible to vote in a General Election. If a simple random sample were taken the researcher might have to question 10 people in Newcastle, 15 people in Cardiff and so forth. It would be a time-

consuming and very expensive process and the results from the poll would probably be out of date before it could be finished.

To avoid these problems, a researcher uses cluster samples that firstly, divide the country into smaller sampling units (in this example, electoral constituencies) and then into small units within constituencies (for example, local boroughs).

Individual local boroughs could then be selected which, based on past research, show a representative cross-section of voters and a sample of electors could be taken from a relatively small number of boroughs across the country. Thus, sampling units (electoral constituencies) have same the same basic characteristics (population size, for example), but each cluster is a small scale version of the target population.

⚠ Digging deeper

Having outlined some of the basic features of different types of sampling we can briefly evaluate each type in terms of its general advantages and disadvantages.

Simple random and **systematic sampling** have certain *advantages* for the researcher.

- **Time**: Both are relatively quick and easy ways of selecting samples.
- **Random**: They produce random or near-random samples, based on chance (the sample cannot be accidentally biased by the researcher).
- **Expense**: Both are reasonably inexpensive to create using a sampling frame accurate for the target population.
- **Information**: Other than some way of identifying people in the target population (a name for example), the

researcher doesn't require any other knowledge about this population.

However, a couple of *disadvantages* might be:

- **Sampling frame**: These techniques *always* need a sampling frame – and one may not be available.
- **Unrepresentative**: Sampling based on chance may not produce a representative sample.

Stratified random and **stratified quota sampling** have a number of important *advantages*.

- **Known differences** in the target population will be accurately reflected in the sample. We can, therefore, be sure our sample will be broadly representative.
- **Focus**: The researcher can focus their sample on relevant distinctions in the target population (age, gender, class, ethnicity, etc.) and ignore irrelevant factors.
- **Size**: Stratified samples can be relatively small, since it's possible to make certain we have accurately reflected our target population.
- **Resources**: Quota samples are usually relatively cheap and quick to construct accurately.

They can, however, have *disadvantages*.

- **Accurate information** about the target population isn't always available.
- **Out-of-date** information: Even in situations where accurate information is available, this information may be outdated by the time the research is actually done. This is especially true where the sample is large and complex or where the composition of the target

population may change rapidly – age-groups, for example, may change on a daily basis.

- **Uncertainty**: When using a team of researchers to construct a *quota sample* you can't be certain they have correctly placed everyone in the right quota category. If, for example, your research assistant cannot find '100 men over the age of 65' to fill their quota, there may be a temptation to fill it using men under that age.

- **Unrepresentative**: *Stratified quota sample* selection is not truly random; it may be unrepresentative of a target population.

Opportunity sampling has couple of distinct *advantages*.

- **Availability**: It allows a researcher to construct a sample in situations that would be impossible using any other sampling technique.

- **Resources**: It can be a relatively cheap and quick method of sampling.

It also has some serious *disadvantages*.

- **Unrepresentative**: It is very, very, unlikely the sample will be truly representative.

- **Reliability**: There is no way of checking whether your sample is representative.

- A **self-selected sample** (see below) is likely to occur.

Although not very widely used in sociological research, some **cluster sampling** *advantages* are:

- **Resources**: This type of sample saves the researcher time and money because relatively small samples can represent very large target populations.

- **Replication**: Once a reliable sample has been established, the researcher can use the same (or very similar) sample repeatedly (as with political opinion polling, for example).

There are, however, important *disadvantages*.

- **Representativeness**: Unless great care is taken, the cluster samples will be unrepresentative of the target population.

- **Resources**: Although it is a relatively cheap form of sampling, this is not necessarily the case. A sample that seeks to represent the whole of Britain, for example, is still going to be too expensive for many researchers.

Sampling errors

Although any type of sampling is generally a risky business (getting a representative sample is not always as easy as it sounds), we can identify a couple of basic sampling errors that can produce *biased samples* (samples which are unrepresentative of a target population).

- **Self-selected samples** involve creating a sample that effectively 'picks itself' rather

⚠ Growing it yourself: self-selection

A newspaper that asks its readers to respond to the question, 'Should people convicted of murder be given the death penalty?' will always produce an unrepresentative, sample.

What reasons can you identify for this?

If you don't want any help with answering this question, look away now because the following provides a range of possible reasons.

than being selected by the researcher. For example, the type of opinion polls that appear in newspapers and magazines almost invariably involve a self-selected – and hence *unrepresentative* – sample.

Reasons for this lack of representativeness are not hard to find.

- Only a minority of the population buy the newspaper on the day the poll appears and such people have, unwittingly, selected themselves for the sample.

- An unknown number of readers will not notice the poll (and so don't vote in it). Those who notice the question, therefore, have again potentially selected themselves for the sample.

- Only a proportion of readers will respond to the question. This proportion is made even smaller if the *respondent* (the name given to anyone asked to respond in some way to a piece of research) has to pay to vote (by making a telephone call, at their own expense, to a telephone number set up to record their vote, for example).

- People who do respond to such polls are likely to be those who have very strong views either way on the question (in this example, people who are strongly pro- or anti-capital punishment) – and these are unlikely to be representative of the population of Britain.

A classic example of a self-selected sample is *The Hite Report* (**Shere Hite**, 1976), an investigation into male and female sexuality in America.

- **Statistically inadequate samples**: At the beginning of this section I suggested the question of sample size is not as important as that of how *representative* it is. This is true up to a point, but a sample that is too small to accurately represent a target population is going to be inadequate for research purposes (asking your mate what they think about the education system is probably not going to be an adequate sample).

  As a general rule, therefore, the larger your sample as a proportion of your target population the greater the probability it will be statistically adequate. This may improve the chances of your sample being representative of the target population; however, a large sample is no guarantee of a representative sample.

Having covered the concept of sampling as a consideration in the research process (you need, after all, to be able to identify the people on whom you plan to do your research) we can turn next to thinking about how to collect data about such people – and this involves identifying and exploring the range of research methods available to the sociologist.

Research methods

Introduction

As we have seen, one part of the research process involves thinking about how to

construct a sample on which to base your research; a second, related, aspect is to actually collect data about people's behaviour and to understand how sociologists go about this, we need to examine 'the different quantitative and qualitative methods and sources of data, including questionnaires, interviews, observation techniques and experiments, and documents and official statistics'. We can also take the opportunity here to look at 'the nature of social facts and the advantages and limitations of different sources of data and methods of research'.

Primary quantitative research methods: social surveys

Preparing the ground

A *survey*, according to **Lawson** and **Garrod** ('Complete A-Z Sociology Handbook', 2003) is: 'The systematic collection of information about a given population' which could, of course, involve using any number of different research methods.

However, for our purposes, we can think of surveys as involving the collection of data using a *questionnaire*. This, in basic terms, is a list of written questions normally completed in one of two ways.

- **Privately** (with the researcher not present): This is normally called a '**postal questionnaire**' (even though it may not necessarily be posted – how confusing is that?). In this instance, respondents give their answers to the questionnaire without any verbal guidance from the researcher.

- **Publicly** (in the presence of the researcher): This is normally called a **structured interview** and, in this instance, respondents normally answer a researcher's questions verbally.

In this respect, the same set of questions could serve equally as a postal questionnaire or a structured interview – the main difference between the two techniques, therefore, is how they are *administered*. This being the case, we can look, firstly, at some of the shared aspects of this method, before considering some different advantages and disadvantages.

Questionnaires can be used to ask two basic types of question.

- **Closed-ended** (sometimes called *closed* or *pre-coded questions*). This type of question involves the researcher providing a set of answers from which the respondent is asked to choose one (or sometimes more) that best represents their situation, feelings, beliefs and so forth (hence the idea of questions being *pre-coded* – the researcher limits, to a greater or lesser extent, the responses that can be given).

A (very) simple example of a closed question is one that asks the respondent to choose between two options:

Do you drink coffee? Yes/No

(When using this type of question it is useful to add a third option – 'Don't Know' – just to catch those respondents who have no opinion either way).

Variations on this basic theme can be a bit more adventurous. For example, the respondent could be allowed the (limited) opportunity to fill in an answer.

Which soap powder do you regularly use?

Bold
Persil
Other? (please specify)

The inclusion of an 'other' option is often useful because it avoids the need for very long lists – and it also means the respondent can add something the researcher may not have considered.

Alternatively, a researcher could measure *attitudes* towards something, as in the following example:

There are further variations on the *closed question* theme (but I'm sure you get the picture); however, their defining characteristic is they allow respondents little, if any, scope to develop an answer beyond the categories selected by the researcher. Such questions, therefore, are used extensively to collect *quantitative data.*

Open-ended (or simply 'open') questions are different in that the researcher doesn't provide a set answer from which to choose. Rather, the respondent is given the scope to answer 'in their own words'. A simple example of an open question might be something like

> **'What do you like about coffee that you don't like about tea?'**

This type of question, therefore, can probe a little deeper into a respondent's opinions and produces a (limited) form of *qualitative data* (although the main objective with open questions in a questionnaire is usually still to *quantify* responses in some way).

As you need to be aware, questionnaires can, of course, happily contain a mix of open and closed questions.

We can think about some of the general characteristics of questionnaires/structured interviews in the following terms:

- **Coding and quantification**: The use of pre-coded questions makes it much easier to quantify data, since the options available are already known, limited in number and (relatively) easy to count.

  Although closed questions are relatively easy to codify, this is not necessarily the case with open questions. The researcher may receive a variety of responses, each of which has to be categorised, coded and quantified. In the previous 'tea/coffee' example, answers mentioning things like 'taste' and 'flavour' might be categorised and coded in one way, whereas answers mentioning 'cost', 'value for money' and the like, might be categorised and coded differently. In this way, similar types of answer can be coded appropriately and quantified accordingly ('32% of respondents buy coffee because they like its flavour', for example).

- **Depth and scope**: One problem with closed questions, as I have suggested, is the limitation they place on the detail, depth and type of answers a respondent

'How strongly do you agree/disagree with the statement 'Nucuppa is the best-tasting coffee on the market'?				
Agree very strongly	Agree strongly	Neither agree nor disagree	Disagree strongly	Disagree very strongly

can give – it would sometimes be useful to know *why* people believe one thing as opposed to another. Open questions go some way to solving this problem, although questionnaires/structured interviews rarely – if ever – go into as much depth as other types of survey method (such as interviews – a method we will consider in more detail in a moment).

- **Ease of completion**: Open-ended questionnaires take more time and there is the danger (from the researcher's viewpoint) that respondents will:

  - write-down the first thing that comes into their head in order to complete the questionnaire quickly (something that affects the validity of the research)

  - not bother to complete the questionnaire at all, because it takes too much time and effort.

- **Response rate**: There are wide disparities between the response rate of postal questionnaires (you may be lucky to get 25% of those you send out returned) and structured interviews (where the response will always be around 100%). You need, as a researcher, therefore, to be aware of the extent to which a poor response rate may affect the *representativeness* of your sample (by creating, in some way, a biased response).

Questionnaires

⚠ Digging deeper

Thinking a little more about questionnaires, we can note the following *advantages*.

- **Sampling**: Postal questionnaires are a useful survey method when the researcher

⚠ Growing it yourself: asking questions

Asking people questions and discovering things about them can be interesting – but it's even more interesting if you can make connections between the things you discover.

As a class, test whether or not there is a connection between family and education in the following way. Write a few questions to discover:

- What qualifications each member of your class has achieved.

- The birthday of each class member.

- How many siblings (brothers and sisters) each person has.

- Their position in relation to their siblings (are they the oldest or youngest?).

- What connections (if any) can you make for the class as a whole between family life and educational achievement?

needs to contact large numbers of people quickly, easily and efficiently. The respondents, in effect, do most of the time consuming work by actually completing the questionnaire.

- **Analysis**: Where quantitative questions are asked, postal questionnaires are relatively quick and easy to code and interpret (in some instances, 'interpretation' simply involves counting responses).

- **Reliability**: A questionnaire is easy to standardise, which increases potential reliability because everyone answers exactly the same questions.

