

# Understanding culture (Research skills)

## What is the sociological approach to research?

### Why is research important to sociology?

#### Bullets

- Sociology is the systematic study of society.
- It has a specific set of approaches that are called 'the sociological perspective'.
- Sociologists reject common sense and try to challenge people's view of the world.
- Sociologists use evidence to support their ideas
- Sociology is generally seen to be objective and value-free.

#### Text

The subject matter of sociology is people and the relationships that they make. On a large scale, sociologists talk about cultures and societies but on a small scale, sociologists talk about meanings and identity. This is a very wide topic area indeed, and it is important for all of the people studying the subject to have a common language and set of understandings in order to cope with the information that they are dealing with. This set of common understandings is known as 'the sociological perspective'. It is not only what the sociologist chooses to look at that makes a piece of research sociological, it is the method and the approach that is taken that makes the work sociological.

The subject matter of sociology is people; how they view the world and what they do. Sociologists try to understand and explain the social world. This is what most people do, most of the time anyway, so why do we need to study this in a particular academic way? It is because most of us also take certain things for granted: we call these taken for granted assumptions, common sense. However, the job of the sociologist is to challenge common sense beliefs and examine them. Examples of common sense beliefs in the past included the view that if women were over-educated it would make them unable to bear children. Nowadays, most people believe that this is untrue, but for generations it was firmly believed. What other examples of common sense belief could prove to be untrue if examined carefully?

Sociology is evidence based. This means that sociologists draw conclusions from evidence that they or other sociologists have gathered. It is not enough to rely on personal experience, because personal experience is just that, it only happened to one person. Evidence must be systematic; there should be a common pattern or a trend to the behaviour. Evidence should be referenced, so that it is possible to check who gathered it and what they said, and whether the methods that they used to gather the evidence actually support their point of view. Importantly, most, though not all people would say that sociology needs to be value-free (the opinions of the sociologists are not given as though they were factual) and objective (unemotional)

#### Questions

- What is the subject matter of sociology?
- How is sociology different from common sense?
- Why does sociology need to be objective and value free?

# Understanding culture (Research skills)

## Keywords

1. Objective - unemotional, the attempt to be scientific and unbiased.
2. Subjective - to be emotional and biased.
3. Value-free - without personal bias or opinion.
4. The Sociological perspective - an objective and value free way of looking at society.
5. Systematic - having a method that can be understood by others.
6. Referencing - explaining where you obtained information.

## What approaches are used by sociologists?

### Bullets

- There are two main approaches to research
- Quantitative research describes what people do and say, using numbers and statistics.
- Qualitative research is concerned with how people understand and feel about the world, using observations and descriptions.
- People combine both types of research in an approach known as methodological plurality.

### Text

Early sociologists thought that sociology should be empirical. It should be based on the principles of sciences and people should only study what they can see or observe. The earliest study using this scientific approach was published in 1897 by Emile Durkheim and it is still in print today. It was his classic study of Suicide, in which he attempted to prove that even this most personal of actions is in fact governed by social patterns and that it has observable trends. This type of sociology is known as quantitative sociology, because it deals with numbers. It measures the actual behaviour that people participate in, and counts their responses to questions. It provides the kind of data that governments use to plan services. It is often gathered using questionnaires.

However, looking at what people do or say they do, does not tell sociologists much about how they actually think or develop ideas about themselves and the world. It became obvious, early on in the development of the subject that people act according to their beliefs and ideas. This led to the development of another form of sociology which is known as qualitative sociology. It is concerned with feelings, emotions, actions and meanings. This approach to sociology gained importance in the 1970s. It uses observations, interviews and a variety of other methods.

For many years, the two approaches were seen as being opposite to each other, but increasingly, sociologists are coming to the view that both approaches should be used together; the strengths of one approach cancel out the weakness of the other. This approach is known as methodological plurality. Many studies will use more than one method, the idea being that each data from each method will support the material gained from the other. This process is known as triangulation.

### Questions

- What is quantitative research?

# Understanding culture (Research skills)

- What is qualitative research?
- Why are there two approaches to research in sociology?
- What are the advantages of methodological plurality?

## Keywords

1. Empirical - using scientific methods.
2. Quantitative - concerned with number and description.
3. Qualitative - concerned with meaning and feeling
4. Methodological plurality - using more than one method in a piece of research.
5. Triangulation - process of checking the validity of research findings by using more than one approach.
6. Data - information gathered from research.
7. Reliability - the trustworthiness and repeatability of a piece of research.
8. Validity - the measure of whether the findings of a piece of research can be supported by the evidence provided by that research.

## What sources of information are available to sociologists?

### Bullets

- Primary data is produced by the sociologists carrying out the research.
- Secondary data is produced by other people and used by the sociologist.
- Primary data is easy to collect, but not always done well.
- Secondary data should be treated with care, it was not always collected with sociologists in mind.

### Text

There are many different ways for sociologists to gather information. They can collect the information that they need themselves. This is known as primary data collection and the process is known as primary research or primary data collection. There are a number of different methods of primary data collection. The most common are surveys using questionnaires and interviews, but observations and experiments are also important. Sociologists are expected to write about their methods when they write up their research projects so that others can evaluate the quality of the methods that were being used. Primary research or data collection is extremely important to sociology.

Primary data is relatively easy to collect. However, it is very difficult to do it well; that is why the study of sociological methodology is so important. The types of projects that are typical of primary research are small scale projects into specific problems or issues. Sociologists who wish to work on a topic that has not been fully studied before or who want to undertake a piece of original work will collect primary data.

Many sociologists rely on secondary data. This is material that has been produced by other people. The most important source of secondary data is official statistics which are gathered by governmental organisations such as the Office for National Statistics and Surveys, the police, the health service and the educational services. There is considerable debate as to how much we can trust official statistics, but they are enormously useful to sociologists as they provide us with information about patterns and trends in society. Other forms of secondary data include previously written books and research, newspapers, diaries. There is a drawback to some of this material, for example, much of it

# Understanding culture (Research skills)

was written for reasons other than social research. One of the most important source of secondary data in the UK is the annual book Social Trends published by the Office for National Statistics (ONS)

## Questions

- What is primary research?
- What is secondary research?
- What are the advantages and disadvantages of relying on secondary data?

## Keywords

1. Primary research - carried out by the researcher.
2. Secondary research - collected and published by other people and used by the sociologist.
3. Social Trends - an annual book summarising statistical data from government sources about British society. Can be downloaded from the ONS website.

## What are reliability and validity?

### Bullets

- No piece of research is perfect. All research has strengths and weaknesses.
- The quality of evidence depends on the quality of research.
- Sociologists must evaluate the quality of the research evidence that they use.
- Reliability is the trustworthiness and repeatability of a piece of research.
- Validity is the measure of whether the findings of a piece of research can be supported by the evidence provided by that research.

### Text

The quality of research is very important because it is from research that sociologists draw the evidence on which they base their conclusions. If the research is faulty, then the evidence and conclusions have limited value. However, no piece of research can be perfect.

This is because human beings are unpredictable, do not always tell the truth and do not always recognise when they are being dishonest either. Humans are different from the subjects of pure science because they are reflexive. This means that they can think about what they do, and what they say. They may not even think the same thing consistently from one situation to another.

Because sociologists recognise that it is impossible to produce a perfect piece of research, they recognise that the evaluation of the quality of research is extremely important. All social scientists use the same key measures to evaluate the quality of any piece of research that they may use or produce. The most important of these measures are known as reliability and validity. They are similar, but not the same and should not be used interchangeably.

### Reliability

The scientific approach to research places great value of the reliability of data. Empirical sociology is sociology that is concerned with measuring observable phenomena, that is,



# Understanding culture (Research skills)

things that can be seen and counted. If social change is to be measured, or social theories are to be tested, then the actual data produced must be trustworthy. This is reliability. Reliability is difficult to define easily because it covers a number of ideas. The most basic and important of these is repeatability or consistency. This means that if more than one person administers a test or questionnaire, the results should still be broadly similar between two pieces of structured research, assuming that no basic changes have taken place between the two tests. Reliability is often seen as being a characteristic of quantitative social research.

## Validity

Both the qualitative and the quantitative methods in sociology place great emphasis on validity. Validity refers to the question of whether the findings of the research truly represent what it was the researcher was actually attempting to discover. There are a number of things that can affect the validity of a piece of research - for example, the design of the research may be faulty or the researcher may draw conclusions from the research that cannot be justified. It is often claimed that qualitative research is more valid than quantitative research because it can explore people's answers in depth. Qualitative research however, is not always reliable because it cannot be repeated.

## Questions

- Why is it impossible to produce a piece of perfect research?
- What are the key measures of the quality of research evidence?
- What is the difference between reliability and validity?

## Keywords

1. Reflexivity - the ability to think about one's actions.
2. Reliability - the trustworthiness and repeatability of a piece of research.
3. Validity - the measure of whether the findings of a piece of research can be supported by the evidence provided by that research.

## Ethics and sociology research

### Bullets

- Sociologists investigate the private details of people's lives.
- People are entitled to protection from harm, as are sociologists.
- Ethics means the study of morality.
- Sociologists abide by a code of ethics which protects the people they study, the reputation of the subject and themselves from harm.
- This code of ethics must not be violated.

### Text

There is another important dimension to social science research that all sociologists should be aware of. Because the subject matter of the social sciences is people, it may be necessary to ask personal questions, or observe people in private situations. Sociologists are therefore in a position of trust. It is possible for them to place individuals in a situation where they can be embarrassed, or come to harm. Laud Humphries (1970 Tearoom Trade) allowed for the possibility of men to be exposed as participating in homosexual behaviour at a time when it could have resulted in criminal prosecution and social disgrace.

# Understanding culture (Research skills)

Equally, the researcher could also be placed in danger. One of the more famous studies was James Patrick's (1973) *A Glasgow Gang Observed* which was published anonymously because the researcher had been on the borders of criminal activity and his study group were known for carrying knives. He felt that he was genuinely at risk of harm from them or others if they knew of his identity.

Ethics refers to the study of right and wrong. Sociologists have developed Ethical Codes that are constantly reviewed and all research will be judged in the light of whether the research was ethical. If it is judged to have risked any form of injury or harm to the researcher or people participating in the research, then it is unethical. When research proposals are made, then the ethics of the research will be discussed before ever the researcher begins work.

The British Sociological Association expects the researcher to avoid racist and sexist language, assess the risk of harm to researcher and participants, guarantee confidentiality, to avoid exploitation of vulnerable people and for people to be made aware at some stage that they are the subjects of study so that they can be removed from the data if they so choose. In addition, researchers should be adequately qualified and appropriately skilled in order to undertake the research that they propose. The research should also be made public at some stage.

## Questions

- Why does sociology need a code of ethics?
- What rules would you write for sociologists?

## Keywords

1. Ethics - the study of morality.
2. British Sociological Association - the governing body for sociology in British universities.

## Why are experiments controversial in the social sciences?

### Bullets

- Scientists in many subjects use experiments to conduct research.
- This has proved to be very difficult in sociology.
- Many of the topics studied by sociologists are difficult to define in simple, measurable terms.
- Much experimentation on people has been seen as unethical because it risks harming people.
- People adapt their behaviour if they know they are being studied and the results of the experiment can be worthless as a result.

### Text

The classic method used by most sciences is the experiment. This is a clearly understood process that is common to all sciences as a way of testing observable phenomena. The scientist observes something, proposes a hypothesis to explain it and then conducts tests to check whether the hypothesis can be proven or not. These tests should be repeatable

# Understanding culture (Research skills)

by other scientists. The scientist should be objective and unemotional about the tests. This is all measured in terms of reliability. Some social sciences such as psychology rely on the experimental method to learn more about their disciplines. In sociology, however, the scientific experiment is not often used, and the reasons for this illustrate one of the main difficulties of the scientific approach to sociology.

The first difficulty for sociologists is that it is sometimes difficult to define the subject that is under study. Before measuring anything, it is important to define what it is that is being measured. Very few people can agree on basic definitions of common everyday terms such as family, poverty, love or education. Defining more complex behaviours such as mental illness or social inequality in a way that will satisfy everyone is nearly impossible. Sociologists therefore have to be absolutely clear about what it is they are looking for. The process of defining a term is known as operationalisation. The term that is causing the difficulty is known as a contested concept.

Another problem is that many commentators believe it to be unethical to experiment on people. The results of some famous experiments on people carried out by social psychologists were so devastating that they have been the subject of much debate. The most famous of these were Stanley Milgram's experiments into obedience and the authoritarian personality and Zimbardo's Stanford Prison experiment. These are fully described on the internet.

One of the most interesting experiments was the series of experiments conducted by Elton Mayo which resulted in him describing a phenomenon known as the Hawthorne Effect. In this experiment into working conditions and output, Mayo discovered that the experiment itself had resulted in the effect that he discovered. People are reflexive and anxious to please, so will adapt their behaviour to produce the results that are being sought by the researcher. It is unconscious behaviour, but it does happen and then the experiment is no longer scientific or valid.

## Questions

- What is the value of the experimental method to researchers?
- Why might experiments on humans be said to be unethical?
- Why do sociologists need to operationalise terms before studying people?
- What is the Hawthorne Effect?

## Keywords

1. Operationalisation - defining a term in such a way that it can be measured.
2. Contested concept - a term that is open to more than one possible definition.
3. Experiment - a systematic method used to test a hypothesis.
4. Hypothesis - a statement that can be tested.
5. Phenomenon - something that happens.

## Why are surveys commonly used?

### Bullets

# Understanding culture (Research skills)

- The most commonly used sociological method is the survey which involves asking groups of people questions.
- It is a very flexible method, but for it to produce any data of value it has to be designed well.
- Questionnaires are written down.
- Interviews feel like conversations.

## Text

The most commonly used sociological research method is the survey. This method has been adopted and adapted by many other disciplines as a way of discovering what people think or how they act. Surveys seem to be a very simple process, but they need to be designed with care and sociological objectivity to reveal anything useful.

A survey is when a sequence of questions is asked of a number of people. The questions can be written down and people write in their own answers; this is a questionnaire. The questions can be read out by someone; this is a structured interview. Surveys can cover a large number of people. The Census is conducted every ten years in the UK and attempts to cover the entire population of the United Kingdom. Equally, it is possible to survey a relatively small number of people such as a class of students or a number of passers-by in a shopping centre. Some surveys may be carried out online. The value of the results depends entirely on the quality of the questions and the research design. A person who takes part in a survey is a respondent.

There are two types of survey. Longitudinal surveys follow people over a length of time. These are expensive to conduct and require a long term commitment, but they provide an excellent measure of social change and social trends. Cross-sectional surveys measure people at a point in time, and can be seen in terms of a photograph capturing information about one particular moment.

Questionnaires are a good way of asking exactly the same questions of a very large number of people. They are fairly cheap to create and relatively easy to administer. There are disadvantages in that not everyone may read questions the same way. The answer to any question will vary according to context and who is asking the question. Questions can be closed: the respondent chooses an answer from some that are already written. Questions can be open; the respondent writes down his or her feelings

Interviews have the feel of a conversation. Sometimes the questions are written down and scripted. This is a structured interview because the interviewer is controlling the situation. Sometimes the interviewer lets the interviewee talk at will. This is an unstructured interview. Most sociologists tend to use a combination of the two approaches to produce semi-structured interviews. Interviews have the strength that people can develop points or consider answers. Most interviewers are highly trained and highly experienced because the interviewer can sometimes affect the quality of the answers without quite being aware of what is happening; this is known as interviewer bias.

