

AS Sociology

Revision

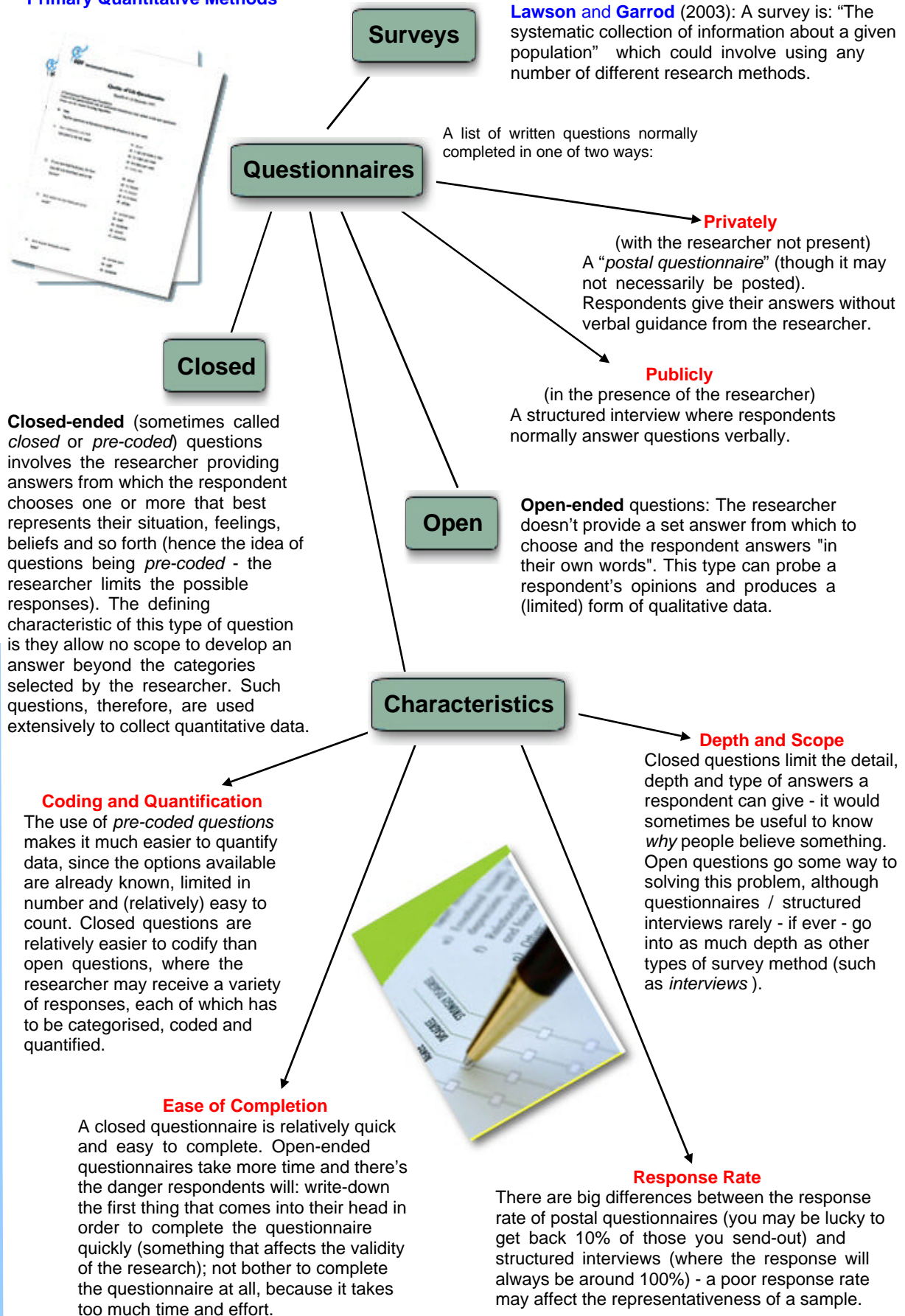
**Sociological
Methods**

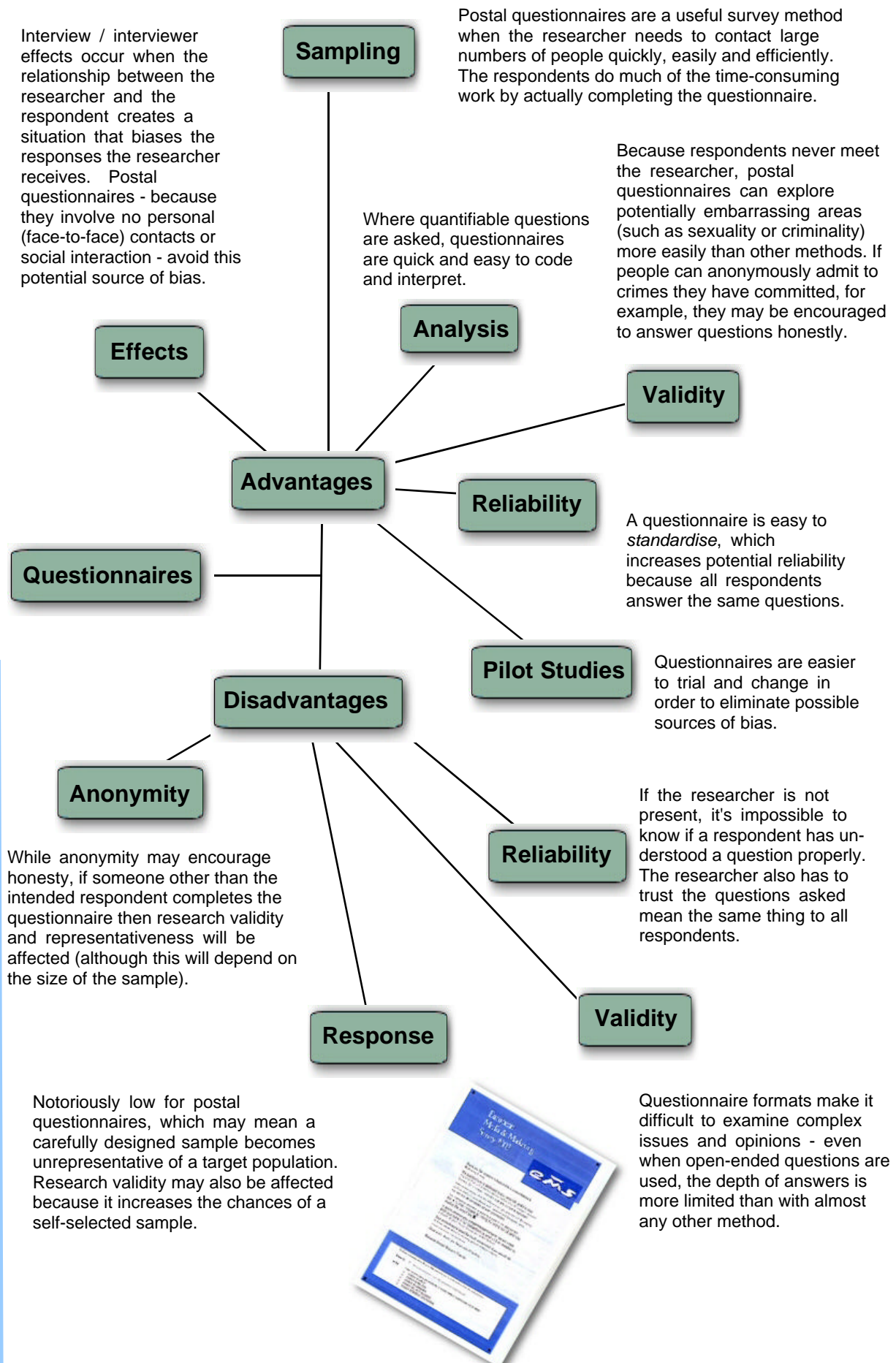
**The different quantitative and qualitative methods
and sources of data, including questionnaires,
interviews, observation techniques and
experiments, and documents and official statistics.**