- **Interview/interviewer effect**: In basic terms, this type of effect occurs when, for various reasons (discussed in a bit more detail below in relation to *structured interviews*), the relationship between the researcher and the respondent creates a situation that biases the responses the researcher receives. Postal questionnaires – because they involve no personal (face-to-face) contacts or social interaction between researcher and respondent – may avoid this potential source of bias.

- **Validity**: Although questionnaires rarely have much depth, one area in which they may have greater validity than some alternative methods is in terms of *anonymity*. Because respondents never meet the researcher, postal questionnaires can explore potentially embarrassing areas (such as sexuality or criminality) more easily than other methods. If people can anonymously admit to crimes they have committed, for example, they may be encouraged to answer questions honestly.

In terms of potential *disadvantages* we can note:

- **Anonymity**: This feature of questionnaires can work both ways – it may encourage honesty, but if someone other than the intended respondent completes the questionnaire then research validity and representativeness will be affected (although this will depend on the size of the sample to some extent – the smaller the sample, the more significant these factors may be).

- **Reliability**: Because the researcher is not present, it's impossible to know if a respondent has understood a question properly. The researcher also has to trust the questions asked mean the same thing to all respondents – if they don't, reliability will be affected.

This problem can – to some extent – be avoided by conducting a *pilot study* prior to the real survey – this involves the researcher trialling their questions to eliminate possible sources of bias (for example, the questionnaire may be completed by a selection of respondents to check for misunderstood questions and so forth. The data collected from a pilot study would not be included in the full survey).

- **Response rates**: These, as I have noted, are notoriously low for postal questionnaires, which may mean a carefully designed sample becomes unrepresentative of a target population. Research validity may also be affected by a low response rate because it increases the chances of a self-selected sample.

- **Validity**: The questionnaire format makes it difficult to examine complex issues and opinions – even when open-ended questions are used, the depth of respondent answers tends to be more limited than with almost any other method.

Structured interviews

⚠️ Digging deeper

As I have previously suggested, the main difference between a postal questionnaire and a structured interview is how they are administered so, keeping this in mind, we can note a couple of ways structured interviews differ in terms of their advantages to the researcher.

- **Reliability**: Because structured interviews involve the researcher and respondent in

personal, face-to-face contact, any issues surrounding the research can be discussed. The interviewer can, for example, explain the objectives of the research and resolve any problems with understanding/answering questions. If a respondent is unable or unwilling to provide an answer, the researcher will be aware of the reasons for this and may be able to resolve them.

- **Representativeness**: Structured interviews potentially avoid unrepresentative research caused by low response rates or self-selected samples.

This method has a few additional *disadvantages* not shared by postal questionnaires.

- **Interview effect**: This potential disadvantage comes from the idea the interview may limit the validity of a respondent's answers if they misinterpret (consciously or unconsciously) their role; for example, the respondent may view their role as one of trying to please or encourage the researcher and, by so doing, they may not answer questions honestly or accurately.

  This may not be done deliberately on the part of the respondent (although with this type of research method dishonesty and inaccuracy are ever-present possibilities); rather, it may involve something like the *halo effect* – a situation **Stephen Draper** ('The Hawthorne effect and other expectancy effects', 2004) describes as: 'uncontrolled novelty'. In other words, the novelty of being interviewed – and a desire to reward the interviewer for giving the respondent the chance to experience it – may result in unintentionally dishonest answers.

- **Interviewer effect**: This idea is related to the interview effect (and a slightly different type of halo effect may operate here, whereby the respondent feels they want to personally please the interviewer), but is subtly different in that it refers to ways the relationship between researcher and respondent may bias responses and lead to invalid data. For example, on one level, an aggressive interviewer may intimidate a respondent into giving answers that don't really reflect the latter's beliefs. On another level, status considerations (based on factors such as gender, age, class and ethnicity) may come into play, such as in a situation where a female respondent may feel embarrassed about answering questions about her sexuality if they are asked by a male researcher.

- **Imposition**: This limitation is common to both postal questionnaires and structured interviews and revolves around the idea that, by designing a 'list of questions', a researcher has effectively decided (before collecting any data) what they consider important (and, of course, unimportant). The researcher, therefore, has imposed their definition of these things in advance of the interview.

  For example, if I was researching 'Attitudes to the European Community', the questions I *fail* to ask may be as (if not more) important to a respondent than the questions I *actually* ask – such as failing to ask if the respondent is 'pro' or 'anti' the European Community. Although a daft example perhaps (although you are probably getting used to that by now), the basic principle involved is significant since the objective

is to collect valid data based on the beliefs of respondents. If a researcher places artificial limits on any possible responses (by not asking certain questions, for example) this may seriously affect research validity.

Experiments

⚠ Preparing the ground

Experimentation is another example of a primary research method – although, it needs to be initially noted, not one that is particularly widely used in sociology for reasons that will become clear. However, we can begin by noting experiments can be categorised in terms of two basic types.

- A **laboratory experiment** is a general name for an experiment where the researcher controls the *environment* in which the research takes place. The ability to do this is a feature of what are called *closed systems* – situations, such as in a laboratory, where the research conditions can be exactly monitored and controlled.

- A **natural** (or **field**) **experiment** is not carried out under controlled conditions. This type is sometimes called *opportunity experimentation* since the researcher takes advantage of a *naturally occurring opportunity* to conduct the experiment (although, having said this, it is possible to deliberately construct a natural experiment). Such experiments are normally used in *open systems* (such as the social world) where the environment cannot be closely monitored or easily controlled.

We can build on the above by identifying some of the basic features of the

experimental method, neatly encapsulated by **Giddens** ('Sociology', 1989): 'An experiment can . . . be defined as an attempt, within artificial conditions established by an investigator, to test the influence of one or more variables upon others'.

Aside from what we've just noted about the ability (or otherwise) of a researcher to control the environment (or conditions) under which an experiment takes place, the key idea here is that of *variables* (in basic terms, something that may change – or vary – under different conditions). The purpose (or *rationale* if you want to show off) of experimentation is fairly simple to describe (but much harder to actually do). For example, in an imaginary (and oversimplified) experiment we have two *variables*. The first we call 'Variable C' and the second we call 'Variable E'. All we want to test is: if we change Variable C in some way, what change (if any) will we see in Variable E?

If this is a bit confusing, consider this: in our laboratory we have a plant and a means of controlling the heat. The plant is Variable E and the heat control is Variable C. What we want to know, by experimenting with changes in the level of heating, is how will the plant change? For example, if we deprive it of heat what will happen?

This example highlights the importance of a *controlled environment* within a closed system. If we record changes in plant behaviour we need to be certain they were caused by changing the heating level. If we allow some other variable into the equation (such as changing the amount of light the plant receives) we can't be sure any recorded changes were due to changes in heat level. In a roundabout way, therefore, we have

encountered some important ideas relating to experimentation that we need to briefly clarify.

- **Variables**: In the above we've identified two types. The first we call:
  - **Dependent variables** and these, in any experiment, are the *effect* we want to measure. Changes in the behaviour of Variable E (otherwise known as a plant) were what we wanted to measure; hence, plant behaviour would, in this instance, be the dependent variable because any changes in behaviour depend on – or are caused by – something else. The second we call:
  - **Independent variables** – the things we, as researchers, *change* in various ways in order to measure their possible *effect* on the dependent variable.

- **Causality**: This can be expressed in terms of the idea two or more things (for example, heat and plant growth) are so closely related that when one changes the other also changes. If this happens *every time* we repeat our experiment we can claim to have established a *causal relationship* – a very powerful statement, mainly because it allows us to make *predictions* about future behaviour. As an aside, a causal relationship is, by definition, highly *reliable*.

- **Correlation**: This is an observation two or more things occur at the same time (for example, if we deprive a plant of heat it dies). This is a *weaker statement* than a causal statement because we can't be certain one thing *caused* another to happen – they may have happened at the same time by *accident* or through *chance*.

We can illustrate the difference between causality and correlation using the following example, in 1989, the First-Class Cricket Averages for batting and bowling in England were as follows:

- The **top ten batsmen** all had names that were no longer than one syllable (Smith, Lamb, Jones …).

- The **top ten bowlers**, on the other hand, all had names that were two or more syllables long (Ambrose, Dilley, Foster …).

This is an example of a correlation for two reasons. Firstly, there is no *logical relationship* between the ability to bat or bowl successfully and a person's name (would changing your name, for example, make you a better or worse batsman or bowler)?

Secondly, since it is not always easy or possible to prove or disprove something logically, a better way would be to use some sort of test – in this instance, we could examine the averages for previous years. If the relationship is *not* repeated (or replicated) we would know it was the product of chance (a correlation in other words). If it *was* repeated every year, this would suggest a causal relationship (and in case you are wondering, it was a correlation – simply a chance occurrence).

Although laboratory experiments are a powerful method used extensively in the natural sciences they're not, as I've noted, used much in sociological research (for reasons we'll examine in a moment). However, **natural experiments** are used occasionally and, for convenience, we can sub-divide this category into two types.

- **Field experiments** are conducted outside the confines of a closed, controlled, environment. They take place, therefore, 'in the field' (not literally 'in a field' of course) where respondents are studied in their natural environment. The basic principles of field experiments are very similar to lab-type experiments (the objective being, as you will recall, to identify dependent and independent behavioural variables and manipulate (or change) them in some way to measure possible effects).

- **Comparative experiments** involve comparing two or more naturally occurring situations to examine their similarities and differences. For example, two identical twins separated at birth and raised in different families (perhaps, if you're very lucky, even different societies) would provide an opportunity for a comparative experiment since it would be possible to identify similarities and differences in the twins' behaviour.

🕸 **If you're interested in exploring experimentation further, examples of laboratory, field and comparative experiments can be found at:** **www.sociology.org.uk/as4aqa.htm**

⚠ Digging deeper

As I have suggested, sociologists tend not to use experiments (especially the laboratory type) in their research, mainly because of the following *disadvantages*.

- **Experimental control**: A major methodological problem with both laboratory and field experiments is the difficulty involved in identifying and controlling all the possible influences on people's behaviour.

- **Awareness**: Because people are conscious of what is happening around them, this introduces an uncontrolled independent variable into any experiment – how, for example, the fact of knowing they are part of an experiment may change someone's behaviour. This is frequently referred to as the **Hawthorne Effect**, named after the studies by **Elton Mayo** (*The human problems of an industrial civilization*, 1933) at the Hawthorne factory in Chicago. **Draper** (2004) describes this possible effect as being noted when:

> A series of studies on the productivity of workers manipulated various conditions (pay, light levels, rest breaks etc.), but each change resulted, on average and over time, in productivity rising . . . This was true of each of the individual workers as well as of the group [as a whole]. Clearly the variables the experimenters manipulated were not the only . . . causes of productivity. One interpretation . . . was that the important effect here was the feeling of being studied.

This possible change in people's behaviour as the result of 'a feeling of being studied' leads us to note the possible effect of an:

- **Artificial environment**: A controlled experiment is, by definition, an unusual situation for people – does this mean they behave differently inside a laboratory to how they behave in society generally?

In addition, we can note a couple of further considerations.

- **Ethical**: Do sociologists have the right to experiment on people, who may be unwitting (and unwilling) victims, in the name of 'research'?

- **Practical**: It is often the case that the kind of experiments sociologists would

like to conduct (such as separating identical twins at birth, placing them in different social environments and observing their development) are *impractical* (and probably *unethical*, come to that).

Despite such problems, experiments do have a number of *advantages*.

- **Reliability**: Laboratory experiments can be highly reliable; if the experimental conditions can be controlled and standardised the experiment can be easily repeated.
- **Validity**: Experiments can be used to create powerful, highly valid, statements about people's behaviour under certain conditions. Through experimental methods, for example, it may be possible to establish *cause-and-effect* relationships in people's behaviour.
- **Assumptions**: Field experiments can be used to manipulate situations 'in the real world' to understand the *assumptions* (norms and values for example) on which people base their everyday behaviour.

Primary qualitative research methods

This general type of data collection is sometimes called *ethnography* – the detailed study of any small group. Ethnographic forms of research try to see and understand the world from the point of view of the subject or participant in that world and we can outline a range of different primary qualitative methods used by this type of research.

Growing it yourself: experimentation

A variety of simple 'classroom' experiments can be constructed (although you should always be aware of the *ethical considerations* that apply when doing this kind of research).