## Questions

- What is a survey?
- What two types of survey are there?
- What two survey methods are there?

# Understanding culture (Research skills)

- What are the advantages and disadvantages of questionnaires?
- What are the advantages and disadvantages of the interview method?

## Keywords

1. Survey - a sequence of questions to a number of people.
2. Interview - the questions take the form of a conversation.
3. Questionnaire - the questions are written down
4. Interviewer bias - the effect that the interviewer has on the interviewee that may affect the results.
5. Longitudinal study - this takes place over a period of time.
6. Cross-sectional study - is a snapshot of one place and one time.
7. Structured interview - the interviewer controls the conversation.
8. Unstructured interview - the interviewee is allowed to talk at will.
9. Respondents - people who answer questions.
10. Open questions - respondents can write down detailed answers.
11. Closed questions - respondents choose an answer that fits their feelings.

## How do the approaches taken by sociologists affect their research design and their results?

### What is the history of scientific thinking in sociology?

#### Bullets

- Sociology developed alongside the scientific approach to study.
- The scientific approach to study is known as Western hypothetico-deductive reasoning. It is common to all academic subjects.
- Some sociologists believe sociology should be a science.
- Others suggest that society cannot be studied scientifically because sociologists are themselves the products of a society.
- The way that they understand the world depends on their cultural background.

#### Text

Sociology began as an academic discipline at the same time as people were beginning to develop a clear procedure for scientific experiments. At the same time, the ideas of science were clashing with the principles of religion. Religious belief explains things by saying 'that's how God intended it' and sees belief as a matter of faith in things that cannot be seen. Science explains things through experiment and observation. Science has given rise to a mode of thought that is known as hypothetico-deductive reasoning. There is a clear and logical process of studying things that anyone can follow. It forms the basis of academic thinking in schools and universities because it is systematic and well understood by thinkers.

The process operates in this way. The researcher sees an event and attempts to explain it. After thought, the researcher makes a possible explanation; this is formulated as a hypothesis. The researcher creates an experiment or study to test the hypothesis. The results are analysed and a conclusion is drawn. The hypothesis is either accepted or rejected. The researcher is expected to draw conclusions about the quality of the research method (evaluation). A report is written and published. Other researchers now repeat the experiment to see if they get similar results and they also evaluate the research. Although



# Understanding culture (Research skills)

all disciplines in schools and colleges follow the same basic principles, they adapt them slightly to suit the needs of their field of study.

There is a long standing debate in sociology as to the extent to which sociology can claim to be a science. Arguments supporting the view that sociology should be a science focus on the following three points: sociologists should only study what they can see and observe, the purpose of sociology is to discover why things happen and investigate social facts that can be discovered and explained. Sociology should be objective and value free

Critics of the view that sociology can be a science point out that the social world is not scientific itself. It has to be interpreted if we are to understand what is happening. Sociology must be subjective because people themselves are part of the society that they study and they bring their own ideas to what they see. Their viewpoints will affect what they discover. Some sociologists take this argument a step further and say that sociology should be emotional and it should challenge things that are wrong with the social world.

## Questions

- What is the name for the type of thinking that is associated with academic research?
- Can sociology be studied scientifically?

## Keywords

1. Objective - unemotional, the attempt to be scientific and unbiased in study.
2. Subjective - to be emotional and biased.
3. Value-free - without personal bias or opinion.
4. Sociological perspective - an objective and value free way of looking at society.
5. Systematic - having a method that can be understood by others.
6. Western hypothetico-deductive reasoning - a way of looking at and studying the world systematically.

## Why do we need interactional research?

### Bullets

- People interpret the world according to their own understandings.
- In order to understand their actions, it is important to understand how they interpret the world.
- Interpretivists try to understand how people create a view of the world.
- Interpretivists use observations and personal records as well as unstructured interviews.
- Action sociologists allow their respondents to become part of the study process.

### Text

Despite the obvious strengths of the positivist approach to sociology, it is clear that human beings are not the same as objects. Humans think about their world. This is known as reflexivity or reflection. Humans think and have emotions as well. It is clear that many human actions are prompted by ideas or feelings; things that make no sense to others will make perfect sense to the person who actually does them. Think of the activities of suicide bombers from the point of view of the bomber. To the bomber, the action is rational and

# Understanding culture (Research skills)

has purpose; others however, will not see it in the same way. There are people who will go to any lengths because of their ideas. This suggests that people's personal beliefs about society may be more important in determining their actions than positivists allow for.

In order to understand how people behave, it is important to understand how they think, what they feel and what they understand about the world. This approach to research arose from the work of two important theorists, Max Weber (1864 - 1920) and George Mead (1863 - 1931). Both of these influential thinkers viewed society as being a social construction. This means that there is no such as society, rather, people interact with one another and they create a set of understandings about the world. They then live as though their personal world were reality for everyone. Sociologists who take this approach to sociology collect data that helps them to understand how people create a view of the world. They want to understand how people interpret events and what things influence what they see.

Sociologists who take this view of sociology are known as interpretivists or Interactionists because they try to interpret the world or attempt to understand how people interact with each other. This approach to research is often known as ethnomethodology. The term was made popular by Harold Garfinkel and it describes the attempt to understand the reasons that lie behind people's behaviour and actions. Ethnomethodology is the attempt to see how people make sense of their experiences. Another term for this approach to sociology is anti-positivism.

The most common methods used by Interactionists include observations. Observations can fall into a number of different categories. Observers can take part in what is happening or sit to one side. They may tell the people that they are observing that they are part of a research project or they may decide to keep this a secret. Other methods include unstructured or semi-structured interviews, content analysis of the meanings of images and writing (semiology), analysis of diaries, letters and biographies. Children's drawings and photographs have all been used. Some sociologists believe that the people who are to be studied can also be included in the research design and comment on the findings as they are written up. This approach is known as action research. Interpretivists create qualitative data. Their work is often evaluated as being very high in validity, but not always reliable.

## Questions

- Why do Interactionists reject positivism?
- What evidence do we have that beliefs and ideas influence how people behave?
- What type of research projects would be suitable for ethnomethodologists?

## Keywords

1. Interpretivists - try to understand how people understand the social world.
2. Interactionists - try to understand how people create shared understandings.
3. Ethnomethodology - the attempt to understand people's reasons for their actions.
4. Ethnographic research - research using ethnomethodology.
5. Observations - people watch how people act.
6. Reflexivity - the ability to think about one's actions.
7. Interviews - talking to people.
8. Semiology - the analysis of meanings.

# Understanding culture (Research skills)

## What is special about feminist research?

### Bullets

- There are a variety of forms of feminism.
- All forms of feminism reject patriarchy.
- Feminist research aims to place the voices of women at the heart of the research process.
- Feminist research should empower women and be political in the widest sense.
- Feminist research is collaborative with those who are being researched.
- Feminist methodologies tend to be personal and qualitative using participant observations, diaries, conversational analysis and unstructured interviewing.
- Feminist research does not attempt to be value-free.

### Text

Feminism in the 1970s set up challenges to all forms of masculine thinking. There were a number of strands within feminist thinking, so that it is difficult to talk just of feminism itself: radical feminists rejected masculinity by accusing all men of being potential rapists, liberal feminists asked for gradual change to society and Marxist feminists called for revolutionary change. By the 1990s there were newer forms of feminism such as black feminism which exposed the dual burden that women from ethnic minorities experienced as a result of patriarchy and of racial discrimination. Most forms of feminism share core beliefs about what makes feminist research.

Feminists believe research should empower women. This perception means that feminists attempt to make the voices of women heard. They research topics that have been overlooked by male scientists and writers. Feminists investigate topics such as domestic labour (Anne Oakley, Hannah Gavron), the experience of motherhood (Anne Oakley), female friendships (Valerie Hey) women as the victims of crime (Elizabeth Stanko) and the different generational experiences of women (Jane Pilcher). Important work has been done on male violence against women: abuse, harassment and control that takes place in the home and in wider society. Thus feminism affected the choice of topics for research.

In addition, feminists tend to believe that the research process itself and positivism in particular reflect a masculine form of thought. The research process makes the researcher powerful, especially in social sciences where the male point of view becomes dominant. The experiences of the respondent can be overlooked or ignored by the researcher who can place his own interpretations on the responses of the researched. Early feminists felt that the research process itself should empower women by helping them to understand their position and reveal the sexism of the society in which they operate. This led to a form of extremely emotional research that used qualitative methodologies and treated the respondent as an equal in the research process. Indeed, many feminist researchers incorporate their own experiences and life-histories into their accounts of the research.

### Questions

- Why do sociologists talk of feminisms?
- What two viewpoints underlie all feminist thinking?
- What methods are used by feminist researchers?

# Understanding culture (Research skills)

## Keywords

1. Feminism - variety of perspectives that see the world as patriarchal.
2. Radical feminism - extreme form of feminism.
3. Empower - give power to.
4. Positivism - scientific view of sociology.
5. Respondent - person who answers questions.

## How have post modernism and realism affected research?

### Bullets

- Positivism cannot work because we cannot study society scientifically.
- Interactionism does not work because it ignores the impact of social structure.
- Realism suggests that researchers should acknowledge both structure and meaning when doing research.
- Post-modernists say that as there is no 'truth', just a number of narratives by which we live our lives, then interpretation and deep analysis is an effective way of studying society.

### Text

Positivism has failed sociology in many ways, not least because any attempt at truly scientific sociological research is doomed to failure at the start. Interactionism fails researchers because it deals with the small scale and personal. This is not to say that either approach is valueless, more to suggest that no one method is superior to the other. They are different. It is from the tension between the two arguments that new perspectives have developed in sociology and these ideas influence how researchers set about understanding the social world.

One response to the problems with positivism has been the development of realism. This approach suggests that there are social structures that do exist and which influence people. However, people also have agency. This is a technical term. It means that people can think for themselves and do not just respond to others or think what they are told. If one accepts that both statements are true, then the job of the sociologist is to look at how people behave within the social structures in which they live. Both positivist and interactionist methods should be used together to offer a sense of balance. Statistical data is gathered to underline the effect of social relationships, not because that is the purpose of sociology. Much recent research follows this view which combines the validity and insights of interactionist research with the reliability of positivist research. A researcher using this approach would gather data about how much bullying took place in a school in order to then make an in depth study as to why bullying took place.

A relatively recent and very influential new idea in sociology is post modernism. This view rejects positivism because it claims that there cannot be one actual scientific truth. Most of the things that we 'know' change over time. For example, notions of masculinity and masculine behaviour are very different now from what they were in the 1950s. Consider the differences between the ways that older and younger men behave towards women, or what they would consider to be acceptable clothing styles. This difference is an example of an over-reaching social view is known as a 'narrative of male gender' or a 'discourse of male gender'. The terms narrative and discourse are used to describe a form of social 'truth' that changes over time. Post modernists argue therefore that as there is no such

# Understanding culture (Research skills)

thing as 'truth' so there is no purpose in looking for it. They often use highly interpretive accounts where they analyse events and deconstruct social phenomena by looking at them in a very intensive way to discover meaning.

## Questions

- What is the main problem with positivism?
- What is the main problem with interpretivism?
- What do realists say about research?
- What is a narrative?
- What impact does theory have on research style?

## Keywords

1. Epistemology - the study of how we know things
2. Ontology - the study of what we know, facts.
3. Agency - the ability to act and think for oneself.
4. Realism - a view that combines positivism and Interactionism.
5. Post modernism - a total rejection of positivism that suggests there is no such thing as a social truth, merely a set of discourses or narratives.
6. Discourse - an ongoing debate about some social phenomena.
7. Narrative - a story.
8. Deconstruction - looking at something such as an image to see what ideas lay behind its creation.

## What is the process of research design?

### How do researchers set about designing an actual study?

#### Bullets

- Before starting to research, a process of research design must be undertaken.
- It is essential to design research carefully if it is to be valid or reliable.
- The process of research design often begins with operationalisation.
- Operationalisation is the process of defining a study term in such a way that it can be studied or measured.
- The definition of a phenomenon that is used can affect the outcome of the study.

#### Text

If a piece of research or a study is to have any value, or is to be regarded as reliable or valid, then the process of design must be very detailed. It is this that separates the work of professional trained sociologists from people who simply use the methods. The underlying perspective of the sociologists will affect both the types of questions that will be asked in the study, as well as the topic itself. For example, feminists will often choose a topic related to femininity and think in terms of qualitative methods, whereas a positivist will be looking for behaviour patterns and thinking in terms of creating measurable statistics. However, there are a number of other processes that must be thought about before a precise method is chosen.

One of the first elements of research design is to operationalise the terms of the study. This is an essential process. Even a short understanding of sociology will bring the



# Understanding culture (Research skills)

understanding that terms may not be understood in the same way by everyone. Think of the possible meanings of the word 'tea'; depending on where you are it is a drink or a meal. 'Do you want a cup of tea?' may be an invitation for a drink, or to friendship. It can even be used as an expression of sympathy when something bad has happened. Given that tea has so many meanings, consider the topics that sociologists study. How many possible ways are there of defining poverty? The process of operationalisation is the process of defining a term in such a way that it can be measured. It is essential to any research study.

When studying poverty, there are a number of different definitions that are currently in use, and depending on the definition used, fewer or more people are considered poor. The government defines it as being less than half the national average income; this is an income of about £7,000 and people who have an income of £8,000 are not poor. Peter Townsend invented a relative definition for poverty in his famous work on poverty. He defined it in terms of what other people consider as being normal to have, so people whose incomes are so low that they cannot afford what other people see as normal are in poverty. Clearly, Peter Townsend and others who use his definition find that far more people are poor than the government does.

## Questions

- What is the process of designing a study important in sociology?
- Why is it important to define study terms before ever a study begins?
- How did Townsend operationalise the term poverty?
- How did the way that Townsend defined poverty affect the results of his research?
- How would you set about defining ethnicity in such a way that it can be measured?

## Keywords

1. Operationalisation - the process of defining a study term in such a way that it can be studied or measured.
2. Qualitative - to do with emotions and feelings.
3. Quantitative - to do with numbers.
4. Positivist - scientific approach to sociology.
5. Feminist - the belief that women are oppressed by patriarchy.
6. Patriarchy - domination by men and male modes of thinking.

## Why is secondary data important in sociology?

### Bullets

- Secondary sources are printed materials produced by other researchers and writers
- They are important to sociologists because they provide a context for research.
- Many researchers repeat previous studies.
- Once secondary research has been carried out; then the researcher can write a set of simple and achievable aims for the research. This gives the research a clear focus.

### Text

# Understanding culture (Research skills)

Before beginning research it is important to start with a literature review. This has a number of supporting reasons and it is so important that all of the books that were consulted must be listed in a bibliography at the end of the research report. One of the most important reasons for the literature review is to that the researcher is aware of previous findings on the same topic and is aware of current debates. Relevant statistics are needed and these can be found in secondary sources. Any of the reports that are downloadable from the Joseph Rowntree Foundation website will have an introduction section that explains the debate in the context of previous research. If the researcher is a positivist, the issue of previous research is often even more important because the purpose of the new research may be to either support or reject the previous research.