[Part 1]

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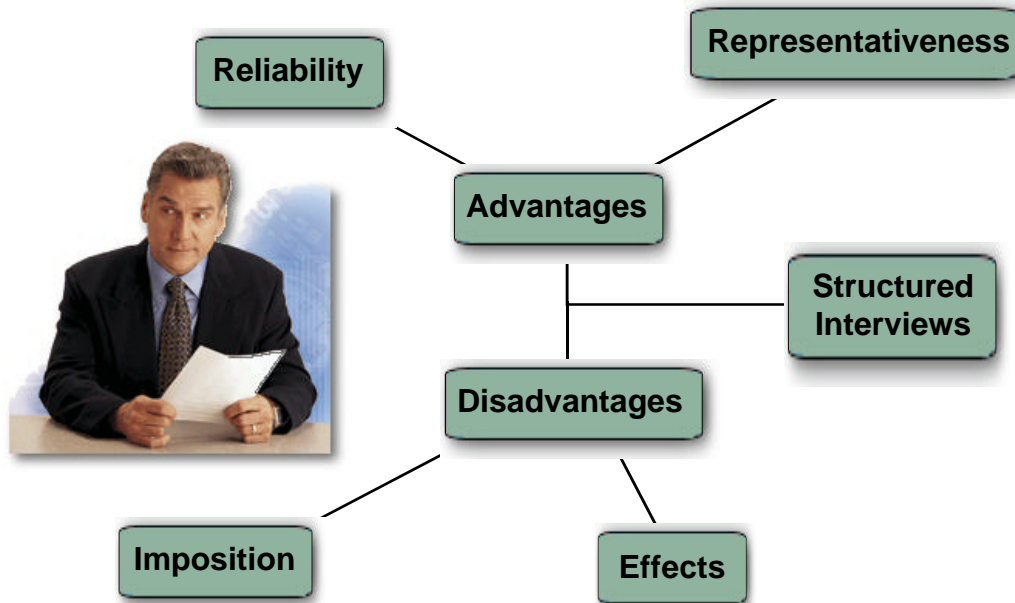
Primary Quantitative Methods





Issues surrounding the research can be discussed face-to-face. The interviewer can 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.

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



This limitation is common to both postal questionnaires and structured interviews and reflects the idea that, by designing a "list of questions", a researcher has effectively decided (before collecting any data) what they consider important. The researcher, therefore, has imposed their definition of these things in advance of the interview. Thus, questions a researcher *fails to ask* may be as (if not more) important to a respondent than the questions *actually asks* - since the objective is to collect valid data based on the beliefs of respondents, *artificial limits* placed on responses may seriously affect research validity.

Interviewer

This idea is related to the interview effect (and a 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.

Examples: An aggressive interviewer may intimidate a respondent into giving answers that don't really reflect the latter's beliefs or *status* considerations (based on gender, age, class or ethnicity) may come into play - such as where a female respondent may feel embarrassed about answering questions about her sexuality if they're asked by a male researcher.