For example, in our society *personal space* is considered to be an area around our bodies we each own. It usually extends for 1–2 feet and we find it uncomfortable if people 'invade' our space without permission. Using a relatively closed environment such as your school or college library.

- Observe and record the responses of students whose personal space you deliberately invade (for example, by standing too close to someone looking for a book on the library shelves). Check to see how people of the same and opposite sex react to your behaviour.

- Observe and record examples of the ways people try to protect their personal space in this environment. For example, do they surround themselves with things like books and bags that seek to stop uninvited people sitting next to them?

- Place a bag on an empty chair at a desk in the library and observe and record how people respond (this is best done when the room is relatively crowded).

Focused interviews
Preparing the ground

This involves the researcher setting up a situation (the interview) that allows the respondent to talk at length and in depth about a particular subject. The focus (or general topic) of the interview is decided by

the researcher and there may also be particular areas they are interested in exploring – which is why this type of interview is sometimes called a *semi-structured* technique. It has a 'structure' (in the sense of things the interviewer wants the respondent to focus on), but one that's not as rigid as a structured interview – there is no list of questions to be asked and answered and different respondents may be asked different questions on the same topic, depending on how the interview develops.

The objective here is to *understand* things from the respondent's viewpoint, rather than make generalisations about people's behaviour (although this may be possible in certain circumstances). *Open-ended questions* are frequently (if sparingly) used, some of which are created in advance of the interview and some of which arise naturally from whatever the respondent talks about.

We can note a number of factors that can affect the conduct (and validity) of focused interviews.

- **Personal demeanour**: This method requires certain *skills* of the researcher – for example, when to prompt and when to listen. Although such interviews are similar to conversations, they are not arguments – people are unlikely to open up to a rude and aggressive interviewer. Similarly, how researchers present themselves (how they dress, how they talk, whether they appear interested or bored and so forth) may be important factors in the interview process.

- **Setting**: Interviews take time and the respondent should be comfortable with both their surroundings and the interviewer. To get people to talk openly it's important to build a *rapport* with the

respondent – they should feel comfortable with both the researcher, the interview and their surroundings; unlike a structured interview which can be conducted almost anywhere, focused interviews can't be easily conducted on street corners or in a noisy classroom.

- **Trust**: Interviews may deal with matters of personal importance to respondents – one reason for using this technique is, after all, the desire to explore 'what people really believe' – and it is important respondents feel they are being taken seriously (whatever they may say or do) and that the information will be confidential. Building trust between the researcher and the respondent may also, of course, help to increase the reliability and validity of the data gained using this method.

- **Interview schedule**: In essence, a schedule is a plan, developed by the researcher, used to specify and track the progress of the interview. For focused interviews, such a schedule may start with the *major topic* (or focus) and an initial, open-ended, question (for example, 'Can you tell me about …') designed to get the respondent talking about the general topic. The schedule may also include some subsidiary questions or topics the researcher wants to explore and these may or may not be asked, depending on how the interview develops. If they are asked, they may not be asked in the original order they appeared on the schedule. Finally, the schedule can be updated with questions that arose during the interview (which, again, may or may not be used in subsequent focused interviews with different respondents)

One further thing we can note in this context is a general development around the basic theme of the focused interview, namely **hierarchical focusing** – a technique advocated by **Tomlinson** ('Having it both ways', 1989), whereby the researcher constructs an interview schedule that starts with the most general question and develops with more specific questions, gradually introduced as the interview progresses. General questions are used to encourage respondents to talk and specific questions are used as and when required to refocus the interview.

Digging deeper

We can look at some *advantages* of focused interviews in the following terms.

- **Pre-judgement**: The problem we noted, in relation to questionnaires, of the researcher *pre-determining* what will or will not be discussed is largely (although not totally) avoided, since there are few 'pre-set questions' or topics.

- **Prior knowledge**: Since the interview allows the respondent to talk about the things that interest or concern them, it's possible for the interviewer to pick up ideas and information that had either not occurred to them or of which they had no prior knowledge or understanding (and this new knowledge can, of course, be used to inform subsequent interviews with different respondents).

- **Validity**: By allowing respondents to develop their opinions, the researcher may be able to get at what someone 'really means or believes'. By focusing on things the respondent sees as important and interesting, the researcher is likely to receive a much greater depth of information.

- **Help and guidance**: Within limits, the face-to-face interaction of a focused interview allows the researcher to help and guide respondents – to explain or rephrase a question, for example – which may improve the overall validity of the responses.

Focused interviews, for all their undoubted uses, also have certain *disadvantages*.

- **Information overload**: Large amounts of data are produced (which needs to be interpreted by the researcher – always an important consideration in this type of research), much of which may not be directly relevant to the research hypothesis or question.

- **Focus**: Because the respondent largely dictates the direction of the interview they may go in directions that are of little or no relevance to the research (although the ever-present problem with this type of method is the researcher may not know – or be aware during the interview – whether the information being given is relevant or irrelevant in the greater scheme of their research). The researcher usually, however, has to make (skilled) decisions about when to ask questions that refocus the interview.

- **Generalisations**: Where the same questions are not necessarily put to different respondents, the result is a lack of standardisation; this, in turn, makes it difficult to generalise the results from a set of focused interviews.

- **Skills**: This relates to both the skills required of a researcher (the ability to ask the right questions, to put respondents at

ease and to think quickly about relevant question opportunities as they arise during the interview) and a respondent – an *inarticulate respondent*, for example, will lack the skills to talk openly and in detail about the research topic.

- **Validity**: Although research validity may be high because of the depth and detail involved, any interview is, essentially, a *reconstruction*. Respondents are required to remember and recount events that happened in the past and this creates validity problems for both researcher and respondent.

  A researcher, for example, has no way of knowing if a respondent is lying; a more subtle problem may be *imperfect recall*. If you were asked to remember things that happened days, weeks or months ago, it is possible you would remember very little about what actually may have happened.

  An interview can also be a 'second chance' to do something; in other words, given the time to reflect, the respondent 'makes sense' of their behaviour by rationalising their actions. They are not consciously lying here, but their explanation for their behaviour, with hindsight, may be very different from what they actually felt or did at the time.

- **Recording information**: This is not necessarily a limitation (unless the researcher is trying to manually record everything – which may disrupt the flow of the interview) but electronic recording (such as a tape or video recorder) needs to be unobtrusive; if the respondent is too aware of being recorded it may make them nervous, uncooperative or self-conscious.

Unstructured interviews

⚠️ Preparing the ground

Unstructured (or non-focused as they are sometimes called) interviews involve the researcher entering the interview with only a general idea or topic they want the respondent to 'talk about'. The main objective, as with focused interviews, is to record a respondent's views about a particular topic and a researcher does this by encouraging the respondent to talk. The researcher's contribution to the interview is, however, minimal; they may provide *non-verbal cues* (nodding, smiling and so forth) to encourage respondents to talk about the topic, but the researcher's role is mainly to observe and record rather than to contribute.
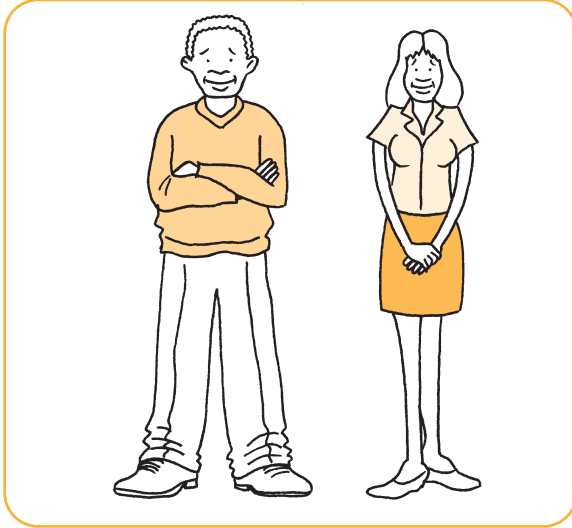
The *non-participation* of the researcher is part of the technique, not just because they want to avoid influencing what's said (the objective, after all, is to discover the things the respondent feels are important), but also because *conversation norms* in our culture do not tolerate silence (think about how embarrassing it is when you are having a conversation and neither of you can think of anything to say). The silence of the researcher encourages – in theory at least – the respondent to talk.

⚠️ Digging deeper

Unstructured interviews, although similar to their focused counterparts, have a couple of distinct *advantages*.

- **Validity**: The minimal intervention of the researcher – the respondent leads and the researcher follows – means the data

Conversation norms in our society tell us silence is embarrassing.

- **Focus**: By intention, the researcher has no control over the direction of the interview. The respondent may choose to talk about things of little or no immediate interest to the researcher; they may, for example, wander into areas of no relevance to the research topic. In addition, large amounts of information are generated and will involve some form of selection and interpretation process on the part of the researcher when the data is finally analysed.

- **Reliability**: This tends, as you might expect, to be relatively low. The unstandardised format makes it impossible to exactly repeat the interview (even with the same respondent). Unintentional bias can occur if a respondent is inarticulate or unwilling to open up; there may be a temptation to 'lead the respondent' ('So what you mean is …'). In addition, the respondent may feel pressurised into 'talking for the sake of talking' when the interviewer fails to respond. Respondents say things they don't particularly believe, simply to 'fill the silence'.

collected reflects the interests of the respondent and, consequently, is more likely to be a true expression of their beliefs.

- **No pre-judgements**: The main objective of this method is to describe reality as the respondent sees it so they, rather than the researcher, decides what is and what is not significant information.

The drawbacks of this technique are again similar to those for focused interviews but we can note a couple of additional *disadvantages*.

- **Skills**: Unfocused interviews require researcher patience and skill, since the temptation may be to try to converse with the respondent when the objective is simply to listen and record. The respondent must also be articulate (able to express themselves clearly and understandably) and forthcoming since, if they aren't, it's difficult to use this method to produce data.

Before we leave interviews (in all their different shapes and sizes) and as a prelude to discussing *observational methods*, we can identify and examine a couple of general problems of bias.

- **Unintentional bias** involves a variety of things a careful researcher can avoid doing. Focused and unstructured interviews, for example, place demands on the skills and expertise of the researcher and an unskilful interviewer can easily bias the interview process (thereby producing invalid data). Unintentional bias can range from things

like tone of voice and general demeanour (does the interviewer appear interested?) to the ability (or otherwise) to organise the interview – to ensure recording devices are not intrusive and distracting, for example.

- **Inherent bias**, on the other hand, involve things critics of interviews say cannot be avoided. Thus, the potential problems of bias we've noted so far have been basically *technical* (problems the researcher can resolve), but an idea that suggests interviews are fundamentally flawed is called the **interview effect**. Any interaction process (for example, the doctor–patient or teacher–student relationship) represents a situation in which status considerations apply. In other words, when I, as a teacher, interact with my students, certain unstated status rules exist between us. For example, when I take the register, I expect them to respond. These rules, therefore, involve people knowing and accepting their relative status positions.

Interviews, as an interaction process, are subject to such rules. **Cohen** and **Taylor** ('Talking About Prison Blues', 1977), for example, have argued one form of interview effect happens when, through the act of questioning people, a series of subtle and not-so-subtle *status manipulations* come into play, the outcome of which is respondents effectively tell the researcher what they believe the researcher would like to hear. Status differences come into play because the respondent considers the researcher to be 'in charge' (just as a patient expects the same of their doctor) and, consequently, is looking to both defer to

the researcher and, in some senses, please them through their cooperation.
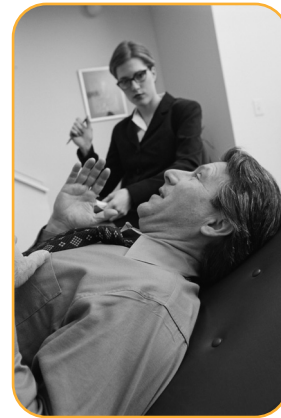
Do status differences between researcher and respondent mean interviews are inherently biased?

Interviews, so the argument goes, cannot get at 'the truth' because, like any other form of social interaction, they involve a process of what **Erving Goffman** (*The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*) has called:

- **Negotiation** – a respondent makes decisions about how much or how little to reveal in the interview.
- **Impression management** – the way each participant in the interview attempts to manage the impression they give of themselves to each other.
- **Manipulation** – the interviewer attempting to push the respondent into a position where they feel able to reveal 'the truth' about themselves.

