

Sociological methods of research



Sociology studies the social structures and influences society has on people, their experiences and interpretations of the world around them. Sociology provides information on how human societies are constructed, where our belief system may stem from, our daily routines and how social identities are formed. This essay will cover a small fraction of sociology; Quantitative and Qualitative methodology, its advantages and limitations. What will also be covered is quantitative approach to suicide by Emile Durkheim (1897) and his critic, J. D Douglas' qualitative approach to suicide. (Tutor2U 2010)

Emile Durkheim (1938) advocated Comte's methodology and agreed that social factors should be studied rather than what goes on internally; his rule was to 'consider social facts as things', he believed social facts make individuals behave in a certain ways (Haralambous).

Sociologists use different methodologies to reach their conclusion; ways of producing and analyzing data so the theories can be tested which are then accepted or rejected. Durkheim adopted the methods of natural science by applying the use of quantitative methods in his suicide study.

There are two ways in conducting a research, primary and secondary research. Primary research is where sociologist has to start from scratch as there is no data available, for it to be taken from. In order to do this the researcher needs to design they method of collecting data and analyze the results. Primary research is only validated if the research gives true measurement, descriptions or explanation of what was being studied. Unfortunately there is a likely hood that these finding may not be actually explain peoples everyday settings or actions. (Haralambous p815-16)

Secondary research is data that has already been produced by a previous researcher(s); Organizations such as companies, charities, trade unions are useful sources of data as well as documents such as letters, autobiographies and dairies. Secondary research may not be specific enough for researchers needs which in that case means they may have to look at more than one source to come to a conclusion and not only that but more than necessary time is taken up, also information given by the secondary data are sometimes questionable which is why the research has to be aware of this disadvantage (Haralambous 838-9)

Quantitative research, in sociology, contains measurements of variables within society; people and groups. In order to get people's opinions, a survey may be carried out; fieldwork, experiments or documentary research. When these methods are carried out, the researchers are usually avoiding being biased. In order to be unbiased as possible questions that are asked in a closed question form, so the participant's replies are very limited or generalised observations are then conducted. Researchers who carrying out quantitative research do not want to get distracted from the intent of the research; they know exactly what they are looking for so their researches are controlled, with closed questions or only statistical information (McGuigan 2010).

Alternatively, qualitative research, in sociology, attempts to gather more in depth understanding of individuals or groups actions in the context of social life (Giddens 2009). There usually is no scientific evidence and if there is, it's very little evidence. When using qualitative methods of research the investigator is more interested in deeper truths; they prefer to observe

things in their natural settings, make sense of things and interpret the information gained; in order to gain information they may interview people or observe them in non artificial settings. Qualitative is more theoretical rather than statistical. Information gained explores deeper into their interest and then data is collected by either observing or interviewing and from the data gain helps generate a hypothesis. Qualitative research digs deeper into reasons of why people may act the way they do.

A survey is a method used by researchers to gather information from a sample of individuals whether it's from a certain gender, age, race etc where the researcher's interest is at and changes depending on the purpose of the study. These samples of individuals are questioned on their information that will help the sociologist conclude, questions can be very much closed questions or open, they are sent out to participants or administered directly; surveys can have a variety of purposes and questions are asked in standardized procedures so the same questions are asked; Surveys help obtain a composite profile of the population. In all reputable survey organizations, organisers should present their results anonymously (Scheuren). Surveys are an advantage for generalizing a big group by getting smaller groups to answer the questions once there is an efficient amount of results. Unfortunately there is a risk of answers to the questions being answered falsely, may not actually reflect their true feelings or may even seem superficial. Surveys can be used to either get quantitative or qualitative data, solely relies on the wording of the question, whether it's a open question or a closed question.

Field work is when the investigator hangs out, works or lives with a group, organization or community and lives the realism of the environment by taking direct part in their activities; in other words 'real world' experience. Investigators who take part in this are likely to have a better understanding of those who actually are a part of what they are investigating. This method is more likely to be used to have a qualitative outcome.

There are two types of experiments, one being laboratory and the other being field experiment. Experiments are used to test the hypothesis and the relationships between the two variables are tested. It is conducted in a controlled environment where the variables are isolated and the correlation between things can be discovered. In sociology laboratory experiments are barely used as they believed variables cannot be controlled, the environment people are put in are artificial which will lead to the actions of people being artificial too and they do not believe its right to put laboratories just to measure the effect of variables. Field experiments have been proved to be more used and affective in sociology as they are conducted in normal everyday situations and environments; variables cannot be controlled. Although field experiments aren't conducted in laboratory they are still not exact but are more valid than lab experiments as the actions from the people are real; less artificial. But if people are aware that they are taking part in a experiment their actions can become artificial, for an example workers may work harder in normal conditions because they know they are being observed.

Emile Durkheim (1897) did a socially confusing study on suicide based on the hypothesis; as the individual's social unity decreased it was found there was

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an increase of suicide rates. Durkheim (1897) did not believe that reasoning for suicide was an individual act, he believed suicide was a social fact that can be proved by other social facts; the larger social forces can account for social facts. Durkheim (1897) employed quantitative research to his study of suicide, to make it have a scientific backbone as he believed it to be more rich and valid, by examining the official suicide statistics in France; these official statistics were secondary sources produced by the government. He believed that patterns of suicide were linked to the way which individuals were integrated and regulated by society and how they controlled them, he identified there were four types of suicide, and he generalized these four types of suicide to everyone; the four were Egoistic, Anomic, Altruistic and Fatalistic suicide. Egoistic suicide is when an individual is isolated or their ties to a group is broken or weakened; Catholics and Protestants. Anomic suicide is when an individual feels his life has a lack of meaning and feels as they are worthless, this can be a result of a divorce. Altruistic suicide is when an individual values others more for an example a mother who pushes their child out the way of an oncoming car and hurts herself or a suicide bomber. Fatalistic suicide is when an individual feels hopeless about their fate or feels excessively restraint for an example an individual may take their own life before the police arrest them to avoid being in a cell for the rest of their life or many years. Egotistic and Anomic are the two most common occurred, of the four.

In contrast to Durkheim's study of suicide Douglas (1967) is one of the many interpretive sociologists; interpretive approach strongly advocate qualitative data as they believe sociologists should be able to understand and interpret

the meanings and motives of actions and quantitative data does not help discover meanings and motives. Interpretative sociologists reject studying social facts as things, they say natural sciences deal with matter and matter does not have a mind which in that case has no consciousness which in that case there is no meaning in behaviour. Interpretive approach acknowledges that people have consciousness, it is believed that people will interpret the meaning of a stimulus and then react to it; meaning is attached to the stimulus.

J. D Douglas (1967) conducted his study ' Social meanings of Suicide', he believed that the official statistics were systematically biased and could have been made up by friends, families, and coroners. He disputed that Durkheim (YEAR) neglected other meanings attached to why an individual may commit suicide, he believed it to be wrong that Durkheim (YEAR) would treat all suicides the same without investigating other reasoning's. Douglas was concerned with meanings of suicide and believed there to be different reasons behind a suicide than the four generalisations Durkheim (YEAR) had made. In Douglas's (1967) study of social meanings for suicide he believed there to be four different meanings of suicide. Douglas (1967) believed in qualitative research methods to find his answers to why an individual would commit suicide; his methods were conducting case studies, unstructured interviews and diaries, from his investigations he found four types of suicide, the four are Transformation of the soul, this is where it is used as a way of getting into heaven, transformation of self, this is where the individual would want others to think differently of them, suicide where an individual wants

sympathy and suicide where the individual tries to get revenge by leaving the other person feeling guilty.