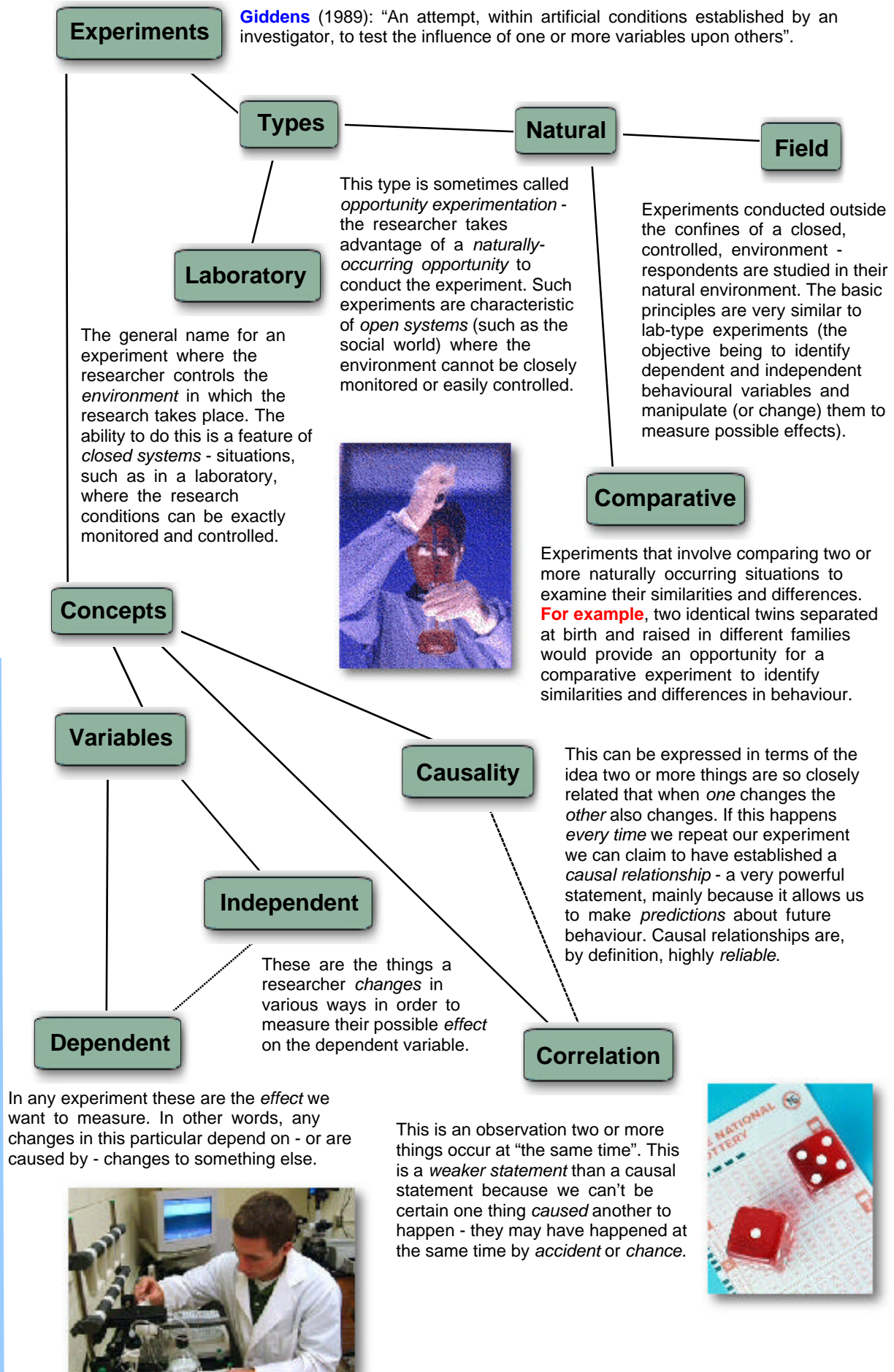
Interview

The interview may limit the validity of a respondent's answers if they misinterpret (consciously or unconsciously) their *role*.

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 (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.

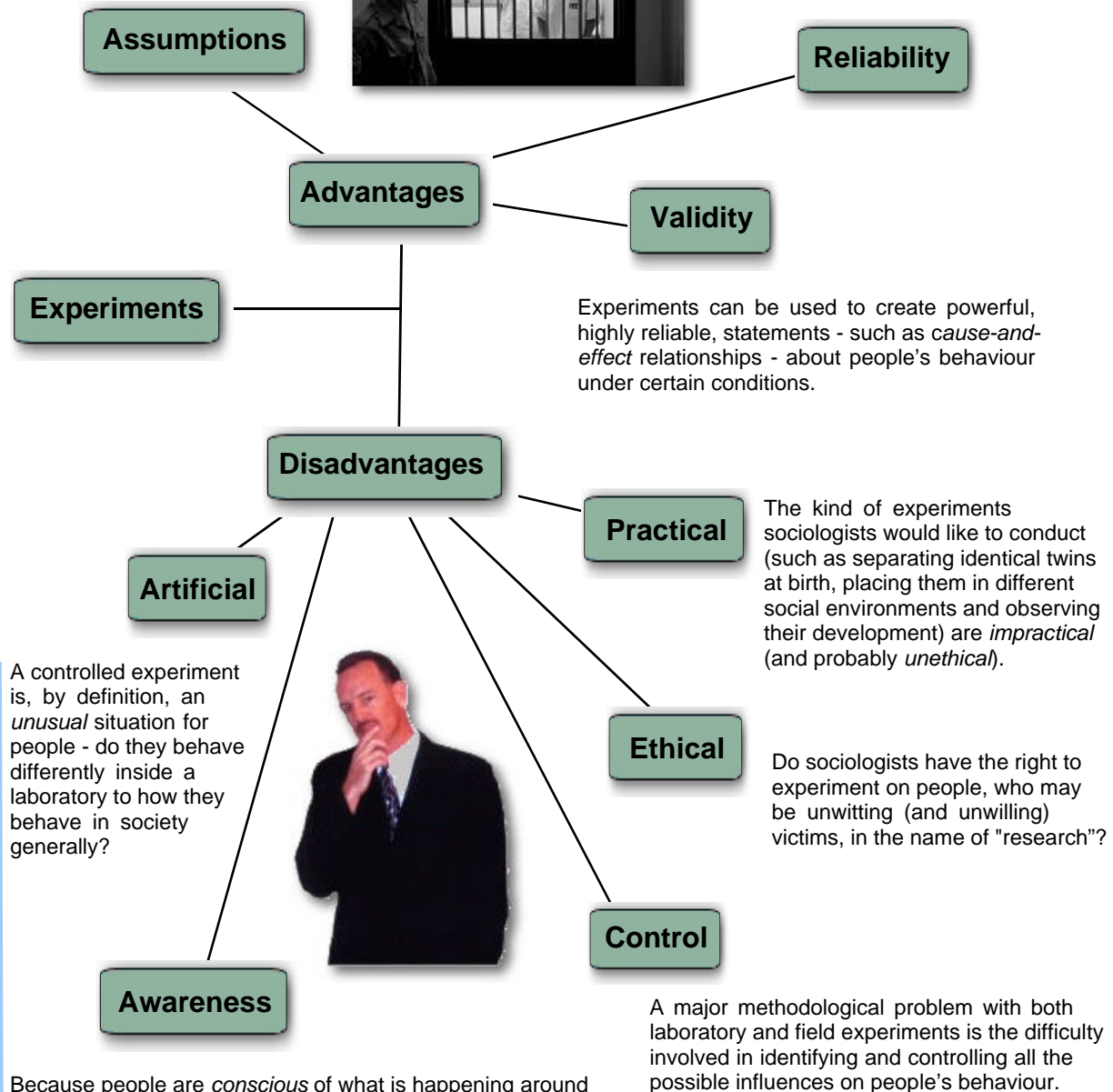




Field experiments can be used to manipulate situations "in the real world" to understand the *assumptions* on which people base their everyday behaviour.