If we agree with the logic of the interview effect, we must seek another method that allows sociologists to collect data in as natural a way as possible – we need, therefore, to observe people and their behaviour.

Observation

⚠️ Preparing the ground

The research methods we have considered so far all have one major thing in common, namely that the researcher is collecting data on the basis of what people *say* they believe or *say* they do. These methods, in their different ways, rely on people telling or remembering the truth about their behaviour – which does, of course, raise questions about their general validity. What is missing here is the ability to observe people going about their everyday lives – watching them in their 'natural setting'. This section, therefore, focuses on a couple of different types of observational method.

- **Non-participant observation** involves observing behaviour *from a distance*. The researcher doesn't become personally involved in what they are studying since, if they are not involved, their presence can't influence the behaviour of the people being watched. The technical term for this 'social distance' is *objectivity* – the ability to remain detached, aloof or personally separate from the people you're researching. There are a couple of important dimensions to objectivity (namely, personal and methodological) but for the moment we can consider it as not interacting with the people we are researching.

    An experiment might be an example of *non-participant observation* since researcher involvement is limited to setting up and then observing the experiment. Alternatively, a sociologist interested in the social psychology of crowd behaviour might simply observe and record behaviour witnessed at a football match or a pop concert. By observing people (without them knowing) we get an insight into the way they actually behave. **Yule** ('Why are parents so tough on children?', 1986) used this technique when she observed how mothers treated their children in public places.

⚠️ Growing it yourself: take a walk . . .

A simple – and relaxing – way to do some sociological observation is a take a short walk around the area where you live or work. As you walk, make a note of the things you observe.

You can note things like who's around 'on the streets' and what they're doing; you can note the buildings, record graffiti etc.

If you're doing this as a class, make sure you compare notes at the end of your walk because it's probable different people will consider different things significant . . .

What sort of sociological picture of your area have you observed?

Alternatively, if you have access to a digital camera (and, more importantly, you know how to use it), take pictures of the interesting things you observe while walking.

- **Participant observation**: This type of research stresses the need for the researcher to involve themselves in the behaviour they are observing and we normally identify two main types:

    - **Covert** observation involves participating in and observing behaviour secretly; the research subject is unaware they're being observed. For example, a researcher joins and studies

a group without informing them they are being studied and, as far as the group are aware, the researcher has simply joined (or been admitted) to participate in the usual activities of that group.

This method has certain advantages and disadvantages for the researcher, since they will have to balance the roles of researcher and participant while keeping the former role secret from other group members. By fully participating in a group, the sociologist may, of course, potentially become involved in various forms of unethical, personally distasteful or criminal behaviour.

- **Overt observation** involves participating in and observing the behaviour of people who know they are being studied. The researcher joins the group *openly*, telling its members about the research being undertaken (its purpose, scope, etc.) and they carry out research with the permission and co-operation of the group.

Participant observation is sometimes referred to as *subjective sociology* because the researcher aims to understand the social world from the subject's viewpoint – it involves 'getting to know' the people being studied by entering their world and participating in that world. It involves the researcher putting themselves 'in the shoes' of the respondent in an attempt to experience events in a way they are experienced by the people being studied. The technical term for this – suggested by the German sociologist **Max Weber** – is *verstehen* (literally, 'to understand'). Another way

of expressing this is to use **G. H. Mead**'s (*Mind, Self and Society*, 1933) idea the researcher should exploit the ability to *take the part of the other* in order to understand how people experience the social world.

As **Parker** (*A View from the Boys*, 1974) argues, the reason for doing this is that: 'by visiting the deviants in prison, borstal and other "human zoos" or by cornering them in classrooms to answer questionnaires, the sociologist misses meeting them as people in their normal society'.

⚠️ Digging deeper

Considered as a general research method, participant observation has a number of *advantages*.

- **Flexibility**: The researcher, because they're not pre-judging issues (in terms of what they consider to be important/ unimportant) can react to events, follow leads, and develop research avenues that may not have occurred to them before becoming involved with a group.
- **Validity**: This method, because of the depth of involvement with people's behaviour, has the potential to produce highly valid data.
- **Understanding** (**empathy**): By their participation and experience in the group, the researcher can understand, first-hand, the influences on behaviour.

In terms of *disadvantages*, however, we can note things like:

- **Skill** and commitment is required from the researcher – the ability to fit into the

group, to communicate with group members on their level, in their terms and so forth.

- **Generalisation**: Participant observation is normally restricted to small-scale, intensive, studies carried out over a long period and the group being studied is unlikely to be representative of any other group. It would be difficult (probably) for a researcher to generalise their findings from one group to the next.

- **Reliability**: Two general reliability issues are, firstly, the research can never be replicated. It would be possible to revisit a group, but the research could never be accurately repeated. Secondly, we have, of course, to take it on *trust* the researcher saw and did the things they claimed to see and do.

Although these are advantages and disadvantages relating to the general method, its two basic forms are sufficiently different to warrant separate consideration.

Overt participant observation, for example, has some distinctive *advantages*.

- **Recording data** is relatively easy because the group knows and understands the role of the researcher. The researcher can ask questions, take notes, etc. with the permission of the people involved.

- **Access** to all levels is important if research is being done on a group that has a hierarchical structure (a large company, for example, where the researcher would have access to both the 'shop floor' and the boardroom).

- **Going native**: Overt participant observation makes it easier to separate the roles of participant and observer and reduces the chance of the researcher

becoming so involved in a group they stop observing and simply become a participant (in other words, they 'go native').

A couple of significant *disadvantages* to this method need, however, to be noted.

- **The observer effect**: A major criticism here is the observer's presence changes group behaviour in some unknown way – do people who know they are being studied change (consciously or subconsciously) the way they normally behave?

- **Superficial involvement**: If the researcher doesn't fully participate in the group, their 'involvement' may not be deep enough to fully experience the world from the viewpoint of the people being studied. Depth of involvement may also, of course, be limited by ethical considerations – not participating in the crimes committed by a criminal gang, for example.

Covert participant observation, on the other hand, also has its *advantages*.

- **Access**: This type of observational method may be the only way to study people who would not normally allow themselves to be studied (their behaviour is illegal, deviant or secretive, for example). **John Ray** in his study of groups of Australian environmentalists ('A Participant Observation Study of Social Class Among Environmentalists', 1987) argued: 'The study was covert to minimize defensiveness on the part of those studied and to avoid breakdowns in co-operation'. Similarly, **Lofland** and **Stark** ('Becoming a world-saver', 1965) used a covert approach to study the behaviour of a secretive religious sect.

- **Level of participation** is, of course, very high – the researcher may live with the people they are (secretly) studying and, in consequence, this method produces massively detailed and insightful data (observed and personally experienced) about a group's behaviour.

- **Validity**: Personal experience means the researcher understands the meanings and motivations within a group that explain why people behave in certain ways (even when such people themselves may not understand the reasons for their behaviour). In addition, when we look at behaviour 'from the outside, looking in' it can be difficult to explain why people would want to behave in ways we may find distasteful, disgusting or perverse – covert observation goes some way to resolving this problem by allowing the researcher to understand the meaning behind people's actions.

- **The observer effect** problem is avoided because people are not aware they are being observed – their behaviour is, consequently, unaffected by the researcher's observations.

The potential *disadvantages* of covert observation should, however, not be ignored.

- **Problems**: **Goffman**'s classic covert study of an American mental institution (*Asylums*, 1961) noted three major problems for the covert participant observer.

  - **Getting in**: It may be difficult for the researcher to enter a group.

  - **Staying in**: What happens if the researcher fails to either participate properly or is exposed as a 'spy'?

- **Getting out**: In many groups it may not be particularly easy to simply 'stop participating'.

We can develop these (and some additional) ideas as follows.

- **Entrance and access**: If the researcher's characteristics (age, for example) don't match those of the group then, not to put too fine a point on it, the researcher can't enter the group (a man, for example, would find it difficult to covertly study a group of nuns). In addition, some groups (Freemasons, for example) only allow people to join by invitation, while professional occupations (such as accountancy) require particular qualifications. If a group has a hierarchical structure the researcher won't have access to all levels. Doing covert observation in a school under the guise of 'being a student' won't give you access to the staffroom.

- **Level of participation**: A researcher has to learn the culture of a group if they are to participate fully and not be exposed as a 'spy'. This may not be easy.

- **Going native**: Separating the role of participant from that of observer can be difficult to maintain when you are acting undercover.

- **Reliability** issues abound with covert research – it can't be replicated, we have to trust the researcher's observations (there's nothing to back them up) and recording data is frequently difficult (the researcher can't take notes or record conversations openly, because to do so would risk exposure).

Goffman (1961), used a *field diary* to write up his observations at the end of

every working day – although this does, of course, mean the researcher must remember things accurately and make decisions about what events were significant. Having said this, it's possible to use modern technology (miniature cameras and voice recorders etc.) to ensure data is accurately captured and recorded – although these raise questions of:

- **Ethics**: These range from the effect of leaving a group who may have grown to trust and depend on the researcher, to questions about whether covert observation exploits people (does a researcher have the right to spy on people or, in **Parker**'s terms, pretend to be 'one of them'?).

Visual (creative) research methods

⚠ Preparing the ground

All of the methods we have looked at so far rely, to varying degrees, on spoken language – either in terms of people recounting their thoughts and experiences in words or through descriptive observational analyses by sociologists. However, a different approach to data generation and collection is one that focuses on visual methods, pioneered by academics such as **David Gauntlett** (examples of whose research work you can find on-line at the Centre for Creative Media Research's *Artlab* project (http://www.artlab.org.uk) run by the Bournemouth Media School).

The basic technique here is deceptively simple; respondents are required to visualise behaviour, through the use of drawings, videos and the like. Instead of asking people questions or observing them, the researcher

⚠ Growing it yourself: observing in a chatroom

A relatively simple way to get a feel for both non-participant and participant observation is to join an internet chatroom (although if you're going to do this you should check things out first with your teacher, parents and friends – some chatrooms should not be used in this way – and never give out personal information, for more advice see www.chat.danger.com). You can record the social interaction you witness (you should think about how you can do this) as both an observer and, if you wish, as a participant.

The Sixth Form Forum (http://www.sixthform.info/forum) has a chatroom you can use for this type of research (you will need to register first, but it's free – all that's required is a valid email address). It is moderated by college lecturers and students and is a relatively safe environment to use for this purpose.

Alternatively, try doing a day's covert observation of a group of which you're already a member. If you do this as a class – all 'secretly' observing each other – compare your observations at the end of the exercise. This will give you an insight into some of the practical and theoretical problems involved.

asks the respondent to 'do or create something' – the analysis of which (by both the researcher and the respondent) gives an insight into people's ideas, interests, perspectives and concerns. For example, a respondent may be asked to visualise their relationship to their physical environment through drawings, digital photographs or video recordings.

The rationale for this method is that, according to **Gauntlett**, putting feelings, emotions and beliefs into words is often difficult for people; visualisations, on the other hand, make it easier for both respondent and researcher because a drawing, serious of photographs or a video is something concrete on which to base further analysis (which may involve using more traditional research techniques such as questionnaires or interviews).

Growing it yourself: picturing reality

The best way to understand this idea is to actually do something.

Draw a picture of a celebrity you admire or would like to be. Artistic skill is not important – just include anything you think represents that person (and, by extension, you). Once you've drawn your picture:

List three words that both describe the person you've drawn and how you would like people to think of you.

In pairs, exchange drawings. Each of you should make brief notes (without showing them to your partner) identifying:

1. what you think your drawing says about you

2. what you think your partner's drawing says about them.

Compare notes – look for points of convergence (where you agree) and divergence (where you disagree) – and discuss what this exercise says about the relationship between how we see ourselves and how others see us.

Digging deeper

If you have tried the previous exercise (you should, it is great fun) I trust you'll agree this is a different – and dare I say it, interesting? – research method. We can examine some of its *advantages* in the following terms.