Many positivists will repeat previous research so that they can identify changes that have taken place in society. In the 1960s, famous a famous research project was carried out on the South Wales town of Swansea by Rosser and Harris. This study was itself a replication of a previous study by Young and Willmott on Bethnal Green in London. Clearly, the findings of the 1960s study are out of date and not applicable to society in the 2000s. Changes in work patterns and family structure have made the Rosser and Harris study a historical document, a snapshot in time, rather than an accurate description of family life in Swansea today. Nicola Charles has repeated the original Rosser and Harris study recently, though with some modifications including introducing ethnographic methods, and the report can be seen on the website of the ESRC. She has made a number of significant findings that describe the impact of social change on family life.

Another reason for conducting a literature review is so that the researcher can refine the terms of the research and decide on a specific set of aims. Most research is limited to three or four aims and these are usually clearly identified in the research report. ESRC reports often provide Plain English summaries and these simple summaries provide a simple description of the context of the research, the aims, methods and the findings. It is a useful exercise to look at the Plain English summaries and identify the aims of the reports.

It is useful to note that some post modernists and feminists do not set out with a highly refined set of aims because they feel that this may act as a constraint on the findings. They develop precise aims as the research progresses. Simon Charlesworth (2000) used this approach in his study of working class life in Rotherham but he also used unstructured interviews and conversational analysis because he wanted to open a dialogue with his respondents as the research developed. Nevertheless, this research project was based on the writings of Pierre Bourdieu and was certainly influenced by previous reading and literature. One of the most interesting types of secondary data used by a sociologist was that investigated by Valerie Hey (1997). She wanted to study the nature and formation of girls' friendship groups and used secondary data in the form of the letters and notes that they passed to each other in the classroom.

## Questions

- What is a literature review?
- Why is a literature review important?
- Why is Rosser and Harris's work on Swansea now no longer useful for understanding modern society?
- Is it essential to have a clear set of aims for a study?

# Understanding culture (Research skills)

## Keywords

1. Literature review - looking at what others have written before on the same topic.
2. Ethnomethodology - the attempt to understand people's reasons for their actions.
3. Ethnographic research - research using ethnomethodology.

## How do sociologists choose a method?

### Bullets

- Positivist sociologists will use methods that create numerical data.
- Interpretivist sociologists will aim to identify meaning and create understanding.
- Realist sociologists combine methods in methodological plurality.
- A famous example of methodological plurality is Barker's Making of a Moonie.

### Text

Clearly, the next important decision that needs to be made regards the nature of the data. This relates to the purpose of the research. Having refined an approach, there are a variety of methods that can be used and each has a whole set of theoretical debates attached to it identifying strengths and weaknesses and discussing practical and ethical issues associated with it. It is not enough to write a list of questions and go out and ask them to people for all kinds of reasons, not the least because question design can affect the outcome of the research.

Quantitative data will be collected by positivists and Interactionists will seek qualitative data. Positivists will tend to use large scale surveys, questionnaires with closed questions, structured interviews and experiments. Closed questions are ones where answers are provided and respondents choose the answer that best fits their opinion. Closed questions sometimes use a Likert scale. This is one where a respondent can choose a level of response e.g. Agree a lot, Agree, don't know, disagree, disagree a lot. Each possible answer will then have a numerical score that can easily be translated into statistical data. Interpretivists will use open questionnaires, interviews, observations, focus groups

Some sociologists will use multiple methods to balance one set of findings against another, this is known as triangulation. Realists use multiple methods for theoretical reasons. They will aim to combine methods or create research projects with a variety of levels in order to gain the benefit of having research that is high on reliability but also valid in terms of understanding and meaning as well. The combination of methods is known as methodological plurality. This is a very common feature of recent sociological research.

One of the most notable examples of methodological plurality is Eileen Barker's Making of a Moonie (1984). This was research into a religious cult that was the subject of some concern in the 1980s. The beliefs are different but Moonies were rejected by most people in the same way in the 1970s and 1980s that scientology is treated by some people with open suspicion in the 2000s. Initially Barker was very open with the Moonies about her research and observed them, participating in their activities. Later, having gained their trust she was able to conduct interviews and carry out questionnaires. This study has become a classic for many reasons, but the quality of the research methodology is certainly one of the most important.

# Understanding culture (Research skills)

## Questions

- Why do positivists prefer closed questions?
- Why do interpretivists prefer open questions?
- What is a Likert Scale?
- What is the advantage of methodological plurality?

## Keywords

1. Interpretivists - try to understand how people understand the social world.
2. Interactionists - try to understand how people create shared understandings.
3. Ethnomethodology - the attempt to understand people's reasons for their actions.
4. Observations - people watch how people act.
5. Questionnaires - a list of questions on a piece of paper.
6. Open questions - respondents can write down detailed answers.
7. Interviews - talking to people.
8. Respondent - someone who answers questions for a sociologist.
9. Likert Scale - a way of measuring the strength of feeling behind a response.

## How do sociologists choose who to study?

### Bullets

- Sociologists need to define their population.
- Sociologists may then need to access a population.
- Positivists often have fewer problems accessing a population.
- They will then use systematic sampling techniques to choose a sample.
- Ethnographers may require a gatekeeper to help them access a population.

### Text

Having clarified a topic, it is important to define who will be the subject of study. Sometimes this requires the sociologist to be as precise as with the meaning of the terms of the study. For example, 'young people' might be aged 15 - 18 or 21 - 30. Obviously, the sociologists would need to be precise because the characteristics of older teenagers are going to be different from early stage adults. The group of people that the sociologist looks at is known as the population. It is a general term describing the characteristics of the whole group of people from whom a few will be chosen to study in depth.

Sometimes the sociologist may need help to actually get in touch with the people he wants to study. This is known as accessing a population. In most cases accessing a population requires a little imagination. For positivists this usually involves writing letters or telephoning people asking if they wish to be involved, or perhaps sending out large numbers of questionnaires with self-addressed envelopes. Sometimes people may be offered inducements to respond. Shopping vouchers or a prize draw are frequently offered by commercial companies who seek responses. Increasingly, people are posting questionnaires on the Internet for people to respond to, but this raises issues of reliability, because there is no way that the researcher can check the truthfulness of the responses offered. Having chosen a population, then individuals within that population are selected to act as representatives of the whole population. This process of selecting individuals is known as sampling. It is considered to be very important for quantitative data that the sample is representative of the whole community as otherwise the results will be biased in

# Understanding culture (Research skills)

some way.

Convenience or snowball samples are used when information about the population is poor, or it is difficult to access the population. These samples, by their very nature are not representative and tend to be typical of Interactional research. Respondents are asked to find people who fit certain specific characteristics for the researcher to ask questions. There are also some mathematical ways of choosing a sample. Random sampling consists of a lottery system where people's names are put in a hat and they are then surveyed. Systematic sampling consists of picking names from a list using a system of some kind (every tenth name) Stratified sampling consists of picking groups and then choosing names from within them. Quota sampling is when people are picked because they fit certain characteristics.

On the other hand, Interpretivists and ethnographers need to get very close to their populations and often have serious difficulties accessing people. Much ethnography is conducted in schools, often by people employed as teachers or on communities by people who are part of that community. Ethnographer Shane Blackman (1997) worked as a helper in a homeless unit in Brighton where he was able to talk to homeless, unemployed young people. He viewed his role as being an 'action' researcher so he also wanted to make things happen and interact with his subjects. He therefore gained trust by drinking with his study group, playing football and acting as a friend and advisor. More recently, Sudhir Venkatesh (2008) published a study where he describes his experiences in a Chicago gang, a project that his advisors warned him against for fear of his safety.

Samples therefore may be fluid or limited to a few individuals. Often ethnographers use a significant person in the community to act as gatekeeper. The gatekeeper already has access to the group and acts as an intermediary between the study group and the researcher, explaining things and smoothing the progress of the research itself. Alexander (2000), for example used a youth worker known as Yasmin to access her Asian Gangs. Yasmin became a friend and she and Alexander holidayed together in India. Yasmin educated Alexander into Asian culture.

## Questions

- What is a population?
- Why is it important to positivists that samples are representative?
- Why is ethnographic research less often representative?
- What is the role of a gatekeeper in ethnographic research?

## Keywords

- 1.
2. Population - the people the sociologist is interested in studying.
3. Access - making contact with a population.
4. Respondent - person who answers questions.
5. Gatekeeper - helps an ethnographer make contact with a population.
6. Sample - small group that is representative of the whole study population.

## How do sociologists test the quality of their study design?



# Understanding culture (Research skills)

## Bullets

- Sociologists will often create a small scale project before they finalise their research design and carry it out. This is known as a pilot study.
- Much research design must be passed by an ethics committee before it can be conducted in the field.
- Sociologists can now progress to actually conducting the study. They still need to check their methods as they carry out the research.
- When sociologists have conducted the research, they will write a research report.
- This research report will be published in a book, online or in a journal.
- People will read the report and comment on the strengths and weaknesses. This is known as criticism.
- The findings of the research may be published in newspapers and magazines.

## Text

Once the study has begun to take shape, the researcher will still need to try out a small scale version of the larger project simply to ensure that what is attempted will actually work in the field. This is more often used in positivist research than Interactionist research. The researcher tries out the questions on a trial sample to ensure that they actually produce the data that is sought. This trial run of the full scale study is known as a pilot study or a feasibility study. The Census of 2001 was first trialled and tested in 1997 on a sample of 100,000 households to check the reactions of the public to the research as well as the usefulness of the questionnaire itself.

In addition, many universities and academic study organisations will require the sociologist to obtain ethics approval to ensure that the work cannot harm anyone. Many early studies into sociology and psychology remain controversial to this day because of the potential that there was for harming either the subjects of the study or for harm possibly coming to the sociologists. It is only at this point in the research process that the actual methods will be applied to people in the field. As the research is carried out, the researcher will make notes not just on what is there to be discovered, but how the research process itself impacts on the final results. Sociologists sometimes have to re-evaluate their designs and start again for reasons that are beyond their control at this stage. For example, in Hey's study of girl's friendships, younger girls refused to participate, so Hey was forced to study a peer group that was older than those she originally intended to research.

The data that is produced in a research will be subjected to analysis and this analysis becomes an important part of the final written report. The process of processing data is known as collation. The results of primary research are known as raw data because they have not been processed. Positivist research can now be processed through sophisticated statistical analysis programmes that can be run through computers. Interactional research can also be processed through computer programmes, but often it is subject to analysis by the researcher or research team who look for themes in the material that is collected.

The written report is an important part of the evaluation process because it is here that the research goes into the public domain for others to see and to criticise. Note that criticism in academic terms can be positive as well as negative; though in daily language people assume criticism is bad. It is at this point that research becomes part of public debate. Organisations such as the JRF or the Child Poverty Action Group will put out press releases of their studies for journalists to write stories about.

# Understanding culture (Research skills)

## Questions

- What is a pilot study?
- Why do sociologists carry out pilot studies?
- What is an ethics committee?
- What problems can there be for sociologists who are collating data?

## Keywords

1. Criticism - commenting on the strengths and weaknesses of something.
2. Public domain - anyone can see the report.
3. Pilot study - a small scale test of a research design.
4. Feasibility study - a small scale test of a research design.
5. Ethics approval - permission to conduct research because it will not harm anyone, or because the benefits of the research outweigh the possible damage it could do.
6. Collation - processing raw data for patterns and trends.
7. Raw data - unprocessed data.
8. Feasible - something that is realistically and practically doable.
9. Pilot - something that points the way, or goes before something larger.

## Why are ethics so important to sociological research?

### What are ethics?

#### Bullets

- In the past, scientists experimented on humans. The results were generally unacceptable.
- Increasingly, people have been more aware of ethical considerations.
- Sociologists have codes of ethics that are intended to protect the subjects of research as well as the sociologists conducting the research.

#### Text

In the early days of the development of science, there was a feeling in many subjects that 'the end justifies the means'. The thinking was that if human knowledge was advanced, then it did not really matter if people were hurt or damaged in the process. This led to a number of cases where abusive behaviour was justified because of science. It happened in the concentration camps of Germany, where many doctors carried out inhumane experiments on Jewish people with the justification that it advanced human knowledge. Controversially, some of the knowledge obtained was useful; but there were debates as to whether people should use it given the way in which it was obtained. There have been a number of famous scandals in science: from the testing of the effects of radiation from atom bombs on unprotected British servicemen in the 1950s to the Tuskegee experiments in America where African-American men were allowed to develop syphilis unchecked, even when there was perfectly acceptable treatment.

One of the saddest stories concerning the misuse of science to understand social effects was that of David Reimer, who is well-discussed in the literature. David was one of a pair of twin boys. His penis was damaged as a result of a botched operation as a child. His

# Understanding culture (Research skills)

parents were persuaded to allow doctors to remove his genitalia and they then brought David up as a little girl, whom they named Brenda. David was never happy as Brenda, reverted to masculine status as an adult, but eventually killed himself in 2004, having described his entire past as a 'form of torture' from which he could not recover. The justification for the experiment that David was made subject to was that it would prove once and for all, an answer to the nature/nurture debate. In the event, it proved nothing, but it killed David. Look up the story of David on the Internet

Clearly, the cases described are extreme, but the issues are clear. Actions have consequences, and if sociologists act as though they are unaware of this, they are capable of doing serious damage to the people that they study. As a result of these and many similar cases, most sociological associations have drawn up detailed codes of ethics which are effectively sets of rules for studies that all researchers should abide by. Codes of ethics are not always simple and easy to apply in all situations. As a general rule for student research, if there is significant doubt, then it is better not to do the study.

## Questions

- How did some scientists justify their abusive behaviour?
- What ethical issues are raised by the case of David Reimer?
- Can the advancement of science be used to justify cruel or unusual treatment of others?

## Keywords

1. Ethics - the study of moral behaviour.
2. Abuse - behaviour that controls or intimidates another person.
3. Codes of Ethics - rules for acceptable professional behaviour.

## Which sociological methods are likely to raise serious ethical issues?

### Bullets

- Sociology deals with socially and emotionally dangerous topics.
- Some forms of study may be more intrusive than others.
- Ethnomethodological studies require that the researcher conceals the purpose of the study from those who are studied.
- Deceit may sometimes be justified by the value of the findings.
- The researcher should be aware of the impact of the deceit on the person studied.

### Text

Not all sociological methods are equally ethically risky, but all sociology contains some risk simply because of the nature of the subject matter under study. Asking simple questions but personal questions about a person's relationships with others raises all kinds of dangers that might not be predicted by the researcher; unresolved issues, bereavements, family abuse or just intrusion into matters too personal to be shared.

One of the most important ethical issues is that of deceit. The question is whether it is correct or not to reveal to the people who are the subject of a study that they are the

# Understanding culture (Research skills)

subject of a study. If people respond to quantitative methods, they are fully aware that they are the subject of a study and can choose not to answer questions or participate in the full knowledge of what it is they are doing. This is known as the rule of informed consent. Respondents have the right to know what it is they are undertaking and have the right to withdraw information from a study if they so choose. This is not always possible with qualitative sociology. People may not act naturally if they know that they are being observed; but it is the aim of the sociologist to see how people behave in normal circumstances. Qualitative methods may therefore sometimes involve some element of deceit. People may not be aware that they are the subjects of study and would not want their personal behaviour or beliefs reported to others.