Laboratory experiments can be highly reliable; if the experimental conditions can be controlled and standardised the experiment can be easily repeated.



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:

Example: The Hawthorne Effect, named after the studies by Elton Mayo (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".



Primary Qualitative Methods

The researcher sets 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're interested in exploring - a *semi-structured* technique.

Focused Interviews

There is no list of questions to be asked and different respondents may be asked different questions on the same topic. The objective is to *understand* things from the respondent's viewpoint, rather than make generalisations about behaviour. *Open-ended questions* are frequently used, some of which arise naturally from whatever the respondent talks about.

Hierarchical Focusing Tomlinson (1989)

General questions are used to encourage respondents to talk and specific questions are used as-and-when required to refocus the interview.

Very General Questions,
General Questions,
Specific Questions,
Very Specific Questions.

Schedule

A plan used to specify and track the progress of the interview. This may start with the *major topic* (or focus) and an initial, *open-ended*, question to get the respondent talking about the general topic. *Subsidiary questions* or topics the researcher wants to explore may be included (which may or may not be asked). The schedule can be updated with questions that arose during the interview.



Factors

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; unlike a structured interview which can be conducted almost anywhere, focused interviews can't be easily conducted on street corners.

Skills

This method requires certain *skills* of the researcher - for example, when to prompt and when to listen and people are unlikely to open-up to a rude and aggressive interviewer. Things like how a researcher dresses and talks, whether they appear interested or bored and so forth can be important factors in the interview process.

Trust

Interviews may deal with matters of personal importance to respondents - one reason for using this technique is the desire to explore "what people really believe" - and it's important respondents feel they are being taken seriously and that the information will be confidential. Building trust between the researcher and the respondent may also help to increase the reliability and validity of the data.

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.

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.

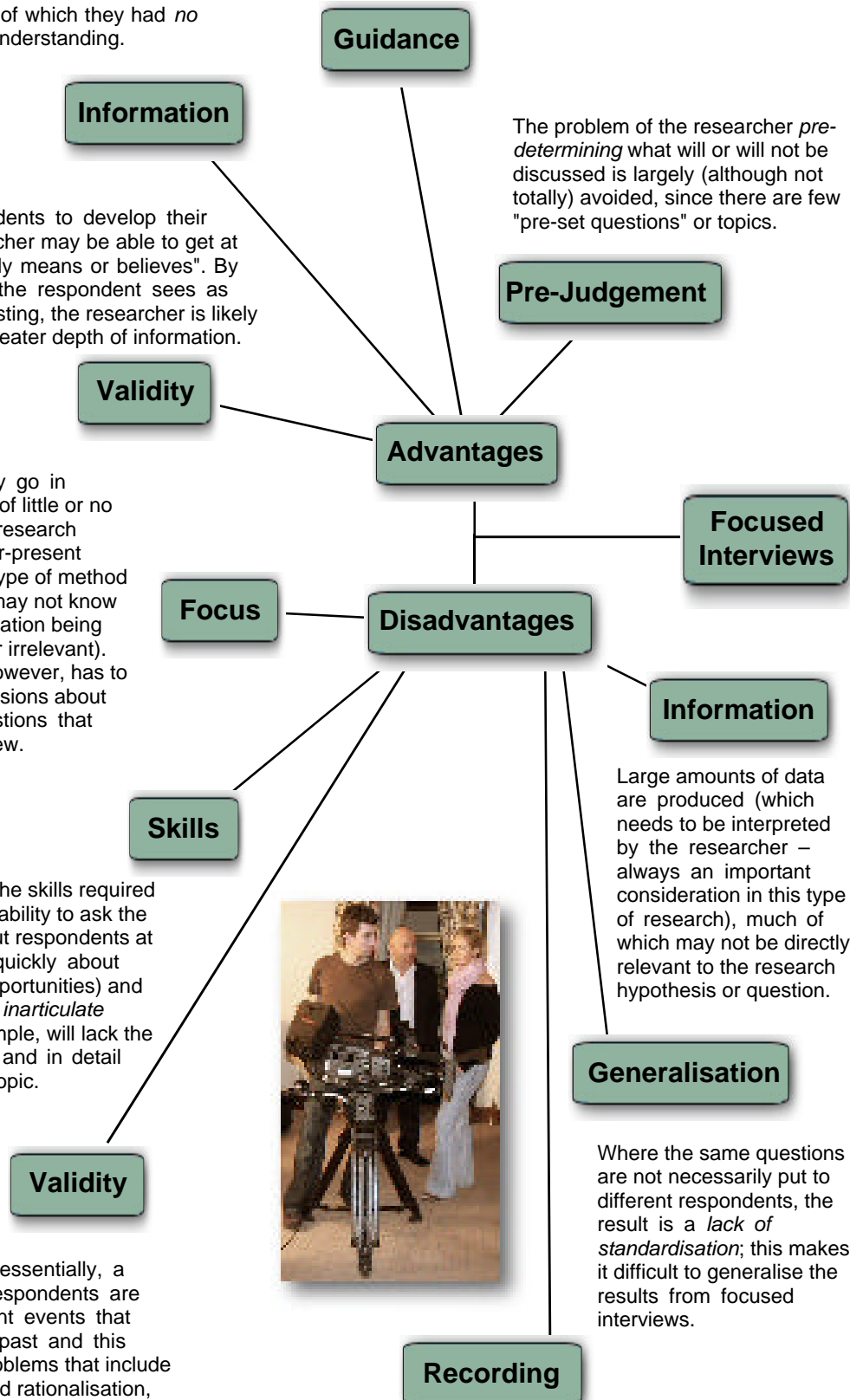
By allowing respondents to develop their opinions, the researcher may be able to get at what someone "really means or believes". By focusing on things the respondent sees as important and interesting, the researcher is likely to receive a much greater depth of information.

