

Notes on sociology

Sociology



Choosing a research method Webb, R. , Westergaard, H. , Trobe, K. , Steel, L. , (2008) AS Level Sociology, Brentwood: Napier Press p. 162 Sociologists use a range of different research methods and sources of data to collect information and test their theories. In this Topic, we shall identify the main methods and sources used in Sociology. We shall also look at the different types of data that these methods produce. We shall also examine the factors that influence sociologists' choice of what topic they research, and at some of the main practical, theoretical and ethical (moral) factors that affect their choice of which methods to employ.

Types of data P. 163 Sociologists use a wide variety of different methods and sources to obtain data (information or evidence) about society. To make sense of this variety, we can classify them into:

- Primary and secondary sources of data.
- Quantitative and qualitative data.

Primary and secondary sources of data Primary data is information collected by sociologists themselves for their own purposes. These purposes may be to obtain a first – hand ' picture' of a group or society, or to test a hypothesis (an untested theory).

Methods for gathering primary data include:

- Social surveys: these involve asking people questions in a written questionnaire or an interview.
- Participant observation: the sociologist joins in with the activities of the group he or she is studying.
- Experiments: sociologists rarely use laboratory experiments, but they sometimes use field experiments and the comparative method. A big advantage of using primary data is that sociologists may be able to gather precisely the information they need to test their hypotheses.

However, doing so can often be costly and time consuming. Secondary data is information that has been collected by someone else for their own purposes, but which the sociologist can then use. Sources of secondary data include:

- Official statistics produced by government on a wide range of issues, such as crime, divorce, health and unemployment, as well as other statistics produced by charities, businesses, churches and other organisations.
- Documents such as letters, diaries, photographs, official (government) reports, novels, newspapers and television broadcasts.

Using secondary data can be a quick and cheap way of doing research, since someone else has already produced the information. However, those who produce it may not be interested in the same questions as sociologists, and so secondary sources may not provide exactly the information that sociologists need. Quantitative and qualitative data

Quantitative data refers to information in a numerical form. Examples of quantitative data include official statistics on how many girls passed five or more GCSEs or on the percentage of marriages ending in divorce.

Similarly, information collected by opinion polls and market research surveys often comes in the form of quantitative data – for example, on the proportion of the electorate intending to vote for a particular party or how many people take holidays abroad. Qualitative data, by contrast gives a ‘feel’ for what something is like – for example, what it feels like to get good GCSE results, or for one’s marriage to end in divorce. Evidence gathered by using participant observation aims to give us a sense of what it feels like to be in that person’s ‘shoes.’

These methods can provide rich descriptions of these people's feelings and experiences. Factors influencing choice of method P. 164 Given the wide range of methods available, how do we select the right one for our research? Different methods and sources of data have different strengths and limitations and we need to be able to evaluate these when selecting which to use. We can look at these strengths and limitations in terms of a number of practical, ethical (moral) and theoretical issues. Practical issues Different methods present different practical problems. These include: Time and money

Different methods require different amounts of time and money and this may influence the sociologists' choice. For example, large – scale surveys may employ dozens of interviewers and data – inputting staff and cost a great deal of money. By contrast, a small – scale project involving a lone researcher using participant observation may be cheaper to carry out, but it can take several years to complete. The researcher's access to resources can be a major factor in determining which methods they employ. A well – known professor will probably have access to more research funds than a young student, for example.

Requirements of funding bodies Research institutes, businesses and other organisations that provide the funding for research may require the results to be in a particular form. For example, a government department funding research into educational achievement may have targets for pass rates and so require quantitative data to see whether these targets are being achieved. This means the sociologist will have to use a method capable of

producing such data, such as questionnaires or structured interviews.

Personal skills and characteristics

Each sociologist possesses different personal skills, and this may affect their ability to use different methods. For example, participant observation usually requires the ability to mix easily with others as well as good powers of observation and recall, while in - depth interviews call for an ability to establish a rapport (relationship of empathy and trust) with the interviewee. Not all sociologists have these qualities and so some may have difficulty using these methods. Subject matter It may be much harder to study a particular group or subject by one method than by another.

