AS Sociology

Revision

Sociological Methods

The distinctions between primary and secondary data, and between quantitative and qualitative data;

Types of Data

Primary

Information collected *personally* by a sociologist - who, therefore, knows exactly how the data was collected, by whom and for what purpose. A range of research methods (such as questionnaires, interviews and observational studies) can be primary data sources.

Secondary

Information *not* personally collected by the researcher, but used by them in their research. Sources include newspaper articles, books, magazines, personal documents, official documents and the research of other sociologists.

Primary

Quantitative

Expressing data *statistically* or *numerically*.
For example, the number of people who commit crimes each year.

Number
For example, the number of people who live in poverty.

Percentage
The number of people per 100 in a population).
Example, 30% of voters in Britain regularly vote Labour.

Rate
Sociologically, the number of people per 1000 in a population). For example, if the suicide rate was 1, for every 1000 people in a population, 1 person commits suicide each year

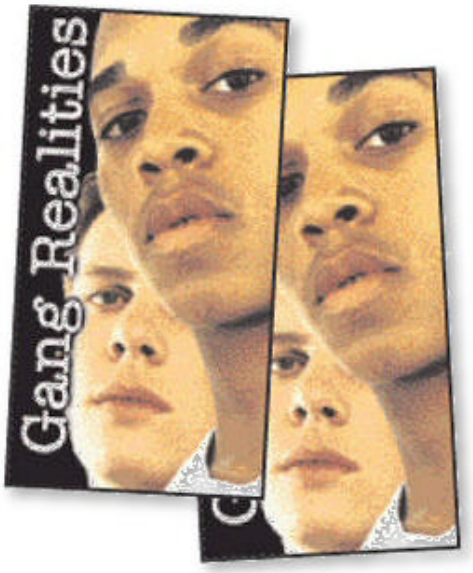
Comparisons

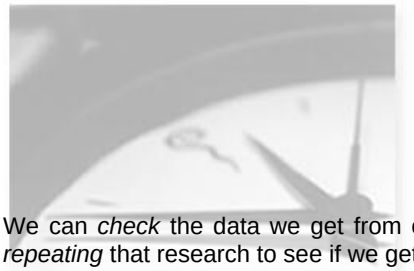
Example: Levels of unemployment or crime between countries. P*ercentage / rate* allows us to compare "like with like".

Qualitative

Capture the *quality* of people's behaviour. Qualitative data says something about the way people *experience* the social world and can be used to understand the *meanings* people give to behaviour.

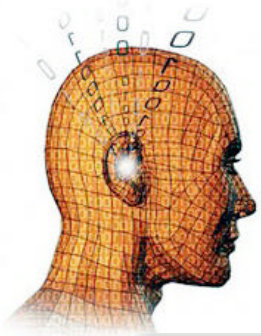
Boyle (1977) studied the behaviour of a juvenile gang from the viewpoint of its members.
Goffman (1968) tried to understand the experiences of patients in an American mental institution.





We can *check* the data we get from our research by *repeating* that research to see if we get the same results. Data is *reliable* if similar results are gained by different researchers asking the same questions to similar people. **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 - If they get two different answers, it's likely the data is *unreliable*.

Example: Official crime statistics have limited validity - they only record reported crimes.



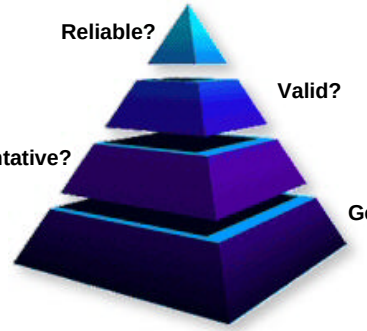
Refers to whether data gives a true measurement or accurate description of "reality". Does data actually measures or describes what it claims to measure or describe?

Relates to the "nuts-and-bolts" of actually doing research in terms of the *consistency* of the data we collect.

Reliability ↔ **Validity**

Methodology

Focus on various ways we can identify and collect **reliable** and **valid** knowledge about the social world.



Representativeness

Generalisability

With all types of data an important question is the extent to which the data accurately *represents* what it claims to represent.

Data

Representativeness in this context refers to the idea that any information we collect is sufficiently comprehensive to accurately represent something. **Example**: Official unemployment statistics are *unrepresentative* of all unemployed (they only measure those "available for and actively seeking work" - anything we say about "unemployment" in our society needs to be qualified by the idea that some types of "lack of paid work" are not represented in the statistics.

Group

Representativeness here refers to the use of research samples; if we're researching a small group (of nurses, for example) and, on the basis of this research, want to be able to say something about *all nurses*, the characteristics of the first group must exactly match those of the larger group; in other words, we can use one, small, group to *represent* a much larger group.