The problem 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.

The interview 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 whether the information being given is relevant or irrelevant). The researcher, however, has to make (skilled) decisions about when to ask questions that refocus the interview.

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) and a respondent – an *inarticulate respondent*, for example, will lack the skills to talk openly and in detail about the research topic.

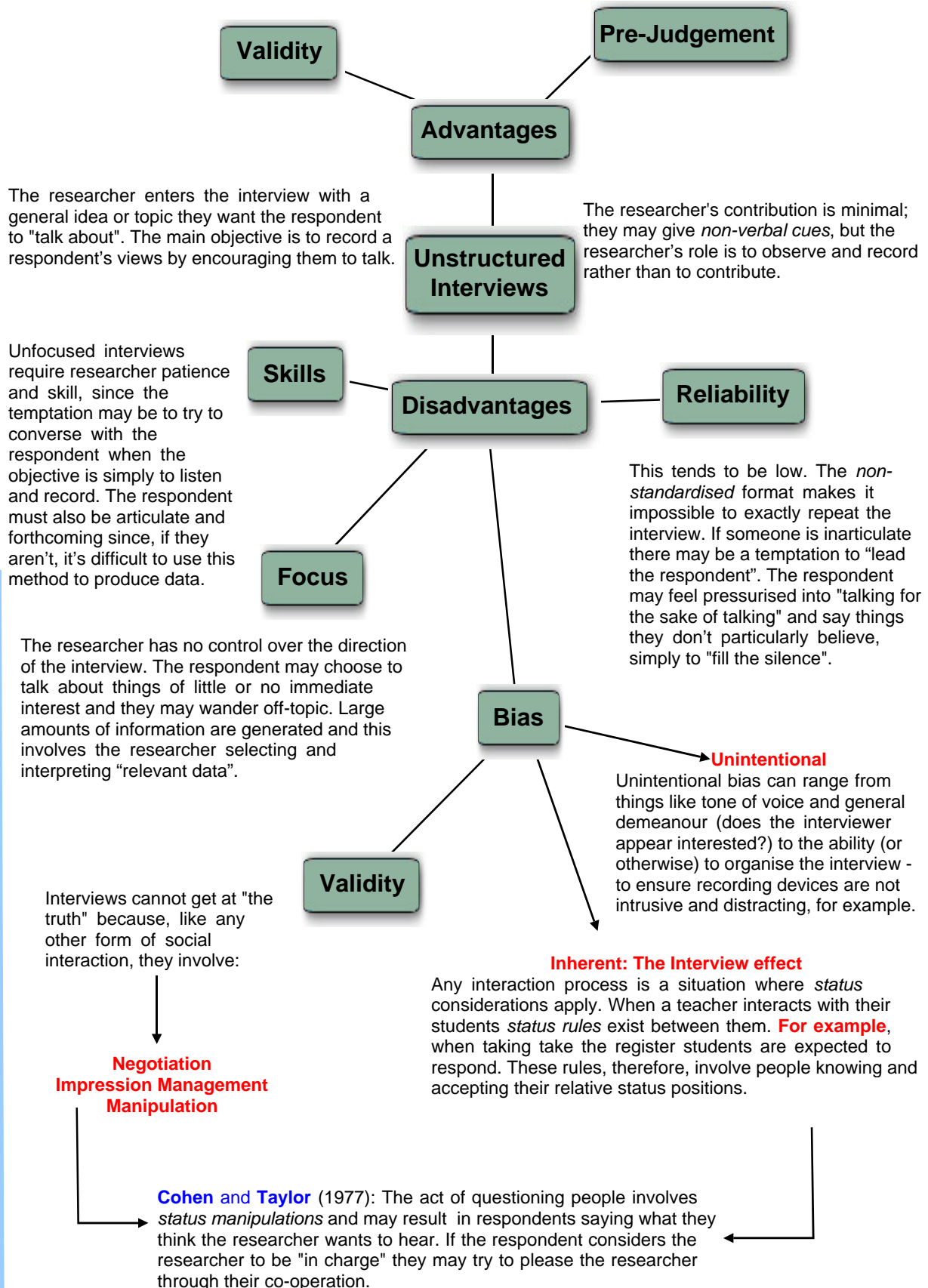
Any interview is, essentially, a *reconstruction*. Respondents are required to recount events that happened in the past and this creates validity problems that include *imperfect recall* and rationalisation,