Deceit therefore is a problem for anyone using ethnomethodology. If researchers reveal the fact they are observing, people will withhold permission or act unnaturally. This is significant if the study involves looking at risk behaviours such as drug taking, criminality, or sexual deviation. One of the most famously deceitful studies was that conducted by Laud Humphries (1970) into the behaviour of men seeking brief homosexual encounters in public toilets. This study is well described on the Internet. Homosexuality was illegal in St Louis at the time of the study, and men would not have allowed a researcher access to their behaviour. To gain his information, Humphries consistently lied to his study group about his purpose and his identity. There are very many ethical issues with this study and it remains a classic in terms of the controversy that has been generated.

A famous journalistic study was Mark Daly's (2003) television programme, *The Secret Policeman*. Daly joined the police and secretly filmed evidence of racist behaviour among his fellow recruits, some of whom he befriended. These recruits lost their jobs in the police when the television programme was aired. Daly misled the men as to his politics and his feelings.

## Questions

- Why is all sociology potentially ethically risky?
- Which sociological methods are most ethically risky?
- What is the difference between sociology and journalism?
- List the ethical problems associated with observations.

## Keywords

1. Deceit - deliberately misleading people.
2. Ethnomethodology - the attempt to understand people's reasons for their actions.
3. Ethnographic research - research using ethnomethodology.
4. Observation - a method that involves watching people in their normal environment to see how they act.
5. Journalism - writing or reporting that is intended to entertain or stimulate the reader or watcher.

## Why is confidentiality important?

### Bullets

- Sociological research may intrude into people's personal lives.

# Understanding culture (Research skills)

- All sociologists protect the names and personal details of the people with whom they work.
- People who feel protected by the rules of confidentiality can reveal useful information.
- By observing the rule of confidentiality, sociologists may find themselves guilty of other ethical breaches.
- Even if identities are hidden, sociologists should still take care to protect people.

## Text

Confidentiality means that the sociologist must protect the identity of the respondents to a study. All sociologists insist on the anonymity of respondents. Sociological research can intrude into people's lives and be very personal. The most extreme examples are usually found in feminist research. Feminists, for example, research topics such as sexual harassment and the legal issues surrounding rape. One particularly provocative study was carried out by Liz Kelly, a feminist researcher (1996) who conducted very personal research into lesbian violence against other women. However, even less intrusive study is anonymous because people may not tell researchers anything that is private if there is a risk that it might be made public or traced back to them.

Dick Hobbs (1995) published research into professional crime. He interviewed criminals who were allowed considerable freedom to talk for themselves. They confessed to violence, drug dealing, safe-cracking, and importation of pornography, burglary and a variety of con-tricks and scams. Clearly, if the criminals had felt at risk of arrest or the passing on of information, they would not have discussed their behaviour, their motives or criminal cultures with Hobbs. Hobbs was able to draw useful conclusions because he promised the respondents that their responses were confidential. However; note that the duty of confidentiality that Hobbs observed put this study into another ethically risky area. If a person is aware that a crime has been committed and does not inform the police, then that person becomes guilty of 'being a party to the crime'.

Sociologists may make judgements of people or report their behaviour in a way that is not always flattering. Observations in particular involve some degree of interpretation of events and reporting by the researcher. Tony Sewell, (1997) observed teachers in schools in London and reported that most of them were racist, including Black and Asian teachers. Heidi Safia Mirza (1992), in her study of a school that she worked at, and which she called St Hilda's, makes personal remarks about 'Mr Madden' the Headteacher. This name is a pseudonym or false name, but it tells us about her feelings towards this Headteacher. It would possibly take very little research by someone so inclined to discover the identities of these people.

The names of these teachers are not actually revealed in the studies, but they and others would certainly be able to recognise themselves. The issue here for the respondents is that they are not able to answer the accusations. This adds another dimension to the debate. The rule of confidentiality has implications for the reliability of research. There may be no-one who can support the sociologists' interpretations or accounts of what was observed. This shows how important it is that sociologists are seen to be professional, trustworthy and reliable witnesses to events.

## Questions



# Understanding culture (Research skills)

- Why do sociologists insist on the anonymity of respondents?
- Why was the rule of confidentiality important to Hobbs?
- What are the disadvantages of respondent confidentiality for sociologists?

## Keywords

1. Confidentiality - sociologists do not reveal the names or personal details of individuals.
2. Anonymous - a person's name and identity are hidden.
3. Pseudonym - a false name or alias.
4. Reliability - the trustworthiness and repeatability of a piece of research.
5. Validity - the measure of whether the findings of a piece of research can be supported by the evidence provided by that research.

## Can sociologists put themselves at risk with research?

### Bullets

- Sociologists need to be aware of the emotional consequences to themselves of some types of research.
- Sociologists may need to be aware if they are putting themselves at physical risk of harm from other people or from the situations that they are in.
- Some sociologists have been murdered for the work that they are doing.

### Text

Clearly, there are two kinds of risk that sociologists may be in danger of experiencing. The first of these is emotional risk. Eileen Barker was well aware, in her study of the Moonies of the risk of becoming over-involved in her study and perhaps being converted to the religion which she was studying. Sociologists studying sensitive or emotional topics may find themselves over-identifying with their subjects and perhaps experiencing emotional upset. This was analysed by Dickson-Swift et al (2008) in an Australian study of health care researchers, and the authors of the study recommended that researchers identify emotional risk factors to themselves when undertaking a study. Again this is an ethical issue that is more relevant to qualitative research than to empirical research, as ethnomethodologists are more likely to be working in a small scale setting and in closer with respondents than empirical researchers are.

Much early ethnomethodological research focused on street gangs and criminal sub-cultures. Whyte (1955) studied an American gang and Becker (1966, 1970) studied Californian drug takers and delinquents. These writers exposed themselves to danger from their study groups. One of the most famous such studies in Britain was James Patrick's (1973) study of Glasgow street gangs which was published anonymously to protect the author from risk. There have been cases where sociologists have been invited to participate in crime. This leads to an ethical dilemma. If they participate in the crime, they risk being caught and punished. If they refuse to participate, it will spoil the study or even risk them being exposed for what they are. This was a problem for Patrick who became involved in the theft of a car.

More recently, Hobbs studied professional criminals, some of whom had been involved in murders and other acts of random violence. Some sociologists have even been murdered while carrying out sensitive research. Myrna Mack Chang was brutally killed, possibly by

# Understanding culture (Research skills)

the Guatemalan military when studying refugees in that country. The political sensitivity of her research was obviously seen as a danger to the authorities who sanctioned the killing.

## Questions

- What types of harm can come to a sociologist?
- Is any research worth the risk of physical danger?
- What research would be worth the risk of serious physical danger?

## Keywords

1. Risk - placing oneself in a situation where there is a danger of harm either emotionally or physically.

## What is fully informed consent?

### Bullets

- People should give fully informed consent to participating in research.
- Some people are vulnerable and cannot offer informed consent.
- The sociologist should seek informed consent from another responsible person.
- In covert or undercover research, then consent should be sought after the research has concluded.

### Text

Some participants in research can be very disturbed by the process, particularly if they are given false hope that their lives may change, or if they are made anxious in some way. One of the issues, for example, with Milgram's famous electric shock experiments into the authoritarian personality was that participants discovered something about themselves that they did not choose to know. In theory, any person who is likely to become part of a social survey or a research project should give fully informed consent. The researcher should explain the purpose of the study, where it will be used and what methods will be used in gathering data. Participants can choose whether they wish to go ahead with the study.

Not everyone is equally able to make such a decision on their own behalf. Some people may not appreciate what they are agreeing to by virtue of mental disability, age (the young and the old), mental health issues or even disability of other kinds. Does this then mean that they are not to be studied by sociologists or to have their voices heard? In such situations, researchers are expected to use professional skills and to obtain not only the consent of the participant to a proposal couched in simple terms, but also from a carer or parent. Researchers studying children under the age of 16 should also be aware of child protection issues and allow for the possible disclosure of abuse. Researchers need to be very careful with children who can sometimes form emotional bonds with adults as well.

The issue of informed consent therefore presents researchers who work on covert (hidden or undercover) studies with very particular problems. Recent ethical guidelines suggest that the researchers should offer participants the opportunity of a debriefing session and the opportunity to withdraw consent after the research has been concluded.

# Understanding culture (Research skills)

## Questions

- What is fully informed consent?
- Is it possible to have fully informed consent?
- If there are particular ethical risks attached to studying vulnerable people, does this mean that they should not be studied?

## Keywords

1. Participant - someone who takes part in a research project.
2. Fully informed consent - participants in research should understand what it is that they agree to when they say they will participate in research projects.
3. Vulnerable people - those who are more at risk of harm than others.
4. Covert research - hidden or undercover research.

## What sampling techniques do sociologists use?

### Why is representativeness important to sociology?

#### Bullets

- It is not practical to study everyone who fall into a category that a sociologist wants to study.
- Sociologists study small groups of people that represent larger groups of people.
- Empirical sociologists emphasise the importance of making sure that the small group is like the larger group from which it is drawn. This is known as representativeness.
- If it is possible to draw conclusions from the smaller group that apply to the large group, this is generalisation.
- The sample frame is the actual group of people from whom the study group is drawn.

#### Text

When studying a topic such as poverty, the numbers of people that could be involved are enormous. In 2006, there were 13,000,000 people who lived in households below 60% of the national average income. It is not practical for a sociologist to try to survey this number of people. The costs in both time and money make it an unrealistic project. Nevertheless, poverty is an enormously important topic and a large number of people are interested in studying its effects on things like health, life expectancy, education, housing and crime rates.

Sociologists therefore will use one of a number of accepted methods to decide who they will ask to participate in a study. They will choose a small number of people to represent everyone in the population who fits into the category area that they are interested in studying. It isn't necessary to eat the whole meal to know what it tastes like, when just tasting a mouthful will do. So a sociologist does not need to ask everyone who fits into a certain category about their experiences to get an idea of what many people in that group will feel like. This process of choosing a smaller group to talk to is known as sampling. However, note that if this smaller group is not like all people who might fit into the category that is being studied, then the results of the study are going to be unrepresentative.

# Understanding culture (Research skills)

Sampling correctly is particularly important to empirical sociologists for reasons to do with the way that humans tend to think. If we see a number of people who fit a certain category do something, we tend to assume that everyone in that category is the same; this is the origin of stereotyping. A simple study of sociology should be enough to show that making assumptions is generally misleading. By applying careful and systematic sampling procedures empirical sociologists attempt to eliminate errors in the data collection process. A good representative sample is one that can be used to generalise back to the whole population.

The population is the group that is to be studied. This could be a large group such as lone mothers, working class people or members of an ethnic minority. It could be a smaller group such as homeless people within Cardiff. The sample frame is the people within the population from which the researcher will draw a sample. The classic error in sampling processes and sample frames was the 1936 Literary Digest Poll. The election for the American President was between Alf Landon and Franklin D Roosevelt. The Literary Digest poll predicted a land-slide for Landon. However, their sample consisted of people with cars, telephones, and money to buy magazines. 1936 was the year of the Great Depression and there was terrible poverty throughout the USA. Poor people came out to vote for Roosevelt. The sample had only consisted of the wealthy and was therefore biased and unrepresentative.

## Questions

- Why do sociologists use samples?
- Can a sample be fully representative of a population?

## Keywords

1. Empirical sociology - the study of what can be observed and measured.
2. Representativeness - a small group has the same characteristics as a larger group.
3. Generalisation - the conclusions that can be drawn about a small group apply to the larger group.
4. Sample frame - the actual group from whom the participants in a study will be chosen
5. Population - all the people who might be considered to be part of the sample.
6. Access - being able to make contact with people and ask them to take part in a study.

## What is convenience sampling?

### Bullets

- Convenience samples tend to be used in Interactional research.
- There are a variety of forms of convenience sample.
- They are useful for accessing populations who do not normally participate in research.
- Although it can be difficult to generalise from a convenience sample, other conclusions may be valid and useful.

### Text

# Understanding culture (Research skills)

Those sociologists who do not feel that sociology can be a science are not under as much pressure to use representative sampling techniques. This does not mean to say that their samples are not generalisable, they often are. The lack of generalisability is an understood measure of the research so that it can be taken into account before conclusions are drawn. Such researchers will use what is known as a convenience sample.

There are a number of different convenience samples including snowball sampling, where each participant is asked to refer someone else to the researcher to answer the questions.

Increasingly, with the use of website surveys, people are using self-referring samples. These are people who volunteer to participate in a study. This is not a recent method; researchers have always advertised for people to participate in studies; it was how Milgram obtained his respondents for his study into the authoritarian personality. Opportunity sampling is when people happen to be in a certain situation and are available for research purposes. These methods are all used quite frequently; the researcher must not place too much emphasis on the reliability of such sampling methods.

Convenience samples tend to be used in situations where it is unclear who exactly makes up the population that is sought. Classic examples would be homosexuals when homosexual behaviour was against the law, drug takers, criminals and other groups who are difficult to access. However, not all convenience samples take this kind of form. A convenience sample could consist of stopping people in a supermarket on a Saturday or talking to people in a crowd at a football match. It might be that a researcher wants to find people who have particular characteristics such as New Age travellers or a heavy drink habit. In this case, a convenience sampling process would be the best and easiest way of finding people to participate. Examples of convenience samples include Lee Monaghan's study of bodybuilders and Skegg's white working class Lancashire women.

## Questions

- Describe three different types of convenience sample?
- When are convenience samples likely to be used?
- What perspective will sociologists who use convenience samples be working from?

## Keywords

1. Convenience sample - the researcher asks people who are available.
2. Snowball sample - the researcher asks key people to ask others to participate.
3. Self-referring samples - people volunteer themselves in response to an advert or request.
4. Opportunity sample - the researcher asks people who happen to be present when the research is being undertaken.
5. Ethnomethodology - the attempt to understand people's reasons for their actions.
6. Ethnographic research - research using ethnomethodology.

## What is random sampling?

### Bullets

- In random sampling, all members of the sample frame have an equal chance of being part of the study.



# Understanding culture (Research skills)

- Lists are often used as the basis of a random sample frame: electoral registers and class lists in schools are ideal sample frames.
- There are problems if the sample is too small; unintended patterns can emerge that affect the representativeness of the results.
- Systematic sampling consists of picking names according to a specific process such as every 10th name on a list. Unless the lists are themselves random, patterns can emerge in the data.
- Stratified sampling processes exist whereby people are sorted into categories and then their names are taken in a random fashion.

## Text

Random sampling is a scientific method of sampling. In a simple random sample, every member of the sample frame has an equal likelihood of being picked out. This is effectively a 'names in a hat' or a raffle type situation. When Rosser and Harris conducted their survey of families in Swansea in 1965, they used an electoral register as their sample frame. The electoral register is a list of everyone who is entitled to vote in a certain area (or constituency). Rosser and Harris took every fiftieth family and contacted them in the hope that they would participate in the study. They achieved a response rate of 87%. This opens the question of what the remaining 13% of families might have contributed to the findings and points to another methodological problem which is that of non-response. It is interesting to note that when Davies and Charles repeated the study in 2002, they achieved a response rate of 43%.

In practice random sampling is not often used as there are some problems that arise with it. It has the obvious advantage that it avoids obvious bias in terms of the selection of participants but the weakness is that unintended patterns may emerge in the data and if the sample frame is very small, then the chances of this happening are very high indeed. For example, taken overall, there is a gender split in society of nearly 50% male and 50% female births, but only a proportion of families have an equal split in the genders of their children. The small size of each individual family means that the distribution of genders in each family may throw up unintended patterns of gender distribution. The parents may have children of only one gender. A family is too small a unit to represent the whole of society.