Information we collect about a small group can be applied to larger groups who share the same general characteristics of the smaller group. **Example**: if the small (sample) group is representative of the larger group anything we discover about the one can be generalised to the other.

Example: If another sociologist attempted to repeat the "pub research", would similar results be achieved? If not, then the research is unreliable…

Is everyone in the group being researched asked the same questions in the same way? If not, how easy would it be to check data reliability by repeating this research?

Replication

Standardisation

Examples: Will the same question, asked of the same person in similar circumstances, produce the same answer? Is it possible for different people (or the same person at different times) to observe exactly the same things?

Data reliability has a number of aspects:

Do opportunities exist for the researcher (consciously or unconsciously) to distort the data collection process?

Bias

Consistency

Reliability

If data is *unreliable* conclusions we draw from it are going to be of limited use. For example, if I attempt to draw conclusions about the state of education in Britain on the basis of an interview with someone in a bar, such data will be unreliable as a guide to what is really happening in the educational system.

Methodology

Validity

Depth

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

Data validity encourages 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.

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.

A researcher has complete control over things like how data is collected and from whom it's collected.

Control over how data is collected doesn't guarantee its reliability, validity or representativeness, but it's much easier to consider these concepts when personally designing and carrying out research.

Time-consuming
To design, construct and carry-out. If the group you're researching is large and you're interviewing them individually, this is going to take a great deal of time and resources.

Expense
The cost of a researcher's time may be a factor in the design of the research.

Control

Methodology

Advantages

Primary

Disadvantages

Resources

Access
The group you want to study may not grant you access (or it may not be possible to construct a representative sample).

Availability
Sometimes it's *impossible* to collect primary data - people may deny you access or the behaviour you want to research is in the past and the participants are no-longer alive.
Example: **Durkheim** ("Suicide: A Study In Sociology", 1897).

Resources

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.

Advantages

Secondary

Disadvantages

Control

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.
Example: Government definitions of social class may be different to sociological definitions.

Methodology

Reliability
Some forms of secondary data (such as official statistics) can be highly reliable.

Validity
Some forms (*biographies* and *personal documents* such as *diaries* for example) give detailed insights into behaviour.

Representativeness
Where data is produced on a national level representativeness is normally high.

Methodology

Is secondary data 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.

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*. The *authenticity* (has the data been faked?) and *credibility* (who produced it and for what reasons?) of secondary data may be difficult to check.

Quantitative (statistical) data makes this relatively easy to compare differences between two or more things, (such as middle-class and working-class family size) . Alternatively, *cross-cultural* comparisons (crime rates in different countries, for example) are made possible through the use of quantitative data.

Comparison

"Before" and **"after"** studies are a further type of comparison we can make using quantitative data.
Example: Examining the effect legal changes have had on patterns of divorce in our society by noting the number of divorces *before* and after a change in the law.

Quantitative data gives us an easy, manageable, way of identifying, tracking and examining trends and changes over time.
Example: Statistics on educational achievement over the past 25 years highlight changes in relative levels of achievement between (and within) the sexes.

Reliability

Change

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

The ability to express relationships statistically can be useful if you don't need to explore the reasons for people's behaviour (for example, if you only need to know the number of murders committed each year).

Quantified

Advantages

Quantitative Data

Disadvantages

Quantitative data can't be easily used to explore issues in any great depth (knowing the number of thefts in our society doesn't tell us anything about why people commit this crime).

Validity

Meaning

Quantitative data isn't designed to tell sociologists about how people interpret and understand social behaviour; that is, in terms of the various meanings they give to both their own behaviour and that of others.
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 victimisation.

If the research objective is to *understand* the *meaning* of people's behaviour, people must be given the scope to talk freely about that behaviour. If a researcher *imposes* their interpretation on a situation (by asking direct, quantifiable, questions for example) then data *validity* will be affected because people's ability to talk at length and in depth about what they believe in artificially restricted.

Validity

Because qualitative 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.

Imposition

Advantages

Meaning

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

Qualitative Data

Disadvantages

Relevance

Qualitative research produces a mass of data, much of which will be *irrelevant* in terms of achieving the research objective.
Example: With something like an interview or participant observation there is the problem of how to *interpret* or represent data. Does the researcher report *everything* someone says or does or is it permissible to edit the data (and risk *imposing* a single interpretation on the information)?

Reliability

Qualitative research is difficult (if not impossible) to exactly repeat - how difficult 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 source is *representative* of anything more than the views of a single individual.

Comparisons

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

Exam Questions

8 marks

Identify and briefly explain two advantages to sociologists in carrying out their own primary research "rather than relying on secondary sources of evidence".

20 marks

Examine the problems some sociologists may find when using secondary data in their research.

20 marks

Examine the uses of different kinds of secondary data in sociological research.