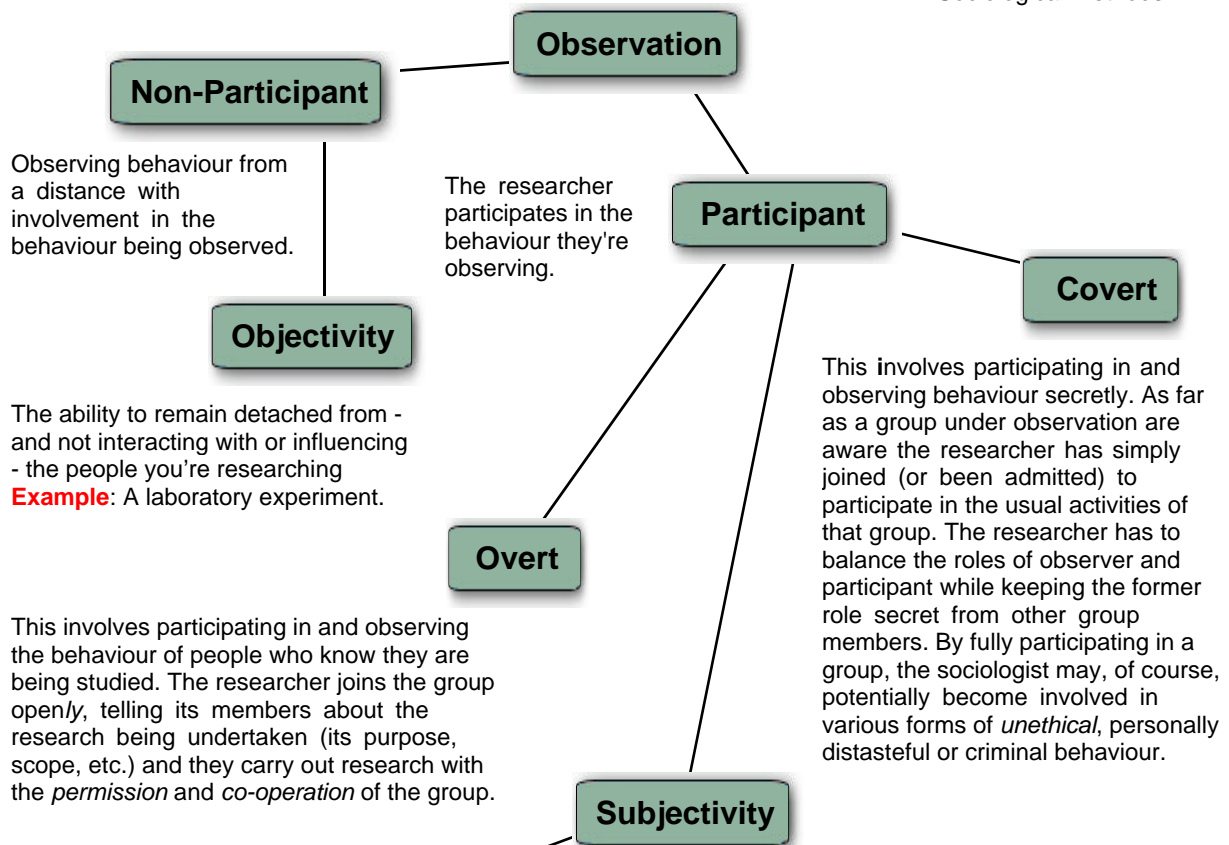


Not necessarily a limitation (unless the researcher is trying to manually record everything) but *electronic recording* should be *unobtrusive*; if the respondent is too aware of being recorded it may make them nervous, uncooperative or self-conscious.

The minimal intervention of the researcher - the respondent leads and the researcher follows - means the data collected reflects the interests of the respondent and, consequently, is more likely to be a true expression of their beliefs.

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.





Verstehen

Weber used this concept to express the idea of "understanding".

Mead (1933) argued the researcher should exploit the ability to *take the part of the other* in order to understand how people experience the social world.

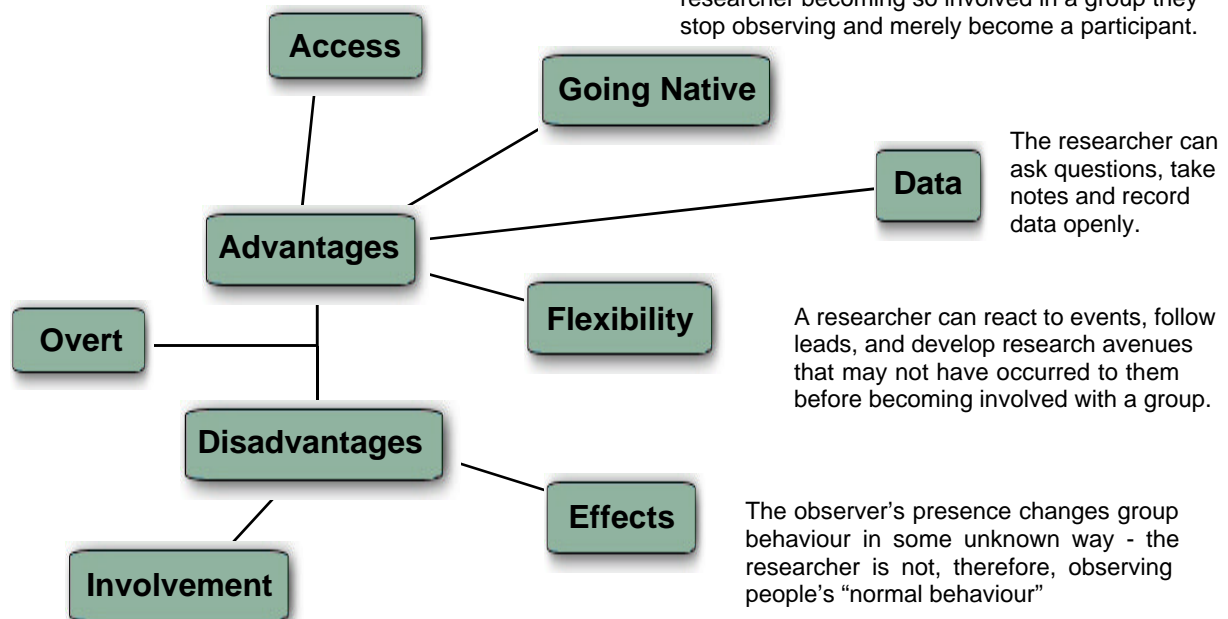
Parker (1974) argues one reason for doing this is that: "...by visiting the deviants in prison, borstal and other 'human zoos' or by cornering them in classrooms to answer questionnaires, the sociologist misses meeting them as people in their normal society".

Participant observation is sometimes called *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.



Research into a group with a hierarchical structure (such as a school) is possible - the researcher can have access to all levels.



Researcher "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.

This 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).

Example: Lofland and Stark (1965) used a covert approach to study the behaviour of a secretive religious sect.

Personal experience means the researcher understands the meanings and motivations within a group that explain why people behave in certain ways (even when those involved may not understand the reasons for their behaviour). The depth of involvement can produce highly valid data.