- **Involvement**: The respondent is an active participant (rather than just a passive audience) in the research process. This method – unlike many others – involves the researcher and the researched working (creatively) together to produce data.

- **Agenda-setting**: Visual methods, whether they be drawing, creating videos or whatever, allow respondents to set their own agenda, in the sense respondents create whatever they want to create – whatever they believe best represents their ideas.

- **Process**: Creating research data in this way gives researchers first-hand experience of the process by which people make sense of their lives – in terms, for example, of how they see themselves (their identity) and their relationship to others.

- **Reflective**: These methods encourage (demand?) respondents reflect on the 'questions' they are being asked. In other words, they avoid the problem – prevalent in methods like questionnaires or interviews – of respondents having to *reconstruct* answers to questions.

All good things, however, have their *disadvantages*.

- **Organisation**: Visual methods require a great deal of organisation – and time – on

the part of the researcher and the researched. The creation of a video record/presentation, for example, is a time-intensive process that also requires access to hardware (cameras...), software (editing suites ...) and skills (how do you splice two images?).

- **Interpretation**: The meaning of data may be difficult to interpret, although respondents may be asked to explain the meaning of their work. However, a sociological context is still required from the researcher and this may mean reading things into the data that were never considered by the respondent.

Secondary sources

Introduction

This type of source – using data that already exists – is extensively used by sociologists for a couple of reasons.

- **Practical**: Secondary sources represent a substantial saving of time, money and effort for the researcher. It may be unnecessary or impractical to create some forms of data (using primary methods) when such data already exists. In Britain, for example, the government collects and freely distributes a huge amount of statistical data each year. For the price of a book, a visit to a public library or a few key presses on the Internet, the researcher has immediate access to data that would cost an enormous amount of money, time and effort to collect personally.
- **Methodological**: Secondary source data may be a necessity if historical and/or

comparative research is being carried out. **Philip Aries** (*Centuries of Childhood*, 1962), for example, used historical evidence (paintings and documents) to support his idea that childhood was a relatively recent invention. **Emile Durkheim** (1897) on the other hand used *comparative* data (suicide statistics from different countries) to test his idea that suicide had social, as opposed to psychological, causes.

In this section, therefore, we are going to outline and evaluate secondary sources under two broad categories, namely:

- **content analysis** as a way of analysing secondary data sources (such as historical and contemporary documents)
- **official statistics** as a secondary data source.

Content analysis

This involves the study of *texts* (which for our purpose refers to data sources such as television, written documents and the like – a text is just a general term referring to data and is not restricted to written material) and in this section we can examine, in turn, examples of quantitative and qualitative content analysis.

Quantative analysis

⚠ Preparing the ground

Content analysis is a popular method of quantitatively analysing media texts, using statistical techniques to categorise people's behaviour.

Some simple forms of content analysis might be:

- **Television programmes**: Analysing a programme such as *EastEnders* might involve the researcher creating two basic categories (men and women) and then counting the number of minutes each gender appears on screen. A more complex analysis might involve the use of categories like location (where each character is seen – for example, in the pub as a customer or an employee; in their own home, etc.) or activity (what each character does – for example, are they always pictured 'at work' or 'at home' and so forth?). Such analyses build up a picture of the patterns of behaviour that underlie (and are usually hidden from view) the social interaction portrayed on screen.

- **Newspapers**: This might involve counting the number of column inches given to activities that focus on men as opposed to women – or counting the number of times men and women are pictured. A more complex analysis might involve analysing data in terms of the prominence given to different stories featuring men and women.

Quantitative content analysis is mainly concerned with categorising behaviour and its main 'tool of the trade' is a **content analysis grid** – a chart developed and used to collect data systematically when an analysis is being carried out. A very simple content analysis grid designed to analyse the behaviour of characters in a television programme might look something like the table below.

An analysis of this type can tell us something about the behaviour of a character (Jo Banks, for example, has two main roles – mother and employee). Although this is a simple example, content analysis can be complex and wide-ranging. **Meehan**'s study of US daytime television for example, (*Ladies of the Evening*, 1983), used just such a complex form of content analysis to identify and analyse the stereotypical roles played by female characters.

⚠️ Digging deeper

This type of content analysis has a number of *advantages*.

- **Themes** and **patterns** to behaviour that may not be apparent to a reader, viewer or general consumer can be uncovered through relatively simple quantification. *Recurrent themes* (such as women being associated with housework) in complex forms of social interaction can also be

Character	Male/Female	Age	Place and purpose	How long on screen
Jo Banks	F	37	Pub (employee)	15 seconds
Tom Ward	M	56	Pub (customer)	43 seconds
Jo Banks	F	37	Shop (customer)	84 seconds

identified using this method. **Hogenraad** ('The Words that Predict the Outbreak of Wars', 2003), for example, developed a computer-based content analysis program to search historical accounts of war to identify key recurring themes that signify the lead up to conflict.

Similarly, **Miller** and **Riechert** ('Identifying Themes via Concept Mapping: A New Method of Content Analysis', 1994) developed the idea of *concept mapping*, which involves using computer technology to identify and describe 'themes or categories of content in large bodies of text'.

- **Reliability**: The use of *standardised frameworks* (the grid) means data can be replicated and checked fairly easily (although there are limits – see below – to the reliability of this technique).

We can note a couple of *disadvantages*, however.

- **Identification**: Although content analysis can uncover themes and patterns, it doesn't tell us very much about *how* audiences receive, understand or ignore such themes (in technical terms, this is called media *decoding*). If patterns of behaviour aren't just a product of the classification system the researcher used, we need some other way of making sense of their significance, both in terms of academic research and, perhaps more importantly, their possible effects on an audience.

- **Reliability**: Content analysis involves making judgements about the categorisation of behaviour. The researcher, for example, decides what categories will be used for analysis. In

addition, the researcher must judge which forms of behaviour fit which categories – can all observed behaviour be put neatly into a particular category (or does behaviour that cuts across different categories merit a category of its own?) In other words, would different researchers, studying the same behaviour, categorise it in the same way?

⚠ 🌺 Growing it yourself: positive and negative images

This simple exercise involves reading magazines, cutting out pictures that show 'positive' and 'negative' images of something and comparing your ideas (why you think it's a positive image) and choices with others in the class.

You can choose anything you want, but make sure, as a class, you all choose the same thing (to make comparisons easier). Some possible ideas might be:

- sexuality (male/female, heterosexual/homosexual)

- men

- women

- celebrities.

Using your chosen topic (sexuality for the sake of argument), create two piles of images cut from your chosen magazines (positive images and negative images). Once you've done this you are required to justify your decisions to the rest of the class (you have to explain why something represents a positive or negative image).

Qualitative analysis

Preparing the ground

Content analysis can also be used in a more qualitative way.

- **Conceptual** (or **thematic**) analysis focuses on the concepts or themes that underlie television programmes, news reports, magazine articles, newspaper reports and the like. In this respect, such analysis can be considered an extension of the quantitative form of content analysis. **Philo** and **Berry**'s *Bad News from Israel* (2004), for example, identifies a number of recurring themes in news reports of the Israeli–Palestinian conflict, such as language differences when referring to similar forms of behaviour (Palestinians were frequently classed as 'terrorists' while Israeli settlers were called 'extremists' or 'vigilantes').

- **Relational** (or **textual**) analysis examines the way texts encourage the reader to see something in a particular way by relating one idea to something different. Media sociologists sometimes refer to this as a *preferred reading* of a text – the way text is constructed (how language, pictures and illustrations are used, for example) 'tells' the audience how to interpret the information presented (without appearing to do so). An example here might be the way sport is presented in British popular newspapers. A brief glance through the sports pages, for example, might lead you to think sport is mainly a male activity.

Module link: The concept of 'preferred reading' is analysed in more detail in the chapter on the media.

Growing it yourself: hollywood themes

A simple way of doing a bit of content analysis is to watch films (or think about films you've seen recently) and to identify common themes and patterns of behaviour.

Many action films, for example, contain fairly basic main themes (Good versus Evil, for example) and more subtle minor themes – the revenge motive, for example, which involves 'The Good' taking personal revenge on 'The Bad' (invariably by killing them in as violent, painful and personally-humiliating fashion as possible). This suggests (to me at least) 'problems' can be solved through violence of an extreme and personal kind rather than the way people normally try to solve problems (through discussion, the police, etc.).

To do this, as a group:

1. Identify a genre (that is, a group of films that have the same basic format – westerns, romantic comedies, action films and the like).

2. Discuss the common themes or behaviour patterns you think are characteristic of the genre.

Keeping the above in mind, therefore, we can move towards looking at **documents** as sources of secondary data. In our society there is a wide range of documentary evidence available to sociologists and classifying them in any meaningful way is difficult. However, for our purposes, we can think about documentary evidence as shown in the table on the following page.

In the table, we have identified a number of different documentary *types* and *sources* and also suggested documents can be both

Type	Official	Organisational	Individual
Possible sources	Government agencies and departments	Private companies and organisations	Personal documents created by individuals
Historical Current	Official Reports, Court Reports	Newspapers (local/national), film, magazines, books, Church records	Letters, autobiography diaries, biography, oral histories

historical and *current* (or contemporary) – again, this is just for convenience in terms of outlining different document *advantages* and *disadvantages*.

⚠️ Digging deeper

Documentary sources have a number of distinct *advantages*.

- **Comparison**: Historical documents can be used for comparative purposes – contrasting how people lived in the past with how we live now is useful for tracking and understanding social change. Historical analysis is also useful for demonstrating the diversity of people's behaviour – things we now take for granted may have been seen differently in the past (and vice versa).

- **Availability**: Documents can provide secondary data in situations where it's not possible to collect primary data (about things that happened in the past, for example). Documents about family life, education, crime and so forth may be the only available evidence.

  The media, on the other hand, can be a useful source of contemporary data. Some newspapers carry reports, analysis and comment on relatively up-to-date social research. The Internet is also an increasingly useful source of secondary data, through the development of search engines such as Google (www.google.com).

- **Cost**: The researcher gets access to data that would cost an enormous amount of money, time and effort to collect personally.

- **Validity**: There are a couple of aspects of validity we can note here.

  Firstly, documentary evidence may provide qualitative data of great depth and detail. Diaries, for example, (such as those of Samuel Pepys – who recorded life in England during the 1660s – or Anne Frank, who recorded her life in hiding from the Nazis during the Second World War) provide extensive details about people and their daily lives.

  Secondly, we can sometimes compare accounts across time to test the validity of current accounts of social behaviour.

- **Meaning**: Documents can, for our purpose, have two levels of meaning – a *literal* meaning (what they actually say) and a *metaphorical* meaning (what they tell us about the hopes, fears, beliefs and so forth of whoever produced the document).

Discussion point: comparing family life

Read the following accounts of family life.

Save our Children from the Collapse of Family Life: M. Benns

Family life is collapsing and responsible parents can no longer afford children' … And lack of parental control and guidance lies behind many of today's pressing social problems, said … Sir Keith Joseph. Part of the background to crime, to drug addiction, to low motivation at school, to poor job prospects and to the transmission of all these problems to the next generation comes from inadequate parenting … the way to destroy a society is to destroy its children'.

An Inquiry into the Extent and Causes of Juvenile Depravity: T. Beggs

The withdrawal of women from the care of her offspring and domestic duties is an unnatural arrangement and a stain on society. Young children are left at home with inadequate parental control – to play at will and to commit all kinds of criminal act. Ignorant of cooking and sewing, unacquainted with the things needed to promote the comfort and welfare of a home … sexually promiscuous and ignorant … social evils are aggravated by the independence of the young of both sexes.

What kind of picture of family life do we get from reading these accounts?

Does the picture change (and in what ways) if we add the first extract was written in 1990 and the second (which I've edited slightly to bring the language a little more up-to-date) in 1849?

The extracts you have just discussed, I would suggest, are more important for what they tell us about the writers and how they saw social problems than for what they actually say about family life.

Despite their uses, documents have *disadvantages* we need to understand.

- **Reliability**: Aside from the usual points about our ability to replicate qualitative data, documents have reliability problems in that they may be incomplete, inaccurate or partial (biased towards one viewpoint – as we have just seen in the Family Life exercise).

- **Representativeness**: When using documentary sources we need to know, for example, if they are simply one individual's view (such as a diary) or whether they are representative of a range of views.