Sometimes sociologists use what is known as systemic sampling. This consists of selecting every 10th name on a list. It is a variant form of random sampling. Even using a systematic random sample is not in itself enough to reduce the risk of patterns developing in the sample. For example, class lists in schools could pose problems as sample frames. Say the researcher chose the first name from each class list; this could pose a problem in that the lists could be arranged in order of ability. The most able child in each class would form the sample. Alphabetical lists create a similar difficulty in that many Asian heritage names begin with A and so Asian heritage children would be over-represented.

Sometimes sociologists use what is known as a stratified random or a stratified sample procedure. This consists of dividing up the sample frame into significant categories and then applying random sampling techniques. If the researcher needed to compare boys and girls, a pure random sample might not provide equal numbers of each gender. The researcher would then create two categories and then sample within each one.

## Questions

# Understanding culture (Research skills)

- What is a random sample?
- What are the advantages of a random sampling technique?
- What factors can affect the representativeness of a random sample?

## Keywords

1. Random sample - Where everyone in a 'sample frame' has an equal chance of being picked.
2. Bias- putting a slant on something so that it reflects prejudice or views.
3. Electoral roll - list of everyone who is entitled to vote in elections.
4. Non-response - people who choose not to participate in a study.
5. Systematic sampling - names are taken from a list.
6. Stratified sampling - the sample is divided up into significant categories and then samples are taken from each of these categories.

## Why use quota sampling?

### Bullets

- Quota sampling takes place when the researcher seeks people that fit a set of required characteristics.
- This is common in political surveys and in marketing.
- The advantage of the method is that it is targeted and cheap.
- The disadvantage is that bias can be introduced accidentally.
- Quota sampling is useful to avoid wasting time with samples that are too large and unspecific to serve the purpose of the study.

### Text

Sometimes it is necessary for the sociologists to look at people who fit into certain categories. An interviewer may need to go and find people who have certain characteristics. If researching health problems among elderly men, then there is no point attempting random samples. Researchers need to find a specific number of older men who are willing to participate in the study. Sara Arber (2002) selected participants in her study of older men from the lists of two general practices but also put out flyers and posters in places where her target population could be found. 30 married and cohabiting men over the age of 65 were found, as were 33 widowed, ten divorced and 12 never married older men.

The advantage of quota sampling is that it need not be complicated to organise; market research organisations for example use this method. They may knock on doors or approach people in the street. Clearly, this sampling method is not random. It can also be unrepresentative in that quota based street surveys will probably mean that the interviewers will only approach the kindly and pleasant looking people who fit their criteria. There is no way of testing the degree of bias that can be introduced into the research through interviewer selection.

Lack of representation is not necessarily a bad thing in a study. It very much depends of the context of the research. Famously, the Goldthorpe and Lockwood studies (1961-2) of Affluent Workers in Luton deliberately sought out well paid working class people to investigate social attitudes. The argument used was that there was no point studying all

# Understanding culture (Research skills)

working class groups if they were seeking evidence of attitude change. They should focus on those most likely to show the attitude changes being sought.

## Questions

- What is quota sampling?
- When is quota sampling used by sociologists?

## Keywords

1. Quota sampling - researchers look for people with certain characteristics.
2. Market research - sociological methods are used to identify spending patterns for commercial companies.
3. Affluent - Wealthy, has money to spend.

## What other points could be raised in questions about sampling?

### Bullets

- When designing a study, a sociologist should not simply assume that they will have access to a group of people.
- Non response can influence the quality of a sample.
- Large samples may take a lot of time to analyse and it becomes difficult to manage the data and identify patterns, particularly if the data collected is qualitative.

### Text

Just because a sample frame exists, it doesn't mean to say that sociologists will be given access to it. There are rules of confidentiality that protect people. For example, doctor's surgeries and clinics may well have lists of Aids patients or people with mental health problems, but Data Protection Acts mean that they will not share this data with others. Schools would have serious ethical issues and legal problems if they were to give researchers access to the names and addresses of children. Finally, some people simply do not want to be studied. Accessing information about the very wealthy, certain religious groups or certain political groups is very difficult because it is not in their interests for information about them to be made public.

Even if a sampling process is extremely well designed, this does not mean to say that everyone asked will respond to the questionnaire. This is an important consideration, because if a lot of people refuse to participate, then this could seriously influence the quality of the results. Postal questionnaires in particular have a very low response rate; this is a well acknowledged difficulty and commercial research companies offer people incentives to participate such as entry into a prize draw or vouchers for a top end high street store.

There is another practical issue with sampling; if samples are large, but the research is qualitative, then computers can be used to collate the data collected and to identify patterns. However, qualitative research is far less easy to deal with and large samples are difficult to manage in terms of time and quality of the data collected.

# Understanding culture (Research skills)

## Questions

- What is the problem of access?
- How can non-response affect sample design?
- What practical issues are connected with sampling?
- Why do sociologists need to be aware of the influence of sampling on the quality of findings?

## Keywords

1. Data Protection Act - it is against the law to reveal private information about people without their consent.
2. Non- response - people do not want to participate in research.

## How useful are questionnaires to sociologists?

### Introduction

#### Bullets

- Questionnaires normally ask closed questions.
- Everybody is given the same questions in the same order, which makes comparing easier.
- Many questionnaires are preceded by pilot questionnaires.
- Questionnaires can be sent through the post.

#### Text

A questionnaire is a list of questions on a piece of paper. It is a method that is often used in social surveys. Social Surveys are conducted when a researcher wants to gather statistical information from a large number of people, normally in order to generalise about the population as a whole. As surveys are large scale and focus on facts, questionnaires usually ask closed questions (with a limited number of answers), which have been coded in advance for computer analysis.

Questions can sometimes be open, closed or multiple-choice. The wording of questions in surveys is extremely important as this affects the quality of the results. If respondents don't understand the words used, or if the answer or choice they would hope to see isn't there, then the survey doesn't produce any useful results.

The questions are standardised i.e. everybody is asked the same question in the same order, therefore people's answers can be compared as they have responded to exactly the same questions.

For these reasons, many questionnaires are preceded by a pilot study which aims to find and rectify any issues before the final questionnaire is sent out. This can also give the researcher some idea of the time the questionnaire will take, and the best order to ask the questions.

# Understanding culture (Research skills)

Nearly all social surveys are based on a sample of the population. Samples are necessary as no researcher has the time or money to study everybody in the population e.g. if their research was based on girls over 16 years old in the UK, it would involve over 23 million people.

Questionnaires can be sent through the post or given to groups of people e.g. in a school or factory, or they can be administered with a questioner reading out the questions and recording the answers. All methods have their strengths and weaknesses.

The following information comes from social surveys. The 'General Household Survey' told us in 1992 that 33% of British homes had a CD player. The 'National Leadership Surveys Ltd' reported that 'Reader's Digest' was the most read magazine in 1992. 'Cinema and Video Industry Audience Research' found that 89% of the 15-24 age group had been to a cinema at least once in 1992.

## Questions

- What are closed questions?
- What are open questions?
- Identify the strengths and weaknesses of postal questionnaires.

## Keywords

1. Closed questions - questions requiring short yes/no/sometimes answers.
2. Open questions - questions requiring long, detailed, extended answers.
3. Questionnaire - a list of questions on a piece of paper.

## Types of questions

### Bullets

- Closed questions have been coded in advance.
- Structured questionnaires include closed questions.
- Open questions allow for detail.
- Some questionnaires include open questions.

### Text

Two types of questions are used in questionnaires - closed and open.

In a closed question, the range of answers is set by the researcher. Usually, the respondent must choose from one, two or more answers.

Closed questions are relatively easy, fast and cheap to distribute and measure. They are coded in advance, in the sense that the categories have been set and the only thing the respondent has to do is choose one or rank them. However, the researcher has chosen the available answers, and in this sense forces his/her choice of answers on the respondent.

An open question requires the respondent to answer a question in his/her own words.



# Understanding culture (Research skills)

Open questions give more freedom to the respondent, however coding/grouping the answers can prove difficult and is very time consuming. Most researchers consider open questions to be suitable for simple and factual data such as age, gender and income level. However, open questions are more suitable for data on attitudes and values where the respondent must express his/her feelings. An open question allows them to say things in their own way.

## Questions

- Explain the differences between open and closed questions.

## Keywords

1. Open questions give respondents the freedom to write their own answers.
2. Closed questions allow respondents to choose from a number of answers provided by the researcher.

## Advantages of Questionnaires

### Bullets

- Large amounts of data can be gathered with questionnaires.
- Positives support quantitative data.
- Quantitative data is more reliable than qualitative data.
- By using questionnaires, larger samples can be used.
- They are cheap to distribute.

### Text

By using questionnaires, a substantial amount of data can be collected from a large number of people over a short space of time. It is easy to count and analyse the data quickly as statistics are involved. Positivists support quantitative data as it can be analysed more 'scientifically.' It is more reliable than qualitative data. It can be checked by other sociologists, therefore is highly reliable.

Because the answers are standardised, they can be gathered and put through computer assisted collation programmes for swift analysis. The Census is gathered and dealt with in this way and results begin to appear within a year or so of the completion of the Census. Given the numbers of people that respond to the Census (at least 60 million names are recorded) this is a remarkable achievement.

By using questionnaires, larger samples can be used therefore there is more justification for making generalisations about the wider population. This is not possible with a detailed survey of a small number of people.

The samples for questionnaires can be huge and so you may reach very large numbers of the community; with the advantage of having written replies as well. The British Crime Survey questionnaire was completed by 47,203 people in 2006. Commercial research organisations such as Mori would typically contact many thousands of people in their surveys and you can see this from their website. The Nestle Social Research programme

# Understanding culture (Research skills)

into young people has a sample of over 1,000 young people. This may improve representativeness.

Questionnaires are relatively fast to complete and aren't as intrusive as other methods. They are easier to distribute geographically therefore the opinions of many people from many different places can be gathered.

They are inexpensive as there is no need to pay an interviewer, and it is cheap to distribute the results. There is no interviewer bias either and they are ideal for answering personal questions which some might be reluctant to answer honestly in a face-to-face situation.

Practical advantages of questionnaires are that they are very economical to run compared to other methods which require a far higher input of time from the research team itself. They are a familiar process and people are generally willing to help if they can. They are not too intrusive either; people may well be willing to answer a questionnaire on a private topic such as sexual health rather than have to answer such questions face to face.

On the other hand Shucksmith and Hendry (1998) criticised large scale questionnaire based surveys into young people as having little validity. They suggested that young people often do not trust the confidentiality of surveys and therefore misrepresent themselves. The young people may exaggerate or lie about themselves. This lowers validity. They also pointed out that one of the problems with large scale surveys is that we obtain an overview of behaviour, but with little sense of the culture and differences between smaller geographical areas.

McBeath and Mortimore (2001) reported on the Improving School Effectiveness project. This used a variety of methods to identify effective schools. They repeated and redesigned questionnaires that had proved effective in other studies to save themselves time and to improve the reliability of their own study.

## Questions

- What are the advantages of questionnaires?

## Keywords

1. Positivists - sociologists who want information based on a specific experiment.
2. Reliability - Research methods and data are reliable when different researchers use the same methods and get similar outcomes. A reliable method enables studies to be repeated and copied, and yields the same results or findings.
3. Quantitative data - Quantitative research aims to collect facts and figures using methods such as social surveys or statistical analysis.
4. Qualitative data - Qualitative research seeks a deeper understanding of the situation e.g. informal interviews.

## Disadvantages of Questionnaires

### Bullets

# Understanding culture (Research skills)

- Interactionists criticise statistical data for its lack of depth.
- Interactionists support qualitative data.
- Qualitative data is often considered more valid than quantitative data.
- Questions can be wrongly interpreted in a questionnaire.
- Response rate is low, particularly questionnaires sent through the post.

## Text

Interactionists criticise statistical data on the basis that it is unsuitable for giving sociological explanations for human behaviour. There is no opportunity to go into great detail. There is lack of validity as there is insufficient depth and personal information.

Respondents might interpret the questions differently if they haven't understood properly. There is no opportunity for respondents to reveal information if it is not specifically asked for in the questionnaire. If respondents can't give full and accurate answers or if they lie, then validity is reduced. Closed questions in a questionnaire limit what respondents have to say. There is no room for depth.

There is also an issue with returning questionnaires through the post to the researcher, which results in a low response rate. Over 50% people choose not to return questionnaires for different reasons. Smith et al (2006) conducted research into cyber-bullying, which is bullying using the medium of computers, mobiles, websites and messaging. A questionnaire was designed with open and closed questions. The research team then phoned schools in the London area and asked them if they wanted to take part in the survey. Twenty schools agreed. Eight questionnaires were sent to named teachers and the teacher was asked to give out one questionnaire to a randomly sampled girl and boy in each age group. In the end, only 14 schools returned questionnaires and even then, not all schools managed to return all eight. Clearly, the sampling method was not especially effective, and there must be questions about the representativeness of the data that was produced.

Questionnaires often occur after the event, so the annual British Crime Survey which is generally acknowledged to be a more reliable measure of actual crime than official statistics relies on asking people if they have been the victims of a crime in the last year. Clearly, respondents may have forgotten some events in that length of time.

Questionnaires are standardised. This means that they are all the same. It is not possible to ask for an explanation of any point that has been misunderstood, or for the researcher to ask for an explanation of why an answer has been given. This is one of the major criticisms of intelligence testing.

It is known that respondents will answer questions at a very superficial level if it looks like the survey is going to take a long time. Antaki (1999) in a study of how people with a learning disability answer questions found that interviewers who supported the respondents through the questionnaire frequently edited the questions in such a way that it made the questions easy to respond to, but left the answers without validity. This leads to another problem with questionnaires; they are not successful for certain groups of people: those with low levels of literacy such as immigrant populations, children, or the

# Understanding culture (Research skills)

disabled. People with busy lives are unlikely to respond. This means that there are serious issues with representativeness. This is also a particular issue with on-line surveying, which tends to produce unbalanced samples of the young, the educated and the wealthy.

Phone questionnaires are increasingly unusable because call centre marketers often use the excuse of a survey to begin selling goods. Many people are now ex-directory, or have signed non-call agreements to deter pestering and cannot therefore form part of legitimate samples.

## Questions

- What are the disadvantages of questionnaires?

## Keywords

1. Interactionists - support qualitative data which includes depth.
2. Validity - This refers to the truth and accuracy of a description or measurement.
3. Response rate - the number of completed questionnaires that are returned.

## Longitudinal studies

### Bullets

- A longitudinal study examines the same group of people over a long period of time.
- The strength of a longitudinal study lies in its capacity to examine developments over a period of time.
- Longitudinal studies can be expensive and time consuming.

### Text

How can you show how a person looks? One way is to produce a photograph. This is like most sociological research which includes a 'snapshot', an investigation of an aspect of social life. Another way of showing how a person looks is by producing a series of photographs taken at different stages in their life. This shows how their appearance has changed and developed. In sociology, a longitudinal study examines the same group of people over a long period of time.

As the following example shows, a longitudinal study can provide important information.

In 1947, the "Population Investigation Committee" conducted a survey of every mother who had had a child in Britain between 3 and 5 March 1946. This was followed up by a health focused investigation of the children.