For example, it might prove difficult for a male sociologist to study an all - female group by means of participant observation, while written questionnaires may be useless for studying those who cannot read. Research opportunity Sometimes the opportunity to carry out research occurs unexpectedly and this means that it may not be possible to use unstructured methods such as questionnaires, which take longer to prepare. For example, a Glasgow gang leader offered ' James Patrick' (1973) the chance ' out of the blue' to spend time with his gang.

With little time to prepare, ' Patrick' had no option but to use participant observation. In other circumstances, the researcher may have been able to set up the research opportunity carefully beforehand and have plenty of time to select their methods. P. 165..... Ethical issues Ethics refers to moral issues of right and wrong. Methods that sociologists use to study people may raise a range of ethical questions. The British Sociological

Association sets out guidelines for the conduct of research, including the following principles: Informed consent

Research participants (the people being studied) should be offered the right to refuse. The researcher should also tell them about all relevant aspects of the research so that they can make a fully informed decision. Consent should be obtained before research begins, and if the study is lengthy, again at intervals throughout the process. Confidentiality and privacy Researchers should keep the identity of research participants secret in order to help to prevent possible negative effects on them. Researchers should also respect the privacy of research participants.

Personal information concerning research participants should be kept confidential. Effects on research participants Researchers need to be aware of the possible effects of their work on those they study. These could include police intervention, harm to employment prospects, social exclusion and psychological damage. Wherever possible, researchers should try to anticipate and prevent such harmful effects. Vulnerable groups Special care should be taken where research participants are particularly vulnerable because of their age, disability, or physical or mental health.

For example, when studying children in schools, researchers should have regard for issues of child protection. They should obtain the consent of both the child and the parent, and they should provide information in language that the child can understand. Covert research Covert research is when the researcher's identity and research purpose are hidden from the people being studied. This can create serious ethical problems, such as deceiving or lying to people in order to win their trust or obtain information. Clearly, it is

impossible to gain informed consent while at the same time keeping the research or its purpose secret.

However, some sociologists argue that the use of covert methods may be justified in certain circumstances. These may include gaining access to areas of social life closed to investigation by secretive, deviant or powerful groups.

Theoretical issues This refers to questions about what we think society is like and whether we can obtain an accurate, truthful picture of it. Our views on these issues will affect the kinds of methods we favour using. **Validity** A valid method is one that produces a true or genuine picture of what something is really like.

It allows the researcher to get closer to the truth. Many sociologists argue that qualitative methods such as participant observation give us a more valid or truthful account of what it is like to be a member of a group than quantitative methods such as questionnaires can. This is because participant observation can give us a deeper insight through first hand experience. **Reliability** Another word for reliability is replicability. A replica is an exact copy of something, so a reliable method is one which, when repeated by another researcher, gives the same results.

For example, in Physics or Chemistry, different researchers can repeat the same experiment and obtain the same results every time. In Sociology, quantitative methods such as written questionnaires tend to produce more reliable results than qualitative methods such as unstructured interviews. p.

166 **Representativeness** Representativeness refers to whether or not the people we study are a typical cross - section of the group we are interested

in. Imagine, for example, that we want to know about the effects of divorce on children.

It would take a great deal of time and money to study every child of divorced parents, and we might only be able to afford to study a sample of, say, 100 such children. However, if we ensure that our sample is representative or typical of the wider population, we can then use our findings to make generalisations about all children of divorced parents, without actually having to study all of them. Large – scale quantitative surveys that use sophisticated sampling techniques to select their sample are more likely to produce representative data.

Methodological perspective Sociologists' choice of method is also influenced by their methodological perspective – their view of what society is like and how we should study it. There are two contrasting perspectives on the choice of methods: positivism and interpretivism. Positivists – prefer quantitative data, seek to discover patterns of behaviour, see Sociology as a science. Interpretivists – prefer qualitative data, seek to understand social actors' meanings, reject the view that Sociology is a science.