- **Authenticity**: With secondary documentary data there may be uncertainty over its source. Paper documents can be forged and we need to know whether they are originals or copies (which may have been changed by other authors). With electronic documents from the Internet, similar considerations apply (as we have previously seen with the John Kerry photograph).

- **Credibility**: We don't always know who created a document or why they created it. In other words, we can't always be certain the document is a credible source – for example, did the author have first-hand experience of the things they describe or are they simply repeating something 'second or third hand'?

- **Data control**: Finally, we need to consider how each of the above ideas connects to (and affects) the others when

evaluating secondary sources. When considering data *authenticity* we would have to consider its *credibility* as a source, how *representative* it is and the *purpose* for which it was originally produced. With primary sources the researcher has control over these things. When dealing with secondary sources, however, it is not always so easy to ensure the data is reliable, authentic or representative.

Official statistics

Preparing the ground

We can complete this section by looking briefly at this major source of secondary *quantitative* data. It is useful, by the way, to note the ideas relating to official statistics in this section can also be applied to other forms of statistical data.

In Britain, the two main sources of official statistical data are government departments (such as the Department for Education and Skills) and agencies (such as the police). Governments produce *demographic data* (information about the behaviour of individuals and groups) for a couple of reasons: to inform policy making (how many teachers we will need in 10 years time, for example) and for information/ accountability purposes (for example how much is spent on defence or schooling each year).

In Britain, major sources of official statistical data are 'Social Trends', 'Regional Trends' and 'The Annual Abstract of Statistics' (all published by HMSO and available on the Internet through the Office of National Statistics (www.statistics.gov.uk).

Digging deeper

Statistics have a number of significant *advantages* for sociologists.

- **Availability**: Official statistics may be the only available source in a particular sociological area. This is especially true where the researcher is carrying out historical or cross-cultural analyses (see, for example, **Oliver Bakewell**'s 'Can we ever rely on refugee statistics?', 1999).

- **Cost**: The researcher does not have to spend money (and time) collecting data because it already exists.

- **Trends**: Using statistical data drawn from different years it's possible to see how something has changed. For example, statistics on educational achievement can show changes in relative levels of achievement between boys and girls. Similarly, statistics can be used in 'Before and After' studies, to track possible changes in behaviour. A recent example here might be the 'Year 2000 problem' relating to fears computers would not be able to cope with date changes associated with the new millennium (see, for example, **Mueller**: 'Twelve Propositions Concerning the Year 2000 Problem', 1999).

- **Comparisons**: Statistics can be used for *inter-group* comparisons (for example, the examination of differences in middle-class and working-class family size), as well as *cross-cultural* comparisons (for example, a study of crime rates in different countries). This kind of information may be too expensive and time consuming for the sociologist to collect personally.

Despite their undoubted uses, uncritical use of official statistics may involve a number of *disadvantages*.

- **Definitions**: We have noted elsewhere how definitions used by the creators of official statistics may not be the same as those used by the sociologist, but it is also important to note governments may change the definition of something (what counts as 'car crime', for example) over time. This may, therefore, create a *reliability* problem.

- **Validity**: Official statistics, apart from not providing any great depth or detail, may have validity problems associated with what governments include (or exclude) from their published data. Crime statistics are an obvious case in point (many crimes go unreported) but official unemployment statistics also illustrate this idea. According to the Office for National Statistics, in 1992, unemployment was 2.6 million people. In 2004, unemployment stood at 892,000. However, we can't simply conclude from this that 1.7 million people have now found employment.

  If we look at other official statistics, we can note the number of people claiming sickness benefit (and thus not appearing in the unemployment statistics) increased from 350,000 in 1992 to 650,000 in 2004. The question to ask here, therefore, is has the health of the nation seriously declined – or are the unemployed increasingly being defined as 'sick'?

  In this respect, a validity problem is that official statistics may only give us a partial picture of reality – the researcher may have to work hard to complete the whole picture.

- **Interpretation**: Although quantitative data is normally seen as more objective than qualitative data, as we have just seen, the significance of any data has to be interpreted by the researcher – the researcher has to decide what the data *means*. In the above example, you need to decide how significant (or not as the case may be) is the rise in official sickness levels in the UK over the past 10 years.

In this section we have looked at a variety of methods available to sociologists and discussed them in terms of their general advantages and disadvantages for sociological research. In the next section we are going to look at why different sociologists prefer to use some research methods but not others and, in order to do this, we need to explore the idea of sociological methodologies.

Sociological methodologies

Introduction

Thus far we have looked at the general research process in terms of the practical mechanics of doing research (although we have referred to methodological beliefs when discussing questions of reliability and validity). However, in this section we're going to develop these ideas by examining sociological methodologies – beliefs about how sociologists *should* go about collecting data and, by extension, the methods they *should* use to do this – in the context of 'the relationship between Positivism, Interpretivism and sociological research methods'.

In this respect, we're going to examine two types of methodology – *Positivism* and *Interpretivism* (which you'll sometimes see called 'social constructionism' for reasons that will become clear in a moment); there are a number of other methodologies we could examine (*realist*, *feminist* and *postmodernist*, for example) but the main purpose here is not simply to categorise sociologists in terms of their methodology; rather, it is to illustrate debates within sociology over the general direction sociological research should take. In other words, we will be looking at debates within sociology over how knowledge about the social world can be reliably and validly generated.

WARM UP: ARE YOU MAD?

To get you into the swing of what's to come (it could be a bumpy ride), pair up with your neighbour (the person sitting next to you, not the person who lives next door).

Your task is to spend five minutes convincing them you are *not* insane.

Their task, after you've had your go, is to explain why they believe you *are* insane.

What does your frank exchange of views tell you about the nature of the social world?

Positivism
Preparing the ground

The word *positivism* means *scientific* and this tells us something about the kinds of basic ideas found within this general methodology – positivists argue that it is possible (and perhaps desirable) to study social behaviour in ways similar to those used by natural scientists (physicists, for example) to study behaviour in the natural world. We can identify some elements of positivist thinking in the following way.

- **Social systems**: For positivists, a basic principle is that these consist of structures (which, as we have seen in chapter 1, can be considered in terms of rules). These structures exist independently of individuals because they represent behaviour at the institutional or large group level of society. As individuals, we experience social structures as forces bearing down on us, pushing us to behave in certain ways and, in effect, shaping our individual behavioural choices.

An example of the way an institutional structure works is to think of communication – in order to be part of our society we need to communicate with others and we do this by using language, both verbal (words) and non-verbal (gestures). Thus, if we want to communicate we are forced to use language (in the case of this textbook, English – although, admittedly, it might not always seem as if this language is being used). As a conscious, thinking, individual I have some measure of *choice* in this matter – I could, if I wanted, speak German to people (in theory at least. In reality my knowledge of this language extends to the word for 'potato' – not very useful in the context of buying this item, less than useful when trying to fill my car with petrol). However, my freedom of choice is actually limited for two reasons: firstly, if I want to 'fit in' to social groups (such as when I teach) there would be little point speaking German to students – they barely understand when I speak English, so using another language would be a recipe for total confusion.

Secondly, even if I do choose to speak German, this is still a language – it has a structure of rules (grammar) that have to be obeyed if we are to understand each other.

- **Actions**: If people's behaviour (social action) is shaped by structural forces, it makes sense to study these *causes* rather than their *effects* (in this case, the different choices people make) – which is what positivists aim to do. If you accept social systems work in this way, it follows structures are real and *objective*; that is, they act on us whether we want them to or not – in crude terms, if you want to communicate, you have to use language; if societies are to survive, people have to work. Although these forces can't be seen, we can observe their effect on people (just as, in the natural world, gravity is an unseen force whose effect we can observe).

- **Reality**: If the forces shaping social behaviour really exist, it follows they can be discovered (in the same way natural scientists have gradually uncovered the forces shaping physical behaviour). This can be done using similar methods to those used so successfully in sciences such as physics – systematic observations that create highly reliable knowledge, organised and tested using something like Popper's Hypothetico-Deductive model of research we outlined earlier.

- **Facts**: For positivists, knowledge consists of identifying facts about how and why people behave as they do and, eventually, making connections between different facts to produce theories that explain our behaviour.

- **Methods**: Quantitative methods are generally favoured (because they allow for

the collection of factual data), with due prominence being given to:

- **Objectivity**: It doesn't involve the researcher influencing the people they are researching (so, non-participant observation is okay, but participant observation is more doubtful).

- **Reliability**: Methods such as questionnaires/structured interviews, experiments, comparative and observational studies are perfectly acceptable in this respect because they offer higher potential levels of reliability than qualitative methods.

⚠️ Digging deeper

If we examine positivist ideas a little more closely, we can identify and develop a number of significant ideas about this methodology.

- **Society**: For positivism, the social world is similar to the natural world in terms of the way it can be studied. This is because human behaviour is, in a sense, determined by rules developed within social groups. For example, the need to survive leads people to develop work groups and the need to socialise children leads people to develop family groups.

- **Structure**: Because societies are viewed as social systems – the requirements of which push people to behave in certain ways – it follows we experience the social world as a force that exists over and above our individual ability to change or influence it. Just as I cannot, for example, escape the fact of gravity (even while flying in a plane, gravity still exerts a force), positivists argue we cannot escape social forces (such as roles or norms).

- **Science**: The task of (social) science is to isolate, analyse and understand the causes of human behaviour – and to understand how social forces shape behaviour we need to (systematically) study social groups rather than individuals.

- **Evidence**: To reliably and validly study behaviour, sociologists should use *empirical* methods; that is, methods involving the use of our senses (sight, for example). Evidence about social behaviour, in other words, can only be considered reliable and valid if it is capable of being observed and tested. Anything not directly observable (such as people's thoughts) cannot be considered valid knowledge.

- **Objectivity**: Since this version of science is concerned only with what *is* – rather than what we might want something to be – scientists must be *personally objective* in their work (that is, you don't involve yourself in the behaviour being studied; this avoids biasing or influencing the data collection process). The methods used should *not* depend on the *subjective interpretations* of a researcher and research should be capable of exact *replication*. If the social world has an *objective existence* – over and above human beliefs about it – reliable and valid knowledge can be discovered in the same way natural scientists discover knowledge.

Interpretivism

⚠ Preparing the ground

In many ways we can think of Interpretivist methodology as being the mirror image of positivism, which should help us come to terms with its basic principles.

- **Social actions**: For interpretivists, a basic principle is human beings have:

  - **Consciousness** – we are aware of both ourselves (as unique individuals) and our relationship to others. This gives us the ability to:

  - **Act** – to make, in other words, conscious, deliberate, choices about how to behave in different situations. This idea is crucial for Interpretivists because it makes us – and the world in which we live:

  - **Unpredictable** – and if we are unpredictable then it means we can't study behaviour in the way Positivists want to study it.

We can understand these ideas a little more clearly in the following way.

If you slap me in the face, you have no way of knowing, in advance, how I am going to act; I might cry (because you hurt me), but then again I might not (because my friends are watching and everyone knows big boys don't cry); I may laugh at you (ha-ha); I might run away; I might tell my dad who will go round your house and beat your dad up (for no better reason than the fact he can – my dad's a bit unpredictable); I might slap you back – in short, I might do any one of a hundred of different things. But the point here, of course, is that *how* I react will depend on a potentially massive range of factors.

- **Social systems**: Part of the reason for this, as I've sort of suggested above, is that for Interpretivists the social world consists of *meanings*. Society doesn't exist in an objective, observable, form; rather, it is experienced subjectively because we give

it meaning by the way we behave. In other words, we create and recreate a 'sense of the social system' on a daily basis, minute by minute, piece by piece.

Every time you go to school, you help to recreate the structure of education; every time you say 'mum' or 'dad' you help to recreate a sense of family; every time you pinch something from Woolworths you help to recreate the criminal justice system (and you thought you were just showing off to your friends).

- **Reality**: In this respect, the social world is very different to the natural world, just as people (well, some people anyway) are very different to rocks. One might struggle, scream and beg if you try to throw it over a cliff while the other won't (I'll leave you to decide which is which). When we talk or think about society as *real* – as something *forcing* us do things like go to school or work – what we are actually doing, according to Interpretivist thinking, is creating a convenient fictional scapegoat for our own behaviour – 'society' doesn't make anyone do anything; only people can do that.