Using the same sample, J.W.B Douglas led a team of people to study their educational careers from the primary school up to the secondary school, until they left in 1962. Two findings from this study showed the importance of a longitudinal approach.

Douglas (1964) found that encouragement from parents was extremely important in terms of educational attainment as the children got older. He also found that their performance

# Understanding culture (Research skills)

in the early years at the primary school was reflected throughout secondary school.

As these findings suggest, the strength of a longitudinal study lies in its capacity to examine developments over a period of time. By studying the same group i.e. keeping to the same sample, the researcher can be certain that any changes in attitude or behaviour haven't been caused by changes in the sample.

However, keeping the same group is one of the main difficulties with longitudinal studies. Douglas' sample started with 5,362 children and ended with 4,720. Also, the "National Child Development Study" began with 17,000 children born in England, Scotland and Wales between 3 and 9 March 1958. By the time the study was completed in 1981, researchers could only contact 12,500 members of the original sample. Death, emigration, refusal to participate and failing to track them down were some of the reasons for this. This results in not only a smaller sample, but probably a less representative sample.

Researchers are aware of this and are trying to minimise the problem. This is evident from the effort made by some to try and find members of the original sample. They contact relatives, visit former addresses and workplaces, send letters and make phone calls, look through electoral rolls and phone directories, as well as contact housing departments and the Criminal Records Bureau. As this suggests, longitudinal studies can be expensive and time consuming. The majority of establishments don't have the resources to fund an investigation which would last over twenty years.

## Questions

- What is meant by a longitudinal study?
- What are the strengths of a longitudinal study?
- What are the drawbacks of a longitudinal study?

## Keywords

1. Longitudinal study - A longitudinal study examines the same group of people over a long period of time.
2. Snapshot investigation - specific to one time and place.

## Why do sociologists use interviews?

### Introduction

#### Bullets

- Interviews consist of asking questions in a face to face format.
- There are a variety of different forms of interview and interview technique.
- Structured interviews are used by empirical sociologists and are highly scripted.
- Semi-structured and unstructured interviews are used by qualitative researchers and take a more informal style.
- Group interviews involve a number of participants.

#### Text



# Understanding culture (Research skills)

Interviewing is used extensively by social scientists and can take a number of forms. It is usually associated with qualitative research methods where depth and meaning are sought, but equally, can be used by empirical researchers when they are faced with situations where questionnaires are not strictly useful. An interview consists of setting up a conversational situation with a respondent. It is a more personal approach than questionnaires. This can be highly structured so that the interviewer is presented with a very detailed script that must be followed, including providing responses to questions that might be asked by the participant in the study. The script would be known as an interview schedule.

At the other extreme is the unstructured interview where the researcher simply encourages the respondent to talk and allows the respondent to dictate the terms and detail of the interview. This totally unstructured approach is typical of feminist research methods. Between these two extremes of face-to-face interviews lie any number of possibilities for the organisation of the discussion and these are known as semi-structured interviews. In these situations, the interviewer can ask supplementary or clarification questions as well as clarifying the meaning of the original interview question.

Interviews do not need to be just one person. Group interviews or focus groups may be useful to researchers. Here the interviewer talks to a whole range of people. This means that all the participants become part of the interviewing process as they discuss issues and explain their points.

Interviews can also take place over the telephone; this is marginally less popular because it is difficult to gauge the respondents' reactions through cues such as body language or facial expression. Increasingly, interviewing can be computer mediated such as through MSN messaging or through email and chat-boxes.

## Questions

- What are the advantages of using a highly structured interview style for empirical sociologists?
- Why might some sociologists prefer an informal interview style?
- When might an interview be preferable to a questionnaire?

## Keywords

1. Interviews - the researcher is in a conversational situation with the respondent.
2. Interview schedule - a script for an interview.
3. Unstructured interviews - the interviewer follows leads offered by the respondent.
4. Structured interview - the interviewer follows a script.
5. Semi- structured interviews - a combination of structured and unstructured methods where a script may be followed but some flexibility is allowed.
6. Group interviews - the interviewer may speak to more than one person at a time (also known as a focus group).

## Types of interviews

### Bullets

- Structured interviews are suitable for factual information.

# Understanding culture (Research skills)

- They are more likely to produce comparative data.
- Informal interviews enable the researcher to obtain detailed and descriptive information about the lives of the people in the study.
- They are more likely to produce qualitative data.
- Semi-structured interviews combine the advantages of both other methods.

## Text

Structured Interviews are a list of questions written in advance

Many researchers consider structured interviews as being suitable for simple "factual" information such as the age, gender, educational qualifications and vocation of the respondent.

Structured interviews are more likely to produce comparative data - all respondents answer the same questions, which should enable the researchers to make a direct comparison of the responses and identify similarities and differences. This tends to be more reliable.

Measurable data is more likely with this approach as questions can be structured to provide yes/no answers or a choice of answers. As structured interviews are also more formal, interviewer bias may be less likely.

Unstructured interviews are conversational in approach.

Unstructured or informal interviews enable the researcher to obtain detailed and descriptive information about the lives of the people in the study. The interviewer must be flexible and respond to the interviewee, and steer the conversation with either a general list of things to ask or open-ended questions. The aim is to get the interviewee to talk freely, and let them decide on the important aspects of the discussion. This is more valid.

A tape recorder is often used to ensure that the information is accurate, and in order to return and analyse the information at a later stage.

Due to the detail of this method, informal interviews are conducted with a smaller sample of people compared to questionnaires. This makes it more difficult to generalise from the findings, and also due to the open nature of the questions.

Semi-structured interviews are a combination of the structured and unstructured interview. A script is followed however adaptation or deeper questioning is allowed as necessary. This means that the strengths of both other types of interviews can be combined. Semi-structured interviews are an example of within-method triangulation.

In research on recent migrants into Britain by Jayaweera and Choudhury (2008), community researchers were used to conduct semi-structured interviews. A special effort was made to find interviewers with the same language and social characteristics as the respondent. This meant that the participants could speak in their favoured language and later, the interviewers could be involved in the translation process.

## Questions

# Understanding culture (Research skills)

- What is meant by a structured interview?
- What are their strengths?
- What is an unstructured interview?
- What are their strengths?
- What was the advantage of using semi-structured interviews in the research by Jayaweera and Choudhury?

## Keywords

1. Structured interview - a list of pre-set questions.
2. Unstructured interview - an interview which is like a conversation; often there are no pre-set questions.
3. Semi-structured interview - a combination of structured and unstructured methods where a script may be followed but some flexibility is allowed.
4. Within-method triangulation- a method that combines different types of data and allows the researcher to check the reliability and validity of the data.

## Focus groups or group interviews

### Bullets

- Focus groups consist of groups of people interviewed at one time.
- This is a cheap and practical method of research.
- There may be group bias and interviewer bias in focus group research.
- They are often used in combination with other methods.

### Text

The focus group or group interview is a method that is associated with qualitative research. Although Merton developed the method in the 1940s, it was more often used as a tool for marketing agencies until the 1980s. It has now become mainstream as a method used in 'pure' or academic research. It differs from the unstructured interview in that a variety of people are interviewed at one time. Between 5 and 7 participants are seen as the optimum number of participants in a focus group. They have the advantage of providing a more natural dynamic for the interview as people are able to share and modify their ideas through discussion. The interviewer is often known as a moderator and has the role of guiding the group through a series of discussion points. There will be a degree of structure in that the moderator will have an outline and some specimen questions to begin the research.

The advantage of the focus group method is that it is relatively economical and practical. Focus groups can be set up in clubs and schools or in organisational settings. Group interactions often bring out a lot of detail as one person prompts another into a comment or opinion. A number of people are interviewed in the same amount of time as one person can be interviewed in detail. Sometimes, the session is videoed so that movements and gestures overlooked by the moderator can be factored into the final analysis. Focus groups may not just involve interviewing; role playing, especially with children is popular.

There is a problem with focus groups in that a dominant member may affect the results as interviewer bias comes into play and the respondents say what they feel the moderator

# Understanding culture (Research skills)

wants them to say rather than what they really feel. Psychologists have studied group dynamics and find that people tend to move their real views towards those of the group. For this reason, people invited to focus groups often do not know each other in advance of the meeting. Focus groups are rarely random; they are more likely to be quota or purposive samples and so they cannot be said to be random and there may be question marks over their representativeness. Few research projects rely on focus groups, they tend to be used in addition to more conventional interviews. A number of groups of different compositions are generally used.

## Questions

- What is a focus group?
- How do focus groups work?
- When would it be appropriate to use a focus group?
- What limitations are there on the usefulness of a focus group?

## Keywords

1. Interviewer bias - the characteristics of the interviewer has an effect on the quality of the data.
2. Focus group - more than one person is interviewed at a time.
3. Group interview - another name for a focus group.

## Setting up an interview situation

### Bullets

- Respondents will talk more freely if they feel relaxed.
- The conditions under which the interviews take place should be non-threatening.
- It is wise for researchers to distance themselves slightly from the research situation.
- Responses may vary according to the quality of the questions.
- The interviewer may have an impact on the research.

### Text

For interviews to work well, it is essential that the interviewee/s are relaxed. Barker, in her studies of the Moonies describes this process carefully. She was at pains to put her interviewees at ease and make them feel happy with the situation. This was done by arranging the room carefully. She needed to avoid creating a situation that could be seen as confrontational or difficult in any way. It is also important for interviewers to be well prepared. This requires some degree of organisation and planning. Interviews take up some considerable amount of time, and if repeat interviews are needed then it is important that the interviewee feels that the time spent being interviewed was valuable enough to repeat the exercise.

The questions or the topics require some considerable planning. Questions can take the form of 'open' or 'closed' questioning. Closed questions offer answers but open questions require some development. It is important to encourage the interviewee to open up, so the interviewer must avoid questions that can be answered with a 'yes' or 'no'. Questions

# Understanding culture (Research skills)

can be asked in more than one format; sometimes just allowing a silence to happen will encourage a response.

There can be serious ethical issues with interviews. Linda McDowell, in her 2003 study of white working class youths and employment interviewed a number of boys from deprived areas. She interviewed her Sheffield sample in public places such as burger bars. However, when she interviewed in Cambridge, she used her own kitchen as a venue.

Retrospectively, she realised that there were serious dangers with this, even though she was never alone in her house with her respondents, they were over 16 and there was parental permission.

It is recognised that the interviewer can have an effect on the quality of the data that is produced by this method. This is known as interviewer bias. For example, many studies of ethnic minorities use interviewers from that community because there is a shared understanding. Carl Hylton's study of Black Families Talking (1997) used staff from African Caribbean and South East Asian descent who could take a Black-centred approach to the study through having a shared cultural background.

## Variations of interview technique

The Offending, Crime and Justice Survey (2003 ff) used a variety of interviewing techniques including computer assisted interviewing. Three basic methods were used:

1. Computer assisted personal interviewing (CAPI): The interviewer reads the questions and the responses are entered into a laptop.
2. Computer assisted self interviewing (CASI): The respondent reads the questions on a laptop and enters his or her own answers.
3. Audio computer assisted self-interviewing (A-CASI): the respondent can listen to questions on a headphone. This helped respondents with reading difficulties to participate in the survey. This was very important because many young offenders have poor literacy.

## Questions

- Why is important that the interviewee is relaxed during the interview?
- What factors can influence the quality of the interview?
- What is interviewer bias?
- How can interviewer bias be avoided?
- What ethical issues were raised by McDowell inviting respondents into her own home?
- What were the advantages of varying the interview techniques in the 2003 British Crime Survey?

## Keywords

1. Open questions - the respondent can answer in any way that seems appropriate.
2. Closed questions - the respondent chooses from a number of pre-prepared answers.
3. Interviewer bias - the characteristics of the interviewer has an effect on the quality of the data.



# Understanding culture (Research skills)

4. Ethical - harm could come to the respondent or the researcher.

## Strengths of Interviews

### Bullets

- There is opportunity here to develop a rapport with the respondent.
- They are more likely to produce valid data
- They are more suitable to find meanings, values, attitudes and beliefs.
- Interviews may be flexible and informal and so respondents can open up.

### Text

Interviews give us detailed information from the point of view of the respondent. Often it is the words and language of the interviewee that is the most interesting part of the research. The interview is an effective method to discover how interviewees think and feel about subjects.

The response rate is higher compared to questionnaires that are sent through the post. Interviewers can explain the meaning of the questions and ask for further details if necessary. Anybody with difficulty reading or writing can be included in the sample

There is opportunity here to develop a rapport and trust between the interviewer and respondent, which is more likely to lead to honest and valid answers.

Hodkinson (2002) in his study of 'Goth' culture conducted a large number of face to face interviews and felt that his study gained depth and validity from the fact that he subscribes to Goth culture and is an insider. Interviews were therefore free-flowing. His questionnaires via post and email were less fluid.

Interviews are suitable for sensitive topics and people have more room to express their own viewpoints. Interviews are more likely to produce valid data. There is greater depth. They are suitable to find meanings, values, attitudes and beliefs.

Duffy et al (2008) interviewed 182 young people who had used cannabis or sold cannabis in the previous six months. Their respondents were as young as 12 in some cases. It was an unrepresentative sample. Interviews were semi-structured and the research uses quotations from the interviews to illustrate the conclusions. This adds richness to the findings which are also presented in statistical and graphical form. They noted that although some of their respondents claimed to have stopped selling drugs, it was difficult to know if they were telling the truth. The researchers were left with impressionistic views that the respondents were in fact trustworthy.

Interviews are flexible and informal therefore allow the researcher to respond to what is being said. In Frosh et al's (2002) study of Young Masculinities, the research team used what is known as a clinical style of interviewing. In this method, there were double interviews. The first interview encouraged the respondent to reflect on issues and a second interview was then used to explore gaps from the first interview. The respondent was encouraged to reflect on the interview process itself. In addition the interviewer

# Understanding culture (Research skills)

collected notes on each interviewee as well, making a record of his personal response to the interviewees. He described one of his samples as 'self-righteous, elitist and annoying'. Equally, he very much liked others, even though they expressed views he found personally unacceptable.

Internet interviews are increasingly popular because they allow for a wider geographical range of participants and also can be significantly cheaper than face to face interviews.

## Questions

- What are the strengths of interviews? Explain by referring specifically to some of the examples you have read about.

## Keywords

1. Validity - This refers to the truth and accuracy of a description or measurement. Data is valid if it provides an accurate picture of lifestyle or an accurate measurement of something. Some researchers argue that qualitative data, with its depth and richness, is more likely to provide a valid portrayal of social life than quantitative data.

## Weaknesses of interviews

### Bullets

- Interviews can be expensive.
- It is difficult to compare interviews, especially those that are unstructured.
- Reliability is also an issue with unstructured interviews.

### Text

Interviews are expensive to conduct as the interviewers have to be paid. Some interviews can take some time to arrange for example it can be difficult to organise interviews with busy people. Innes and Scott in their study of mothers on a return to work course found that it was enormously difficult to schedule meetings as the mothers had dependent young children and needed to organise childcare, public transport and sort out bus fares. This means that the sample is often small and not representative.