Why do positivists and Interpretivists prefer different types of data? Positivists and Interpretivists collect and use different types of data: positivists prefer quantitative data, while Interpretivists prefer qualitative. This is because they make different assumptions about the nature of society and how we should study it. Positivists:

- Assume that society has an objective factual reality – it exists 'out there', just like the physical world.
- Society exerts an influence over its members, systematically shaping their behaviour patterns. Positivist research uses quantitative data to uncover and

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measure these patterns of behaviour. • By analysing quantitative data, positivists seek to discover the objective scientific laws of cause and effect that determine behaviour. • Positivists thus prefer questionnaires, structured interviews, experiments and official statistics. These produce data that is both reliable and representative. Interpretivists: • Reject the idea of an objective social reality – we construct reality through the meanings we give to situations, not the product of external forces. Our actions are based on the meanings we give to situations, not the product of external forces. • Interpretivist research uses qualitative data to uncover and describe the social actor's 'universe of meaning'. • By interpreting qualitative data, Interpretivists seek to gain a subjective understanding of actors' meanings and 'life worlds'. • Interpretivists thus prefer participant observation, unstructured interviews, and personal documents. These produce data that is valid. Functionalists and Marxists often take a positivist approach.

They see society as a large – scale (macro – level) structure that shapes our behaviour. By contrast, interactionists favour an interpretivist approach. They take a micro – level view of society, focusing on small – scale, face – to face interactions. The sociologist's theoretical perspective is usually the most important factor when choosing which method to use. Whenever possible, they will want to obtain the type of data – quantitative or qualitative – that their perspective views as most appropriate.

However, practical and ethical factors usually limit the choice of method. Just because a sociologist prefers a particular kind of data, doesn't mean that they can simply go ahead and gather it. Time, resources, access, consent, privacy and so on are all constraints on their choice. Finally, even sheer

chance may determine the method used. For example, David Tuckett (2001) describes how one postgraduate Sociology student found himself taken ill with tuberculosis and confined to a hospital ward, so he used this as an opportunity to conduct a participant observation study.

Choice of topic p. 167. Before choosing which method to use, sociologists need to decide what topic they wish to study. Several factors influence their choice: Theoretical perspective The sociologist's theoretical perspective is a major influence upon their choice of research topic. For example, a New Right researcher may study the effects of welfare benefits on the growth of lone – parent families, since the idea of welfare dependency is central to their standpoint.

By contrast, a feminist researcher is more likely to choose to study domestic violence, as opposition to gender oppression lies at the heart of Feminist theory. Society's values Sociologists themselves are part of the society they study and thus are influenced by its values. As these values change, so does the focus of research. The rise of Feminism in the 1960s and 1970s led to a focus on gender inequality and the environmentalist concerns of the 21st century have generated interest in 'green crimes' such as serious pollution or the unlawful transport of nuclear material.

Funding bodies Most research requires funding from an external body. These bodies include government agencies, charitable organisations and businesses. As the funding body is paying for the research, it will determine the topic to be investigated. For example, one of the major social concerns of New Labour governments after 1997 was the 'social exclusion' of some disadvantaged groups. As a result, government departments were keen to

fund research projects to investigate the causes and effects of social exclusion. Practical factors

Practical factors, such as the inaccessibility of certain situations to the researcher, may also restrict what topic they are able to study. For example, although sociologists may wish to study the ways in which global corporations make their decisions, this may not be possible because these are made in secrecy. Summary Sociologists test their theories using quantitative or qualitative data. Sociologists obtain primary data themselves, using methods including questionnaires, interviews and observation. Secondary data are produced by others but used by sociologists.

In choosing a method, sociologists take several issues into account: • Practical issues include time and funding. • Ethical issues include whether the researcher deceives the subjects. • Theoretical issues include validity (does the method give a truthful picture?), reliability (can it be replicated?) and representativeness (does it study a typical cross - section?). Perspective also affects choice of method. Positivists prefer quantitative data; interpretivists favour qualitative data. Choice of topic is also affected by society's values and funding bodies.