- **Facts**: For interpretivists, 'facts' about behaviour can be established, but these facts are always *context-bound*; that is, they will not apply to all people, at all times, in all situations. For example, if I steal something from Woolworths and get caught, it is a fact that I will be labelled 'a criminal'; if I don't get caught then it is a fact that I am seen as just another law-abiding citizen. The only difference here is not what I did, but how others *react* to what I did.

- **Methods**: Interpretivist methodology argues that, when studying behaviour, the

best we can do is describe and explain it from the point of view of those involved. As the warm up exercise was designed to demonstrate, your account of behaviour is just as reliable and valid as anyone else's (as Interpretivists might say, knowledge is always *relative*). This being the case, interpretivist methodology leans towards the collection of qualitative data and uses methods (such as unstructured interviews and participant observation) that allow for the collection of this type of data.

Digging deeper

If we outline interpretivist ideas a little more thoroughly, we can identify and develop a number of significant ideas about this methodology. These include the following.

- **Society**: The social world is produced and reproduced on a daily basis by people going about their lives. Things that hold true for now (this minute, today, next week …) in our society may not hold true in the future or in another society. In this respect, the social world has no objective features (or social structures) in the way these ideas are understood by Positivists. 'Society' is simply experienced 'as if' our behaviour were constrained by forces external to us as individuals – in effect social structures are considered to be little more than *elaborate fictions* we use to explain and justify our behaviour to both ourselves and others.

- **Action**: On the basis of the above, the fact people actively (if not always consciously or deliberately) create their world means any attempt to establish cause and effect relationships is misguided (both in theory and in practice). If people's behaviour is conditioned by the

way they personally interpret their world (and no two interpretations can ever be exactly the same), it follows logically that 'simple' causal relationships cannot be empirically established – there are just too many possible variables involved in the social construction of behaviour.

- **Meanings**: The social world is understood ('interpreted') by different people in different situations in different ways (something you interpret as a 'problem', for example, may not be a problem to me). Everything in the social world, therefore, is relative to everything else; nothing can ever be wholly true and nothing can ever be wholly false; the best we can do is describe reality from the viewpoint of those who define it – people.

  Understanding social behaviour, therefore, involves understanding how people (individually and collectively) experience and interpret their situation (the meanings people give to things, the beliefs they hold and so forth). Thus, the methods employed by a researcher (observation and interpretation) have to reflect the fact people consciously and unconsciously construct their own sense of social reality.

Thus far we have seen the research process involves a mix of things like methodology (whether you lean, as a researcher, towards Positivism, Interpretivism or some other form of sociological methodology such as realism or feminism), research methods and sampling techniques. In the final section we can bring these things together by thinking about a range of practical and theoretical research considerations that may, at times, influence the overall research process in a variety of possible ways.

Research considerations

Introduction

Whatever your personal perspective on the prospect of 'doing sociological research', it involves something more than simply choosing a topic, selecting a research method and wading into your chosen hypothesis or research question. Sociological research – whether it's a large-scale, government-funded project lasting many years or a small-scale, personally-funded piece of sociology coursework – is always surrounded by a range of research considerations. This section, therefore, is designed to outline and understand 'the theoretical, practical and ethical considerations influencing the choice of topic, choice of method(s) and the conduct of research'.

Practical research considerations

Preparing the ground

Sociological research involves confronting and resolving a range of practical factors (the 'nuts and bolts' of 'doing research', as it were) relating to choice of topic and research method. We can consider these in the following way.

Choice of topic is influenced by:

- **The interests of the researcher**: Sociologists, like anyone else, have their interests, concerns and specialisms and these potentially affect their choice of research topic. The Glasgow Media

Group ('Really Bad News', 1982: 'War and Peace News', 1985), for example, have specialised (for over 20 years) in the study of bias in the media. Similarly, **Peter Townsend** had an abiding interest in the study of poverty (see, for example, *Poverty in the UK*, 1979).

- **Current debates** and **intellectual fashions**: Surprising as it may seem, research topics go in and out of fashion and sociologists – being fashionable people with their fingers on the pulse of what's hot and what's not – reflect these trends (although factors like research funding (see below) always exert some form of influence here).

The 1960s, for example, produced a range of research into possible changes in the class structure – for example, **Goldthorpe**, **Lockwood** et al's 'The Affluent Worker in the Class Structure', 1965 (which tested the then fashionable *Embourgeoisement Thesis* put forward by **Zweig** (*The Worker in an Affluent Society*, 1959), who argued, in simple terms, most people had become 'middle class').

Currently, 'media sociology' seems to be in fashion (although, by the time this gets to print it will probably be considered last year's thing). However, some sociologists just decide to 'do their own thing' – see, if you dare, **Southerton** et al's tremendously exciting: 'Home from home?: a research note on Recreational Caravanning', 1998).

- **Funding**: Research (especially large-scale research over a lengthy period of time) costs money and those who commission and pay for it, not unreasonably, want some say over choice of topic. In addition, in the UK and USA – where government agencies or departments fund large amounts of social research – the historical trend has been to fund research designed primarily to help policymakers make decisions – so if your research doesn't, it is unlikely to be funded by the government.

- **Time** can affect choice of topic in terms of such things as the depth and scope of the research. For example, although a researcher may be interested in studying the behaviour of football supporters at major international tournaments (if anyone's willing to provide the funds, I could probably find the time), time and money considerations may restrict them to studying such behaviour on a much smaller scale.

- **Access** and **cooperation**: To research a topic, you need access to people and (usually) their cooperation (things closely related to ethical considerations – see below). This is one reason why a lot of sociological research has focused on the activities of the powerless (who lack the ability to resist) rather than the powerful (who most certainly can – and do – resist).

Choice of method(s): In a similar way to choice of topic, choice of research method is affected by a number of factors. These include:

- **Time**: Some methods are more time-intensive than others. Participant observation, for example, may involve years of research – **William Whyte** (*Street Corner Society*, 1943) spent around four years on his study of a gang in the USA. Between 1937 and 1940 he gathered extensive information about the

behaviour of one gang in a small area of the country (Boston, in case you were wondering).

- **Topic**: Some topics (or aspects of them) may lend themselves more easily to one type of method than another. In general, quantitative methods tend to be used when the researcher wants reliable data to establish statistical relationships (such as **Kessler**'s really very interesting 'Sponsorship, Self-Perception and Small-Business Performance', 2000) where his main objective was to establish whether or not 'those who are sponsored are more successful than non-sponsored individuals' (as I say, heady stuff).

Alternatively, with studies such as **Diken** and **Laustsen**'s analysis of tourist behaviour in Ibiza and Faliraki ('Sea, Sun, Sex . . . and Biopolitics', 2004) which *is* as interesting as it sounds (although, speaking personally, the 'bio-politics' bit I can take or leave), a qualitative approach is more appropriate, given the descriptive nature of the research.

A mix of methods (triangulation) is frequently used to satisfy different types of research question within the same topic . For example, if I am interested in understanding the possible 'Effects of marriage break-up' or 'Why people fear crime', I will probably use a method that provides in-depth, qualitative data (such as a focused interview). However, before doing my interview-based research I might need to do a small *establishing study* (so called because it is used to establish some basic information: for example, to identify people who have experienced divorce or to establish if people fear crime) using a simple (quantitative) questionnaire.

- **Funding**: In a perfect world, money would always be available for social research into any topic, using any method – but it's not a perfect world and the amount of money you have to spend will directly influence the methods used (questionnaires are generally cheaper than in-depth interviews, interviews are generally cheaper than participant observation). Money will also influence the size of any research team.

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

Digging deeper

Returning, briefly, to the introduction to this section, in terms of the work you've just done, you could be forgiven for *now* thinking sociological research involves choosing an *appropriate* topic, selecting an *appropriate* method and *then* wading into your chosen hypothesis or research question . . .

However, as we dig deeper we need to reconsider the idea that 'doing research' involves searching in the cupboard (or shed) for your 'Sociological Toolbox' (the one containing various research methods) and selecting the 'right tool for the job'. If only it was that simple.

Ackroyd and **Hughes** (*Data Collection in Context*, 1981) argue it is a mistake to view research methods as a set of 'theoretical

tools' to be picked up and discarded depending on how appropriate they are for the task at hand because, unlike tools in a toolbox, sociological methods do not have a clear, single and straightforward, purpose.

For example, if we are faced with fixing a picture to a wall with a nail, we go to our toolbox and select the most appropriate tool for the job (in this instance, a hammer). A hammer is specifically designed for just such a purpose and it performs its task well. If we had selected a screwdriver, we would probably find this tool didn't do the job as efficiently.

Unfortunately, no such certainty applies to a method such as a questionnaire. Not only do we have to consider practical problems in adopting particular methods, but also our theoretical perspective may lead us to believe questionnaires are not a valid way of studying the social world. At least two major methodological considerations are involved here.

- **Validity** relates to our belief about whether a research method allows us to discover something about human behaviour 'as it really is' (whatever this may actually mean).

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

These ideas, therefore, lead us inexorably towards theoretical research considerations.

Theoretical research considerations

⚠ Preparing the ground

Research involves confronting and resolving a range of theoretical questions – which we can express as the *how*? and the *why*? of choice of topic and research method.

Choice of topic involves a couple of major considerations.

- **Audiences** may dictate topic choice in terms of who you're trying to reach with your research. To an academic audience, something like **Jessop**'s 'Governance and meta-governance. On Reflexivity, Requisite Variety, and Requisite Irony' (2003) is a perfectly acceptable topic; to a non-academic audience, however, it probably wouldn't prove so alluring (even if we allow for the requisite irony of this statement).

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

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

Choice of method(s) is similarly surrounded by theoretical considerations, such as:

- **Theoretical perspective**: Although this influence is by no means as strong as *some* texts might suggest (no-names, no law-suits), Interactionist researchers tend to avoid using statistical methods, mainly because their objective is to allow respondents to talk about their experiences, rather than to establish causality. Structuralists, in the main, tend to take the reverse view, mainly (but not necessarily) because they're not particularly interested in descriptive accounts of behaviour.

- **Reliability** and **validity** are *always* significant theoretical (or methodological) research concerns since beliefs about the reliability/validity of particular methods will affect decisions about whether or not to use them.

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

⚠️ Digging deeper

If we think about the general relationship between theory and method in sociological research we can combine Positivist and Interpretivist approaches outlined in the previous section with the material covered in this section. Questions concerning the relationship between theory and methods, therefore, boil down to four related ideas, which we can outline and apply in the following terms.

- **Ontology**: This idea poses the question 'What do we believe exists?'. In relation to sociology, an *ontological question* is one that considers what we believe the subject matter of sociology to be. For example, is it:

  - The attempt to find solutions to social problems?

  - To answer questions such as 'why are we here?'?

  - To elaborate the fundamental laws of social development?

  - To understand the nature of social interaction?

  The significance of ontological questions is our answers will condition how we view the purpose and subject matter of Sociology, how we conduct research and, of course, how we see it as appropriate to study social behaviour (especially in terms of our choice of topic and method). In the example we've used here, most sociologists' ontological belief is that social behaviour is learned, not based on instinct.

- **Epistemology**: The next question to ask is 'How we know what we claim to know' about the social world. This, in short, relates to the kinds of *proof* we will accept to justify our answer to ontological questions. For example, we may believe that:

  - 'seeing is believing' or

  - 'experiencing something is enough to prove it exists'.

  Alternatively, we may accept something on *trust*, or because we have *faith* (a characteristic, incidentally, of religious proof).

Epistemological questions, therefore, relate to the evidence we will accept to justify our belief something is true. For example, if I suspect you of stealing my pen, what sort of proof will I accept in order to convince me you didn't take it?

- Your word?
- The word of someone you were with at the time of the alleged theft (an alibi)?
- A thorough search of your belongings?

This idea is important, sociologically, because our beliefs about evidence influence our choice of research method – if you don't, for example, believe questionnaires produce valid data, you're not likely to use them in your research.

- **Methodology**: This idea is concerned with beliefs about how to produce reliable and *valid* knowledge. We have come across this type of question before, in relation to two ideas.