Interviewer bias can be an issue. The interviewer, either intentionally or unintentionally, can lead the respondent to answer in a particular way. Sometimes, the respondent wants the interviewer to see them in a positive way, so they might not reveal the whole truth. This would have a negative impact on the validity of the data. People tend to want to please others. It is polite to tell people exactly what they want to hear, it is part of normal social interaction. The interview can therefore be invalid as the respondent simply provides the information that they think is required and not the truth. If the interviewer and interviewee are very similar in characteristics, there will be a very positive bias towards the information.

Interviews can be threatening for some people. The process itself may lead to problems

# Understanding culture (Research skills)

especially for those who may be intimidated by middle class people asking searching questions about their lives. Feminist interviewers believe that the research process should empower women and alert them to their true situation. Millen (1997) argues that this could be a dangerous tactic for some women, because it may actually remove their strategies for coping with prejudice and discrimination. Similarly, action research on underprivileged and vulnerable people could be raising their hopes that the research could have an effect on their lives. This is a serious ethical issue for interviewers.

It is more difficult to compare interviews, especially those that are unstructured, therefore care must be taken when making generalisations. Interviewers should ask permission before keeping tapes of interviews and transcribing these can be a difficult enough task in itself. If a team of interviewers is used then the interviewers may transcribe their notes in different ways, making comparisons very difficult. Collating the data and identifying patterns is a complex and tedious task.

Reliability is also an issue with unstructured interviews - it is not possible to recreate the same situation or re-ask the same questions.

## Questions

- What are the weaknesses of interviews? Refer to examples of research.

## Keywords

1. Interviewer bias - when the interviewer affects what is said by the respondent.

## What is the purpose of sociological observation?

### Introduction

#### Bullets

- When using participative observation, the sociologist participates in the daily activities of the study group and notices what they say and do.
- A number of issues can arise from using this method.

#### Text

How do we find out about the lifestyle of a group of people? One way is to join in - participate in their daily activities and notice what they say and do. This research method is called Participant Observation. It was used by John Howard Griffin (1960), a white journalist who changed the colour of his skin to find out for himself what it was like to live as a black man in the southern states of America at the end of the 50s. It was used by the anthropologist Bronislaw Malinowski who spent many years studying the "Trobriand Islanders" in New Guinea. He observed very intimate aspects of their lives to collect data for "Sex and Repression in Savage Society" (1927).

# Understanding culture (Research skills)

Such observations mean that the observer becomes a member of the group, so that he/she can study social actions in their natural context, as they happen. This could range from joining a group of mental health patients in a hospital, going with a young gang to clubs/cafes or observing the behaviour of a teacher/pupil in a classroom.

Observation aims to get a detailed picture of social reality as experienced by people/actors. The intention is to see the world through the eyes of those being studied. How do they make sense of the hospital environment, the fight on a Friday night, or the telling off from the teacher? The researcher must try to understand a social action without forcing upon it his/her own interpretations and values.

A researcher using this method must decide which approach he/she will adopt. Covert - the subjects will not know the true name and purpose of the researcher. This often means that the researcher has to adopt a false identity for example, James Patrick in "A Glasgow Gang Observed" - described himself as the "hafter" of Tim i.e. "best friend."

Overt observation is when the researcher will reveal himself/herself but will sometimes hide the true nature of the research. For example, Gann's research "The Levitowners" looked into the effect of a new urban life. He told the people of Levitown that the purpose of his research was to study the community from a historical perspective.

"A Glasgow Gang Observed" by James Patrick, and "Tearoom Trade" by Laud Humphreys used covert participant observation to study deviant groups, to whom he might not have had access otherwise. The research by Humphreys shows how participant observation can be made more systematic and therefore more objective by using an observation schedule. Patrick's observation is less structured, however it gives a clear indication of the type of qualitative data that participative observation can produce.

Eileen Barker's research "The Making of a Moonie - Choice or Brainwashing?" uses overt observation with other research methods, and clearly demonstrates the advantages and disadvantages of overt rather than covert observation. Three studies show the problems a participation observer encounters in adopting the role, as well as identifying the strengths and weaknesses of this research method.

## Questions

- What are the differences between covert and overt observation?
- Find out more about the examples of research noted in the text. What were the advantages and disadvantages of observation?

## Keywords

1. Covert observation - the subjects will not know the true name and purpose of the researcher.
2. Overt observation - the researcher will reveal himself/herself however will sometimes hide the true nature of the research.

## What is ethnography?

### Bullets

# Understanding culture (Research skills)

- Ethnography is the study of people in small groups.
- Ethnography has practical difficulties.
- There are many ethical issues surrounding ethnography.

## Text

Ethnography is a research method that is based on observing people in their natural environments. Through ethnography we try to see the world from the point of view of others and to identify patterns of behaviour. It rejects what it sees as the sterility of surveying people and attempts to gain an understanding of their world. Ethnography aims to gain insight through sets of systematic procedures. Ethnographers will collect notes, photographs, video and audio tapes. They will conduct unstructured interviews and participate in the activities of their sample groups in order to understand the meanings that the groups have constructed for themselves.

Famous recent ethnographies include Tony Sewell's (1997) study of Black masculinities in school. Sewell identified with the boys and mixed with them socially. He described this process as being able to 'chill'. However, he was also an adult mixing with school age boys. He observed and interviewed, and then he returned to people he re-interviewed so that his respondents could reflect on what they had said. He was aware of the danger of over-identifying with the boys as he himself shared a similar background, but nevertheless he identified 100% of the teachers in the school that he studied as being racist, including the Black teacher and the Asians. The aims of his study were to look at schools as agencies of oppression and how boys respond to it. This illustrates a danger with ethnography; it is difficult to maintain objectivity. Sewell has now altered his views, but his work remains influential and frequently quoted.

Valerie Hey published an ethnography of girl's friendships (1997) based on fieldwork in the 1980s. She felt that women in general and friendship in particular are under-researched. She wanted to investigate young girl's relationships with each other. She developed her techniques as she conducted the research and is a significant character in the study herself as she explains her methods. Hey used a variety of methods included hanging out with the girls and even truanting with them. She would exchange gifts of time and money which she felt was an ethical compromise. One of her sources of data was the notes that girls write to each other in class.

## Questions

- What is ethnography?
- What practical difficulties with ethnography can be identified?
- What ethical issues with ethnography can be identified?

## Keywords

1. Ethnography - the detailed study of small groups of people.

## Gaining access

## Bullets



# Understanding culture (Research skills)

- Participant observation doesn't work unless the researcher gains access to the group and gets some kind of acceptance from its members. This can prove difficult.
- Many groups don't want to be studied, especially those who are involved in activities that are considered to be deviant or criminal by the wider society.
- People often reject interfering people from the outside if they aren't introduced by a loyal member of the group.

## Text

Participant observation doesn't work unless the researcher gains access to the group and gets some kind of acceptance from its members. This can prove difficult. Many groups don't want to be studied, especially those who are involved in activities that are considered to be deviant or criminal by the wider society. However, as the following examples show, it is often possible to gain access to even these closed groups.

For his research into casual sex between men in public toilets, - "The Tearoom Trade" - Humphreys (1970) takes on the role of a lookout and gained the trust of those he was watching by doing so, without having to take part in their sexual activities.

On other occasions, researchers must take a more direct approach in order to gain access. Festinger (1964) found that the only way of observing a small religious sect was to fake membership and become a member.

The above examples are covert research where the name and purpose of the researcher is kept a secret. Overt research, where those who are being studied are aware of the role and purpose of the researcher, has its own problems of access and acceptance.

People often reject interfering people from the outside if they aren't introduced by a loyal member of the group. This happened in a study by Judith Okely (1983) of traveller gypsies. Gaining access was a long and difficult process until she gained the friendship and trust of the family who had recently had a bereavement. She gained access to the rest of the group due to the sympathetic relationship she had developed with members of this family.

The following examples also refer to access issues. It can be difficult to access groups to study in the kind of detail that observers often require. Hey found it necessary to start her feminist study again when she encountered hostility from males in one school. She transferred to an all-female environment. In addition, she wanted to study younger girls, but they rejected her, so she worked with an older group.

Heidi Safia Mirza, in her study of Black girls looked at two schools and actually worked as a teacher in one; this allowed her access to pupil records, but would not have allowed her the same level of access into the pupils themselves as a more independent researcher. Charlesworth (2000), in his study of the working class people of Rotherham had the advantage of sharing a background with them and contacted many through his social networks in pubs. Many of his friends refused to participate in the study because Charlesworth adopted a persona as a naive and somewhat stupid person and this embarrassed his respondents. He found people unwilling to talk to him even in informal situations like the gym.

# Understanding culture (Research skills)

Mac an Ghaill found that when he was observing in schools, teachers assumed him to be on the side of the boys he studied and the boys thought he was a teacher. Neither side was completely frank with him until he had settled in. Nevertheless, this problem gave him an insight into the power relationships of the school.

## Questions

- What are the problems with gaining access to a study group?

## Keywords

1. Covert observation - the subjects will not know the true name and purpose of the researcher.
2. Overt observation - the researcher will reveal himself/herself however will sometimes hide the true nature of the research.

## Conducting research

### Bullets

- Participant observation means watching and listening.
- As the aim is to observe people in their natural environment, the researcher must not disrupt the environment.
- Watching and listening isn't always suitable for the researcher's purpose. Sometimes, the participant observer must take on a more active role in order to obtain information.
- Recording the findings of participant observations can be a problem, especially when the research is covert.
- Researchers are often cut off from the natural support of family and friends, and sometimes live a double life in a strange environment

### Text

Participant observation means watching and listening. The general rule is to "go with the flow" rather than influence people's behaviour. As the aim is to observe people in their natural environment, the researcher must not disrupt the environment. The researcher must blend into the background, although this is not always possible. For example, a participant researcher in a class may stand out like a sore thumb. This may lead to an 'artificial' lesson. However, it is surprising how soon he/she can become invisible or even be taken for granted.

Watching and listening isn't always suitable for the researcher's purpose. Sometimes, the participative researcher must take on a more active role in order to obtain information. In such cases, the line between participant observation and unstructured interviews is fuzzy.

Much participant observation is informal, unplanned and unstructured - this can mean "hanging around". In his study of stealing from the docks at St. John's, Newfoundland, Mars (1982) wandered around the huts and talked with the stevedores, and hanged around the bars and drank with them in the evenings.

Recording the findings of participant observations can be a problem, especially when the research is covert. Researchers normally record the day's findings in the evening while the events are still fresh in their minds. In some cases, toilets have been useful places to jot

# Understanding culture (Research skills)

down notes before writing them in full (Festinger 1964, Ditton 1977). However, much depends on the researcher's memory, which can be selective and can affect the validity of the data.

Participant observation can be a long process with a year or more spent in the "area". It may involve loyalty, energy and courage. Researchers are often cut off from the natural support of family and friends, and sometimes live a double life in a strange environment. Participant observation can be dangerous. For example, Haralambos (1994) was threatened with guns on more than one occasion during his research in southern Chicago. Ken Pryce, a West Indian sociologist was found murdered during his research into Jamaican Yardy gangs

## Questions

- What are the problems with observation?

## Keywords

1. Covert observation - the subjects will not know the true name and purpose of the researcher.
2. Overt observation - the researcher will reveal himself/herself however will sometimes hide the true nature of the research.

## Strengths of observation

### Bullets

- Observation gives researchers the opportunity to observe people in their natural environments.
- It is considered valid
- The researcher sees social life from the same perspective as the group.
- It can develop a close relationship therefore provides more opportunity to reveal things that would otherwise not be revealed.

## Text

Observation is an opportunity for researchers to observe people in their natural environments. Observational studies are claimed to have more validity than surveys, though this view can be queried. The argument is that because people are being observed in natural settings they will give behave naturally. They can be honest and do as they would normally.

Clearly this possibility for this is reduced with overt non-participant observation, a technique that is frequently used in teaching as a way of assessing the quality of work of teachers.

It is claimed of observations that people can be seen behaving naturally in their own environment, so this leads to their being relaxed. This is known as ecological validity. It is assumed that people will often be more open when comfortable and in a natural

# Understanding culture (Research skills)

environment.

Observation is an opportunity to collect new information and find new directions. Researchers may see patterns in how people act that they themselves may not recognise as being of significance or importance. Early feminist observational studies in education revealed for instance that teachers gave over 70% of their attention to boys in their class, even when they thought that they had corrected the balance, males still had the lion's share of teacher time.

When observing, the researcher can see social life from the group's perspective. This is called 'verstehen' or understanding. It allows a close relationship to develop therefore provides more opportunity to reveal things that wouldn't be revealed otherwise.

Bourgois (1998) studied homeless heroin addicts in San Francisco using ethnographic methods. He rejected survey methods for his research because he felt that the data they produced was too general and unspecific to be of use. Surveys do not allow intimate understanding and trust to develop between the participant in the study and the researcher. Ethnography tends to take place over time, whereas surveys offer a snapshot of a person's opinions in a very short time frame. This alone makes observation more valid.

Observation can therefore produce valid data as it is difficult to mislead the researcher, especially over a long period of time and the researcher can see aspects of social life for himself/herself.

## Questions

- What are the strengths of observation?

## Keywords

1. Validity - This refers to the truth and accuracy of a description or measurement. Data is valid if it provides an accurate picture of lifestyle or an accurate measurement of something. Some researchers argue that qualitative data, with its depth and richness, is more likely to provide a valid portrayal of social life than quantitative data.
2. 'Verstehen' - the ability to understand social life from the perspective of those being studied.

## What are the weaknesses of observation?

### Bullets

- Personal cost can be high for the researcher.
- It can be expensive in terms of time and money.
- It can affect the behaviour of those being researched if they know that they are being watched.
- This can affect validity.
- It is difficult to gain access and develop trust.

# Understanding culture (Research skills)

## Text

There are serious practical difficulties with ethnography. Charlesworth (2000) in his study of Rotherham had to make notes in secret or memorise conversations. Given that his conversations were in pubs, then there may have been errors. Most ethnographers comment on the sheer amount of data that they collect and the difficulties that they experience collating and organising their notes. In addition, it is very costly to employ people to watch others full time for a period of time. Most observers either work with their subjects or are students when they conduct the research.

It is difficult to gain access to the sample and develop trust. Once the researcher has gained access, his/her presence can affect the behaviour of those being observed if they know that they are being watched.

The term used for this is Hawthorne Effect. This can affect the validity of the data. Also, the size of the sample is usually small therefore generalisations cannot be made.

It is difficult, if not impossible to redo the research or similar research and compare the results. Observation is not systematic and this affects reliability. There are also issues with interpreting what is observed.

The famous feminist Stanworth reports an incident where a teacher named all the boys in his class and then says 'the rest were just girls'. This has been taken as clear evidence of male teacher sexism and is a classic quotation. However, it is equally plausible that the teacher was making a joke at Stanworth's expense; she was a feminist looking for evidence of male prejudice and could have expected some teasing. It is difficult to know the correct interpretation of the incident; there was no third party so we have to accept the researcher's interpretation. This may not always be reliable. Sewell for example, interprets female teachers trying to control big Black boys in an aggressive manner in a school where female teachers have been violently assaulted as evidence of racism. This could be a gender and not a race issue for the women, although the boys interpreted it as racism.

The classic complaint of ethnography and participant observations is that the researcher has 'gone native' and become so much part of the group that sufficient objectivity can no longer be maintained. The researcher shares a world view with the study group and is no longer able to interpret events clearly. The researcher over-identifies with the group and loses a sense of balance. Validity is therefore minimised.

