

Task 1

There are a number of issues raised by research designs, in general. These include operationalisation, access and ethics.

1. Operationalisation

This provides the researcher with some means of measuring what is being researched.

It is more commonly used by positivists than by interpretivists. Those who take a scientific approach to research, will always want to make what they are intending to measure.

How would you operationalise the following? There are no right or wrong answers, but some may be more straightforward than others.

Educational success

Healthy living

Political participation

Homelessness

Old age

Cultural capital

2. Access

MacDonald and Marsh (2005), in their research on disconnected youth in the area of Teesside, gained access to young people in a number of ways.

They:

- interviewed 40 people who had worked with young people

They described these as 'stakeholder' interviews and said that one of the main reasons for doing them was to gain access via them to young people. These stakeholders acted as gatekeepers.

- spent a year going to youth clubs, being on the streets, riding around on buses and generally becoming familiar faces in the area.

In their study of bouncers, Hobbs et al (2003) gained access through the fact that one of them had been a bouncer. He went to another town, got a job and did covert participant observation. Another had been a DJ,

so used 'insider' knowledge.

The researchers investigating the London riots either knew key local people, such as youth workers, or, by using other local contacts, they asked people to put them in touch with anyone who had been involved and who might be willing to talk to them.

<https://www.theguardian.com/uk/2011/dec/05/reading-the-riots-methodology-explained>

3. **Ethics**

In any research, ethics is an important consideration.

As far as sociologists are concerned, the British Sociological Association has a code of conduct, which should be followed. This can be accessed on the BSA website. It does provide more detail than an AS/A2 student needs, however, it is worth reading the code that practising sociologists should follow.

Key ethical issues

Deception

Exploitation of the participants

Harm to the participants or to the researcher

Illegality

Informed consent

Privacy/Anonymity

How easy is it for those doing ethnographic research to follow those guidelines?

Brofenbrenner (1952) said 'The only safe way to avoid violating principles of professional ethics is to refrain from doing social research altogether'.

Some ethnographers find it is not entirely possible to follow the strict guidelines of the BSA, but Iphofen (2002) argued that '...our integrity as researchers demands that we recognise that the rights of our research participants are to be valued above our cherished research goals and [we must] seek to embody such principles in the research process from the outset'.

Deception

Colosi (2010) informed most of the people that she observed and interviewed. She was a 'dancer-researcher', but she said '...I quickly realised that it would be difficult if not impossible to inform customers about my project. However, with the exception of regulars, customers frequently changed, I therefore only had limited access to *Starlets*' clientele and as a result was not able to inform every customer entering the club. Despite ethical codes (BSA, 2007) frowning upon not informing customers, unfortunately some level of deception

when conducting this research could not be completely avoided. However, as Punch (1986) argues “...some measure of deception is acceptable in some areas where the benefits of knowledge outweigh the harms and where the harms have been minimized by following convention on confidentiality and identity.” (p.41).’

To what extent do you think Colosi was justified in deceiving some of the customers?

Do you know of other ethnographic research where there has been an element of deception?

Exploitation

Shane Blackman, aged 22, conducted an ethnographic study on ten New Wave Girls, aged 15-16, in a secondary school in the 1980s. He gained access to the girls, through a group of mods he had been studying in the same school. He gradually built up the trust of the girls and spent time with them during the school day. He walked home from school with them and hung about with them in a local graveyard. Eventually, he visited them at their homes, talked to their parents, went shopping with them, chatted to them in their bedrooms, attended gigs and as he says ‘importantly [went to] their all night parties and all girl gatherings’. He became the confidante of at least one girl. He showed them his field notes and consulted female colleagues about his findings.

Identify two ethical issues raised by this research.

In addition to the above issues, in what ways could it be said that he was exploiting the girls?

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Harm and exploitation

To return to Colosi (2010), she said 'In relation to harm and exploitation, I was concerned that because the lap-dancing club is host to a number of socially unacceptable and sometimes illegal activities, such as drug-taking, I had to be careful not to place myself, or any of the participants, in a vulnerable position. By exposing certain activities this could cause problems for participants in a number of ways, affecting their relationships with others, or could even put their place of work in jeopardy. In addition to this, certain data could potentially place some of the participants in physical danger with others.'

Illegality

In the 1980s, Dick Hobbs (1998) carried out an ethnographic study in the East End of London. He was interested in the underworld of the East End as well as the detectives working in the area. As far as ethics is concerned, he said:

'I found nothing immoral or even unusual in the dealing and trading that I encountered. However I do not consider the study to be unethical for the ethics that I adhered to were the ethics of the citizens of the East End.' He also said '...it will become apparent that it was necessary that I should be involved in certain illegal activities. To avoid any legal action against myself I appear in the text on various occasions under a pseudonym, as do all other participants. All names and locations have been altered to protect the guilty.'

Colosi did not take part in any illegal activities herself, whereas Hobbs clearly did.

Was either of them justified in what they did for the sake of their research – Colosi in condoning illegal activities and Hobbs in taking part?

Informed consent

Haleema Khanum (2013) carried out research on racism in the police and says access was difficult, but '...the researcher gained some interviewee trust by offering anonymity and using informed consent.'

Privacy/anonymity

As far as the London riots were concerned, the researchers found that once people involved were promised

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anonymity '...a surprising number agreed to take part in the study, often because they wanted their story to be heard.'

In addition to operationalisation, access and ethics, it is crucial that all stages of the design are evaluated and that any problems you think you might have are discussed.

Task 2

Go back to your table and using the concepts in the **Key Concepts** unit, together with the key concepts of reliability, validity, representativeness and generalisability, go through each stage and identify in columns 3 and 4 where they may be used. Remember – do not use the key concepts in the same sentence, as if they are somehow interchangeable.