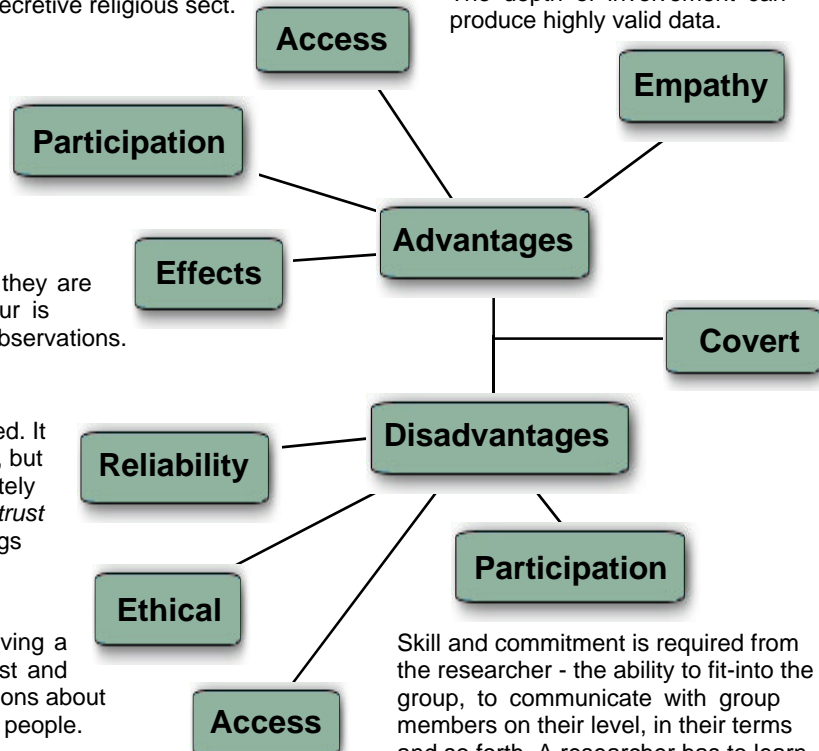
The researcher is totally involved with the people they are (secretly) studying and this method produces massively detailed and insightful data about a group's behaviour.

Because people are not aware they are being observed - their behaviour is unaffected by the researcher's observations.

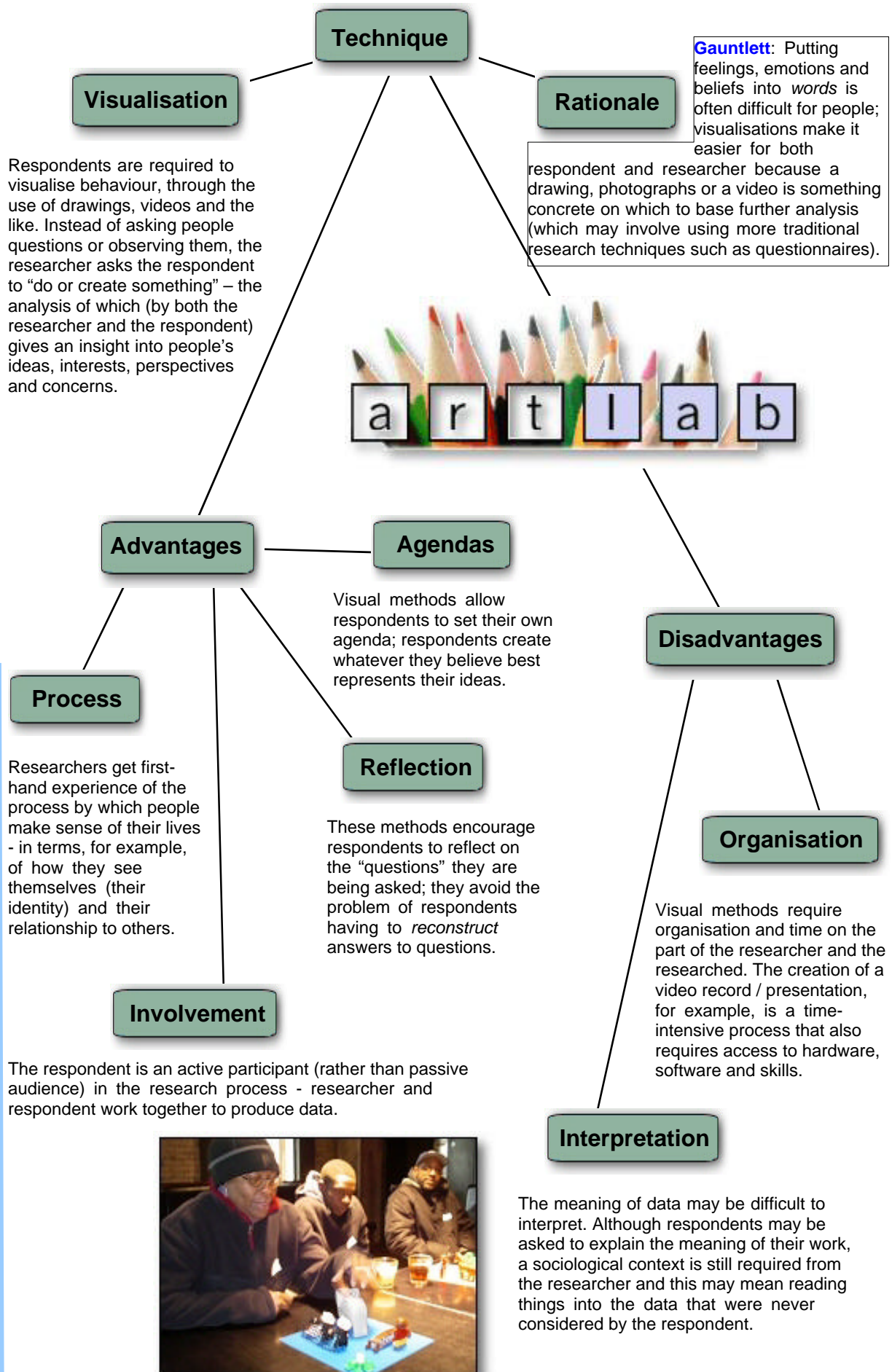
The research can never be replicated. It would be possible to revisit a group, but the research could never be accurately repeated and we have to take it on *trust* the researcher saw and did the things they claimed to see and do.