A number of ethical factors must be considered - is it right to watch someone without permission? What if the researcher observes criminal behaviour?

The key ethical issues that any sociologist should consider when designing research are protection of participants from harm (physical and psychological), prevention of deception, protection of privacy and informed consent. You will have realised that observation studies present particular and complex ethical problems for researchers in all of these areas of consideration. Covert observations in particular raise the issue that if participants are not aware that they are being studied they cannot withhold informed consent. This was the issue with Laud Humphries study of homosexual encounters in The Tearoom Trade.



# Understanding culture (Research skills)

In addition, there are queries about confidentiality. Names may be hidden, but if enough information is given, it may be possible to identify the respondents. For example, Webster et al in Poor Transitions, talk about the fictional town of Kelby, but the descriptions of Kelby and data given for the location mean that a very reasonable guess can be made as to its identity. Participant observers of criminal gangs frequently find themselves in situations which place them at risk of law breaking, if not actually behaving in a criminal manner. In addition, researchers have been injured and killed when addressing sensitive issues. Researchers may also have to lie and deceive their participants. They may even need to conceal their true intentions. This could be a particular problem for the researcher who befriends members of the sample group.

## Questions

- What are the weaknesses of participative observation?

## Keywords

1. Validity - This refers to the truth and accuracy of a description or measurement. Data is valid if it provides an accurate picture of lifestyle or an accurate measurement of something. Some researchers argue that qualitative data, with its depth and richness, is more likely to provide a valid portrayal of social life than quantitative data.
2. Reliability - Research methods and data are reliable when different
3. researchers use the same methods and get similar outcomes e.g. if the same questionnaire and same sampling produces similar results after being used by different researchers, then the data collection methods are reliable. A reliable method enables studies to be repeated and copied, and yields the same results or findings.
4. Hawthorn effect - the influence of the process of being observed on the behaviour of those being observed. This minimises the validity of the data.

## Can we trust official statistics?

### Introduction

#### Bullets

- Official statistics are numerical data produced by local and national government bodies.
- Government departments and surveys are the main sources of official statistics.

#### Text

Official statistics are an example of secondary data.

Official statistics are numerical data produced by local and national government bodies. They can be the by-product of a routine procedure in a government department, or can be the outcome of a mission to gather information. The "Labour Force Survey", gathers information on unemployment for example.

# Understanding culture (Research skills)

Official statistics include a wide range of social actions including births, deaths and marriages, distribution of income and wealth, crimes and sentences, and work and leisure.

Departments such as Education and Employment and the Home Office often request information from organisations such as local tax offices and social services departments, job centres and police stations. This information is then processed and some are published, for example the Department of Education and Employment issues a monthly "Employment Gazette" with a statistical supplement with details of earnings, prices, unemployment, empty positions, industrial dispute and training and enterprise programmes etc.

Every ten years, a Census is conducted of every home in the UK. By law, every householder must complete a questionnaire involving family sizes, houses, work, travel and leisure. The response to the Census in 1991 was 98% ("Social Trends" 1995). Other surveys conducted are the "General Household Survey", which is an annual survey based on a detailed questionnaire given to a sample of nearly 12,000 people, and also the "New Earning Survey", which is based on a sample of workers chosen from the Inland Revenue's PAYE records.

## Questions

- Explain what sources of official statistics are available?

## Keywords

1. Official statistics - numerical data produced by local and national government bodies.
2. Secondary data - data that has been collected by someone other than the sociologist who is using it.

## How useful are official statistics?

### Bullets

- Official statistics cover a large number of statistics.
- They might reflect the government's opinion rather than the general opinion.
- The size of the samples is often large and representative.
- Government surveys have normally been carefully planned and are of a good quality.

## Text

The very first study that could be said to be sociology was published in 1897. It was Emile Durkheim's classic study of suicide. In it, Durkheim set out to prove that social rules govern individual behaviour. He chose the most individual act he could consider: suicide and then used official statistics from a number of countries to show that social patterns existed in suicidal behaviour. He made three basic discoveries: suicide statistics remain constant within cultures over time, different cultures have different suicide rates and suicide rates vary within specific social groups within countries. Durkheim was very aware of the limitations of using official data, but had little choice but to accept them. The impact of this analysis on the thinking of the time cannot be over-estimated. The book

# Understanding culture (Research skills)

remains in print.

Today, the gathering and analysis of official data has become a major industry. Part of the driving force for this is the need for the government to set targets to measure its own success or lack of it. All publicly funded bodies gather data on all elements of their work. For a view of the amount of data that is gathered, consider the amount of testing that students and form filling that follows children through their education.

The gathering of statistics by government is fraught with difficulty. Official statistics are reliable in the sense that they usually use large samples or even the whole population. They are reliable in the sense that they are gathered using detailed tools of analysis. However, they can also be political and therefore invalid in the way in which the figures are collected and analysed. The simplest example is with crime statistics. Car crime is almost always reported because insurers will not pay for damage or theft without a crime number. Rape is a dramatically under-reported crime because conviction rates are very low and people feel shame in admitting what has happened.

Official statistics are government statistics. There might be political considerations behind their collection. They might reflect the opinion of a government rather than a general opinion.

Sometimes, there is a pressure on statistical directors in departments to withhold or change statistics - especially in relation to unemployment and health.

Atkinson (1978) discovered that there are a number of social processes that take place before a death is considered to be a suicide. These include suicide notes, the way the death occurred, the state of mind prior to death and potential motives for suicide. Some coroners are more reluctant than others to declare suicide because of the potential for grief and shame that the family may feel. All of these things will affect the official statistical data.

Official statistics cover a large number of statistics. However, care must be taken when using them e.g. unemployment statistics - there are several definitions of unemployment and there are many ways of collecting data about unemployment.

It has been calculated that the unemployment figures in Britain have been maintained at unrealistically low rates since 1979 as nearly 30 changes have taken place to the way that the figures are calculated and each one reduced the number of people on the official registers of unemployed. This is true of statistics in general - consideration needs to be given to how they are collected.

The value of official data is that it can provide us with a view of patterns over time. Publications such as Social Trends, The Annual Abstract of Statistics and Regional Trends can all be used as base-line data for further research.

Bilton et al suggest that there are five good reasons for using official data. These include:

- They are often the only reliable source of data available. This is certainly true for crime and health data.
- They are easily available on the Internet and in books

# Understanding culture (Research skills)

- They offer us the chance to examine trends over time, for example pass rates at GCSE are measured and commented on
- We can compare data, for example regional data shows major economic differences between different counties in Wales, or between England and Wales
- The effect of legislation on social change can be measured. We can compare the effect of medical screening on survival rates from some diseases or changes, or divorce legislation on the rate of divorce.

It is very practical to use official statistics. Published statistics are available free of charge. The size of the samples is often large and representative. Government surveys have normally been carefully planned and are of a good quality. However they are not gathered for use by sociologists and can therefore be biased in what they show.

## Questions

- What are the advantages of using official statistics?
- What problems are involved with using official statistics?

## Keywords

1. Official statistics - numeric data produced by local and national government bodies.
2. Representative - Representativeness means the extent to which the main features of the chosen sample are typical of the population from which the sample has been taken - the group of individuals studied must be typical of the whole population so that generalisations can be made.

## What other methods are used by sociologists?

### Introduction

#### Bullets

- Secondary data is re-analysis of existing data.
- Some examples are statistics, newspaper reports, diaries and historical documents.
- Secondary data refers to existing data.
- Sociologists have been exploring new methods in recent years.

#### Text

Sociologists who research into a particular subject can choose from several different research methods. They can undertake their research using secondary data, i.e. re-analyse existing data, such as statistics (see page 9), newspaper reports, diaries and historical documents. Alternatively, they can conduct their own primary research, for example by using a social survey, different types of interviews or observations.

Secondary data refers to existing data. This can be historical records, official statistics, government reports, diaries, memoirs, novels, newspapers, films, recorded music and data which have already been produced by sociologists researching other projects.

# Understanding culture (Research skills)

With the growing importance of both post-modernism and feminism, researchers have shown interest in seeking alternative methods of research that take into account new thinking. Once feminists challenged the view that sociology had to be value free and scientific, then it became possible to consider methods that actively involved the participants in the research process. These new sociologies are less mainstream than the traditional methodologies but give rise to useful and valuable insights.

## Questions

- Explain what is meant by secondary data?

## Keywords

1. Official statistics - numerical data produced by local and national government bodies.

## Secondary methods

### Bullets

- Sociologists can make use of personal and historical documents.
- They are likely to be used by sociologists who take a qualitative or interpretational approach and who want information about people's experiences.
- The documents are often very far removed from the objectivity sociologists look for.
- Historical documents have their own issues as they are from a different age, a different culture, and normally their authors have died
- Content analysis is often used by sociologists studying the media

## Text

### Personal documents

Sociologists can make use of personal documents such as letters and diaries. They are likely to be used by sociologists who take a qualitative or interpretational approach and who want information about people's experiences.

Such documents have not been produced in the knowledge that they might be research material, therefore caution must be taken. Sometimes, some sociologists ask people to keep diaries intentionally as part of the research.

Care must be taken - have they been written by the person who claims to have written them?

How representative is it? Maybe that extensive writing is more likely to be more popular amongst educated people, and maybe they aren't typical of the group being studied.

### The Mass Observation Archive

During the 1930s and 1940s, a major sociological project called the Mass Observation Archive collected private information from people, usually in the form of diaries. This material has been used as source material for books and plays. Much of this original material was unstructured and there was a lot of it. This makes it difficult to sort out the



# Understanding culture (Research skills)

issues of interest to sociologists. There has been a renewal of interest in the Archive and in 1981 a new project was started. Volunteers were recruited through the media and invited to write about certain issues in their lives.

A recently (2000) published study by Busby looks at the ways in which participants write about their health and their illnesses. Currently there are about 700 volunteers writing and the participants tend to be middle class, female and slightly older than the average for the population.

In order to study the past, historical documents are often the main or only source of information.

Historical documents are often very far removed from the objectivity sociologists look for. They sometimes show a bias, are prejudiced, one-sided and convey one opinion. If researchers accept them for what they are, then historical documents are a valuable and rich source of data.

Historical documents have their own issues as they are from a different age, a different culture, and normally their authors have died. In addition, the analysis depends to a great extent on the viewpoint of the researcher and his/her background.

Content analysis is the main tool of writers on the mass media such as the Glasgow Media Group. They use a method known as thematic analysis where they seek to find the key words and themes in reporting to show how these themes influence reporting. They also analyse images as well as words to consider how media stories can be given a slant. They use this evidence to argue that news reporting is biased.

## Questions

- What is personal data?
- What are the issues with personal data?
- How useful are historical documents?
- Research examples of how sociologists have used content analysis.

## Keywords

1. Qualitative data - Qualitative research seeks a deeper understanding of the situation e.g. informal interviews, participative observation or analysis of personal diaries, or memoirs.
2. Representative - Representativeness means the extent to which the main features of the chosen sample are typical of the population from which the sample has been taken - the group of individuals studied must be typical of the whole population so that generalisations can be made.
3. Prejudice - a definite opinion about something without knowing the correct facts.
4. Content analysis - a research method that involves a detailed study of the content of the media.

## What are participatory methods?

### Bullets

# Understanding culture (Research skills)

- A recent approach to sociology is participatory research.
- The participants chooses the focus and methods of the study.
- This has been used successfully with children.
- Children require some training to be built into the research project.

## Text

A recent approach to sociology is known as participatory sociology. This has been used successfully with children, and is a blanket term used to cover an approach. In much research, the agenda is set by the research team. The people who design the study choose the topic and the participants, and all that the participants can do to have an effect on the research is to refuse to participate. In participatory research, the researchers deliberately avoid determining the theme of the research. The participants choose the research questions and then decide on its focus. This means that a variety of methods may be developed and used by the participants.

In Sutton et al (2007) 42 children from a deprived estate and an expensive fee paying school aged between 8 and 13 took part in the research. This was aimed at understanding perceptions of class differences in terms of how the children themselves felt that it shaped their lives, experiences and attitudes. Consent was asked continuously of the children so that they could withdraw at any time that they wished. The methods chosen by the children included mapping, role-playing, drawing, writing, photography and walkabouts.

Kellet and Dar (2007) used the same approach with children to understand the links between poverty and literacy. The adult researchers felt that children would gain better responses from people of their own age. The children were empowered by conducting their own research and so the results gain in validity. However, it should be noted that this method has a weakness too; children do not always have the technical skills to conduct research. The Kellet and Dar study built in a programme of training sessions for the children.

## Questions

- What is participatory research?
- Why might participatory research be particularly suitable for the study of children's attitudes?

## Keywords

1. Participatory research - the participants choose the focus and methods that will be used.
2. Peer group - people of same age and status.

## What other qualitative ideas is it useful to be aware of?

### Bullets

- A variety of new methods have been developed.
- Kinesic research analyses body language.

# Understanding culture (Research skills)

- Phenomenologists study symbols and meanings.
- Narrative enquiry looks at personal stories
- Conversational analysis looks at the meanings attached to language.

## Text

A term that is becoming more popular in qualitative and observational study is grounded theory. In grounded theory, the group attempts to create a theory based in their own observable experience. They work with the researcher to reach a conceptual analysis of their situation through a series of steps (Banning 1995)

Kinesic research is based on the understanding that all humans react to situations and communicate through body language. They may say one thing, but their bodies reveal something quite different. Many researchers now use some form of short hand to annotate their work to reveal how the respondent acted when discussing issues. Frosh et al made notes of how boys reacted to certain questions and suggestions in their study of Young Masculinities. Focus group studies often make notes on how people act. Clearly there are dangers of over-interpretation of people's behaviour but the work can also be very interesting.

Phenomenology is very similar to ethnomethodology and sometimes the words can be used interchangeably but they do have slightly different theories underlying them.

Phenomenologists tend to study the meaning of social symbols; for example, pink has a particular association with a certain style of femininity that means some girls and most boys will avoid the colour unless they are trying to make some form of message about themselves for others to read. As Hebdige pointed out in his study of skinheads, the clothing they chose had more significance than just a sense of style.

Narrative enquiry is an interesting form of study. Narrative analysis is when people tell the story of their own lives. They create documentation and also attribute meaning to their stories. The kinds of documents that are used in narrative enquiry include diaries, photographs, letters and drama. Some examples can be seen on David Gauntlett's Theory.org website where serious research has been conducted through the medium of art. Adults were invited to use Lego bricks to create metaphors for their own lives and then to explore their feelings. The research is fully illustrated and can be seen online.

Feminists such as Jane Pilcher have used conversational analysis to explore the kind of language that people use when describing their lives. She found that despite rejecting feminism as a term, young women often had strongly feminist views, whereas older women were happy to call themselves feminist but behaved in a way that was less assertive than their younger relatives.

## Questions

- What is grounded theory?
- Why would a sociologist choose to use kinesic research?
- Why are social symbols important?

# Understanding culture (Research skills)

- What can be learnt through narrative research that is not accessible through traditional sociological research?
- How reliable are these methods?
- How valid are these methods?

## Keywords

1. Grounded theory - groups work with a researcher to explore their situation and develop theory.
2. Kinesic research - explores body language and how meaning is expressed.
3. Phenomenology - looks at the meanings behind social phenomena.
4. Ethnomethodology - looks at people in their lived situations.
5. Narrative enquiry - people tell their own stories.