  - **The interview effect**: If you believe interviews are a manipulative process whereby the respondent presents a picture to you that accords with the picture they would like you to have, you are unlikely to see interview data as valid.

  - **The observer effect**: If you believe a researcher's presence affects the behaviour of those being observed, you would not see overt participant observation as a valid way of collecting data.

- **Methods**: This refers to specific techniques of data collection and our ideas about their appropriateness (or otherwise) to our research (ideas which will be conditioned by our *ontological*, *epistemological* and (deep breath) *methodological* beliefs).

To complete this section, we need to finally consider ethical questions relating to the research process.

Ethics refers to the *morality* of doing something and ethical questions relating to sociological research involve beliefs about what you should or should not do. As a matter of course, this will also include consideration of both *legal* and *safety* issues (for the researcher, those being researched and any subsequent researchers). We can consider some examples of ethical questions in terms of:

- **Rights** and **well-being**: The researcher needs to safeguard the interests, rights and general well-being (both physical and psychological) of respondents. Examples here might be respecting respondent privacy or minimising anxiety/distress that may be caused by the research.

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

- **Legal considerations**: In the UK, the collection, storage and retrieval of data are governed by things such as the *Data Protection Act*, the *Human Rights Act*, copyright laws and the laws of libel. In addition, if research involves criminal or deviant activities, the researcher may have to consider the ethical question of participation in such behaviour or their

⚠️ Growing it yourself: statements of intent

The objective of this exercise is to relate the ideas we've just considered to the work you did earlier on **positivist** and **interpretivist** approaches.

Look at each dimension listed below, think about the example statement associated with it, and then select which of the statements in the positivist and interpretivist categories are most characteristic of each research methodology.

To avoid damaging this valuable textbook, you have my permission to photocopy the table and delete each statement marked * where applicable.

Dimension	Positivism	Interpretivism
Ontological Society exists . . .	Objectively* Subjectively*	Objectively* Subjectively*
Epistemological We know it exists because . . .	Behaviour is patterned, relatively stable and orderly. Therefore, something about 'society' must cause this to occur.* People behave in their day to day lives 'as if' it exists (that is, because it is a convenient fiction)*	Behaviour is patterned, relatively stable and orderly. Therefore, something about 'society' must cause this to occur.* People behave in their day to day lives 'as if' it exists (that is, because it is a convenient fiction)*
Methodological We can validate what we know using . . .	Objective methods to collect data about people's behaviour* Subjective methods in order to understand the meanings and interpretations involved in people's behaviour*	Objective methods to collect data about people's behaviour* Subjective methods in order to understand the meanings and interpretations involved in people's behaviour*
Method The objective is . . .	The collection and analysis of quantitative data* The collection/interpretation of qualitative data*	The collection and analysis of quantitative data* The collection/interpretation of qualitative data*

responsibilities to both the perpetrators and their possible victims.

- **Involvement**: Some types of research involve methods that create high levels of involvement with those being researched. Where close personal and/or intimate relationships between the researcher and respondent(s) exist, care needs to be taken to ensure that, once the research is completed and contact diminishes, distress is not caused to potentially vulnerable people. For example, if your research involves visiting the elderly on a regular basis, it would be unethical to simply stop your visits once the research is completed.

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

- **Consent**: Related to some of the previous categories, where possible, the researcher should always gain the consent of those being researched.

- **Safety**: Care always needs to be taken to ensure the physical and psychological safety of both the researcher and the respondent.

In the preceding sections we have covered a range of ideas relating to research methods and methodology; although many students reading this will be using the information we've covered for exam purposes, a substantial number will be putting at least some of the ideas covered into action through sociology coursework for this involves creating a research proposal for a possible piece of sociological research (which you might want to use as the basis for an actual piece of research, if you intend to take the coursework option in your A2 year). This being the case, the final section in this chapter offers advice on how to complete the AS Research Proposal.

AS Coursework: Research Proposal

⚠️ Preparing the ground

If you choose the coursework option, rather than the research methods exam, you have to complete a 'Research Proposal' by Easter in the year of your AS exams. Apart from being worth 30% of the final AS grade (15% of your

Section	Maximum mark	Maximum word length
1. Hypothesis/Aims	8	100
2. Context and Concepts	20	400
3. Main Research Method and Reasons	20	400
4. Potential Problems	12	300

A2 grade) and extending to a maximum of 1200 words, the Proposal consists of four 'must have' sections identified in the following table:

Before starting your Coursework you need to understand both what the work involves and the required content of each section.

The Proposal: The first thing to remember is your coursework is simply a *proposal* for a piece of research – you are *not* required to carry out any actual research.

When starting your coursework, the key idea is **CARE** – your Proposal should be:

- **C**lear and concise in terms of what you propose to do.
- **A**ppropriate in its choice of research method.
- **R**ealistic in terms of it's aim/hypothesis
- **E**valuative in terms of the possible problems involved.

Getting started: Your Proposal begins with a decision about what you want to research and consists of explaining, clearly and concisely, how you plan to go about doing the research.

Choice of topic is very important here because it's the focus for all subsequent work. When choosing a topic, therefore, think about:

- Something simple and straightforward – choosing something ambitious and doing it badly will not score highly.
- A question/hypothesis from an area you are studying.
- A topic well covered in textbooks – you have to easily identify and explain relevant research and sociological concepts.

The Four Sections of your proposal involve the following:

- **Hypothesis/aim**: Don't be tempted to rush the development of your

hypothesis/aim, because if you get it wrong, it is time-consuming to put things right in the other sections of the Proposal. As a general rule of thumb, if you choose a hypothesis it should:

- state a testable relationship
- not be too ambitious in what it plans to achieve
- not include ideas impossible to measure or test.

If you use an aim, make sure it is:

- not too ambitious
- clearly and precisely worded
- clear about what it's designed to achieve.

Once you have chosen an aim or hypothesis, you need to *justify* your choice with one or two clear and concise reasons related to your chosen topic.

- **Context and concepts**: 'Context' is another way of saying *supporting material* and you need to identify and summarise *two* pieces of sociological research relevant to your hypothesis/aim.

In addition, you must identify and define *two* concepts relevant to your research. You can include more, but it makes sense to stick to the minimum required. The tight word limit reinforces the importance of choosing your topic carefully. Before you begin, ask yourself:

- Can I find two pieces of relevant research?
- Can I easily identify and apply two relevant concepts to the research?

- **Main research method and reasons**: A brief description of your chosen research method is required here – one

that demonstrates your understanding of how and why you would use the method to test your hypothesis/achieve your aim. You need to identify and explain clear reasons for choosing the method – make these reasons specific and relevant to your topic/hypothesis/aim. You won't score highly by just listing some general 'advantages' of your chosen method.

- **Potential problems**: This section requires brief explanations of any problems you foresee with your proposed research. Relate your ideas (gaining access to people, ethical considerations, response rates etc.) clearly to your topic/hypothesis/aim and use your understanding of problems to explain how and why they might be problems in your research.

Digging deeper

If you know – and understand – what the examiner is looking for in each section it makes it easier for you to give them exactly what they want. The following, therefore, indicates what's required to get in to the *top mark band*.

Hypothesis/aim

- **Clarity**: Will the examiner understand exactly what you propose to test?
- **Precision**: Is your hypothesis testable or your aim achievable?
- **Appropriateness**: Is your hypothesis/aim realistic (a six-month participant observation study of Ibizan nightclubs would be nice, but it isn't going to happen, is it?)

The reasons you give for the hypothesis/aim should be relevant and appropriate for your study.

Context and concepts

Identify *two* pieces of relevant sociological research.

- **Describe** each piece accurately and concisely.
- **Explain** clearly how the research is relevant to your proposal.
- **Clearly link** the chosen research to *your* research (for example, is your research going to *replicate* (repeat) an existing study?).

Identify at least *two* concepts relevant to an understanding of your chosen topic.

- **Define** each of your concepts carefully.
- **Explain clearly** how each concept is relevant to your study (for example, do you plan to apply/test these concepts in your study?)

Main research method and reasons

- **Identify** three or four practical and/or theoretical reasons for your chosen research method.
- For each reason, explain *how* and *why* it is appropriate for your study. Be specific and relate any advantages of the method clearly to your research. For example, if you identify one advantage of the method as being the collection of quantitative data, you need to explain why such data is appropriate for the testing of your aim/hypothesis.

Problems

- **Identify** potential problems (practical, theoretical or ethical). Practical problems might include things like access to

respondents while theoretical problems could involve a discussion of reliability or validity issues.

- **Explain** clearly and concisely why these are potential problems (and how you could resolve them).
- **Link** problems clearly to your hypothesis/aim (how, for example, they might potentially affect the testing of the hypothesis).

And finally: constructing your coursework

This section is designed to be an overview of what's involved in a Proposal and is based around a *worked example* that indicates the kind of material required for a finished piece of coursework. It is based on a *hypothesis*, but you could use an *aim* instead if you wish (for example: 'To discover if and how pupil behaviour in the classroom differs according to gender'). Each section illustrates some of the ways the Proposal could develop around this hypothesis – but there are, of course, many other ways to develop such a Proposal.

Hypothesis/aim

The first section will look something like:

> The hypothesis for this Proposal is: "Pupil behaviour in the classroom differs according to gender".

> Because it is a pilot study, I will initially research a group of 16 year old pupils in their last year at school. The main reason for choosing to do this study is to discover whether or not there are behavioural differences between males and females in our education system. Once I have

answered this question the main focus of my study is whether or not any behavioural differences reflect traditional gender stereotypes about male and female behaviour. (93 words)

Context and concepts

Most textbooks (such as . . . err . . . this one) have sections on writers whose research would be relevant to this hypothesis (Spender, Stanworth, Nash, etc.). If your research is not covered in textbooks, a decent Internet search engine such as Google (www.google.co.uk) should provide relevant material.

You need to *define* and *explain* the relevance of two significant concepts to your research. For example:

- **Gender socialisation** – are males and females socialised differently?
- **Gender stereotyping** – do teachers and pupils have different expectations about male/female behaviour?
- **Gender identities** – do males and females have different ideas about what it means to be male and female?

Methods and reasons

You have a range of choices here, depending on whether you want quantitative or qualitative data. If the former, a simple questionnaire could be used; if the latter, focused interviews (either with individual students or with the whole group – a 'focus group interview') could be used. Alternatively, if you could fit easily into the class being studied, participant observation is an option.

Whichever method you choose, you need to give reasons for your choice.

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For a focused interview, for example, some reasons – clearly related and explained in terms of your research – might include discussion of:

- why qualitative data about behavioural differences was important
- data reliability issues
- data validity issues
- practical and or ethical reasons.

Problems

You could, for example, discuss:

- A practical problem in studies of this kind is *access* to a school. If you do not have easy access (through friends, your own attendance at the school …) how would you gain access to do this research?
- Some teachers will demand 'editorial control' over your work. How would you respond to demands they see (and approve) your questions?
- Is there an ethical problem involved in identifying/not identifying the school and your respondents.
- Do you (and your respondents) have the necessary skills to use this method successfully?

Finally: Keep in mind the following bits of advice (trust me, I've been there and have the torn T-shirt to prove it).

- Keep to the **word limit** for each section.

- **Plan** your time effectively – don't leave everything to the last minute.
- Set clear **targets** (and keep to them) for the completion of each section.
- Before you begin, choose a topic and do some background reading about it to generate ideas for a research hypothesis/aim. Use the following web site to help generate some ideas if you are stuck: www.sociology.org.uk/projects.htm
- Think carefully about your hypothesis/aim and the concepts it involves – how easy/difficult will it be to measure these concepts?
- Ask your **teacher** for **help** and **advice** when necessary – it is not cheating, it is their job.
- Ask your teacher to **comment** on each section you produce.

And (really this time) **finally**, remember that doing a Proposal of this type is actually a very good way to think about the *sociological research process* – what it involves, the problems you would face and – of course – the sense of achievement you will get from successfully completing this work.

As I said at the start of this section, the Proposal you produce here can be put into practice during your A2 year if you choose the coursework option; complete a good Proposal now and it will stand you in good stead for your A2 coursework – trust me, I know about these things.