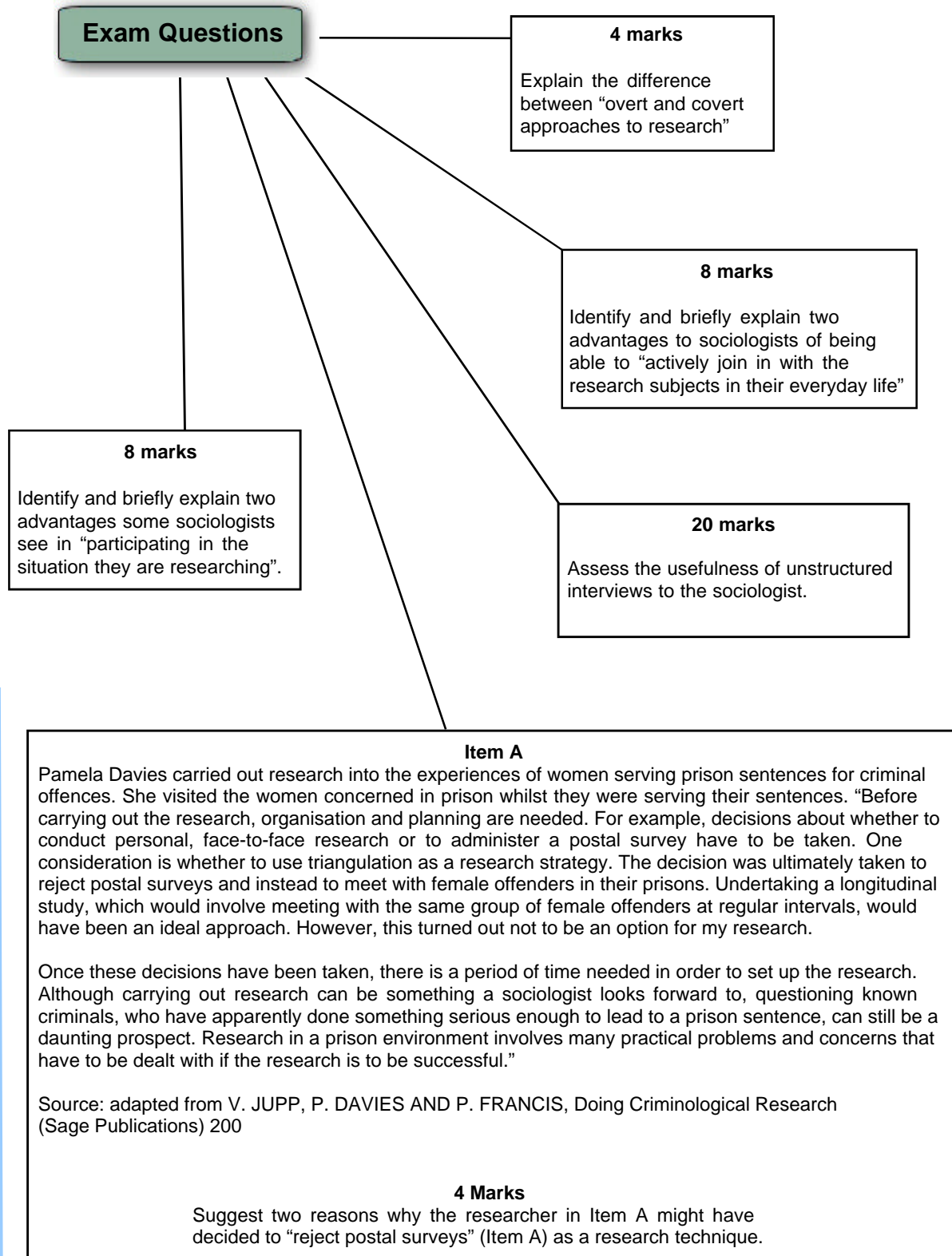
These range from the effect of leaving a group who may have grown to trust and depend on the researcher, to questions about whether covert observation exploits people.

If the researcher's characteristics (age, for example) don't match those of the group the researcher can't enter the group. Some groups only allow people to join by invitation, while professional occupations require particular qualifications. The researcher won't have access to all levels of hierarchical groups.



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. A researcher has to learn the culture of a group if they are to participate fully and not be exposed as a "spy". Separating the role of participant from that of observer can be difficult to maintain when you're acting undercover.





Item B

Lynn Jamieson and her colleagues researched the partnership plans of young married and cohabiting couples in Scotland. In this extract they outline the research methods they used. Our study is based on a stratified sample of men and women aged 20-29. This is an ideal age group for an investigation of 'couple behaviour' and attitudes to partnership as a large proportion of first marriages and cohabitation occurs with people in this age range. The sample was stratified equally between the 20-24 and 25-29 age groups and between men and women. We selected at random 200 research subjects from our sampling frame. Because couple relationships are so personal and such a sensitive research issue, we could not actively join in with the research subjects in their everyday life. We therefore surveyed the sample using a structured questionnaire delivered by a trained interviewer. In the case of 41 people, the researchers followed this up with an intensive interview. Although time consuming and comparatively costly, these unstructured intensive interviews yielded more in-depth information.

Source: adapted from L. JAMIESON ET AL, "Cohabitation and Commitment", The Sociological Review, Vol. 50 No. 3, (Blackwell Publishing Ltd.) August 2002

6 Marks

Suggest three disadvantages of using intensive interviews apart from those mentioned in Item B

Item C

Brandenburg and his colleagues investigated the extent to which there is a relationship between age and response rate to mailed questionnaires. To do this, they analysed the response rates of people aged 60 to 93 years of age to a questionnaire posted to them concerning their pensions. "A random sample of 1000 was drawn from a population of 23 000 retired public employees in the files of a pensions company in a large city in the USA. A four-page questionnaire booklet was mailed to the sample. The questionnaire was designed using large fonts and employed clear and easy instructions. The survey included a variety of question formats including overall satisfaction questions using a five-point scale from 'very satisfied' to 'very unsatisfied', as well as open-ended questions. The questionnaire also carried a question that asked whether the survey had been completed by the person to whom it was mailed. The number of questionnaires returned after a single mailing was 465 out of the original 1 000 sent out. A response rate of 46.5% is generally considered to be very high and this might have resulted from the interest elderly people have in the provision of their pensions. We also found that response rates declined with age."

Source: adapted from KALDENBURG ET AL, Mail Survey Response Rate Patterns in a Population of the Elderly, Public Opinion Quarterly, Volume 58 (University of Chicago Press) 1994

20 Marks

Using material from Item C and elsewhere, assess the usefulness of mailed questionnaires in sociological research.