

No Nonsense Revision Notes: Research Methods

This brief set of revision notes has been designed to help students revise for the research methods section of both the AS and A level Sociology exams. It should be sufficient to get students through both the AQA, OCR and Welsh Board Syllabuses.

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All sections also contain a section of research methods applied to education, or 'methods in context'

Introduction to Research Methods in Sociology

Why do social research?

The simple answer is that without it, our knowledge of the social world is limited to our immediate and limited life-experiences. Without some kind of systematic research, we cannot know the answer to even basic questions such as how many people live in the United Kingdom, let alone the answers to more complex questions about why working class children get worse results at school or why the crime rate has been falling every year since 1995.

So the most basic reason for doing social research is to describe the social world around us: To find out what people think and feel about social issues and how these thoughts and feelings vary across social groups and regions. Without research, you simply do not know with any degree of certainty, what is going on in the world.

However, most research has the aim of going beyond mere description. Sociologists typically limit themselves to a specific research topic and conduct research in order to achieve a research aim or sometimes to answer a specific question.

Subjective and objective knowledge in social research

Research in Sociology is usually carefully planned, and conducted using well established procedures to ensure that knowledge is objective – where the information gathered reflects what is really ‘out there’ in the social, world rather than ‘subjective’ – where it only reflects the narrow opinions of the researchers. The careful, systematic and rigorous use of research methods is what makes sociological knowledge ‘objective’ rather than ‘subjective’.

Subjective knowledge – is knowledge based purely on the opinions of the individual, reflecting their values and biases, their point of view

Objective knowledge – is knowledge which is free of the biases, opinions and values of the researcher, it reflects what is really ‘out there’ in the social world.

NB – While most Sociologists believe that we should strive to make our data collection as objective as possible, there are some Sociologists (known as Phenomenologists) who argue that it is not actually possible to collect data which is purely objective – The researcher’s opinions always get in the way of what data is collected and filtered for publication.

Sources and types of data

In social research, it is usual to distinguish between primary and secondary data and qualitative and quantitative data

Quantitative data refers to information that appears in numerical form, or in the form of statistics.

Qualitative data refers to information that appears in written, visual or audio form, such as transcripts of interviews, newspapers and web sites. (It is possible to analyse qualitative data and display features of it numerically!)

Secondary data is data that has been collected by previous researchers or organisations such as the government. Quantitative sources of secondary data include official government statistics and

qualitative sources are very numerous including government reports, newspapers, personal documents such as diaries as well as the staggering amount of audio-visual content available online.

Primary data is data collected first hand by the researcher herself. If a sociologist is conducting her own unique sociological research, she will normally have specific research questions she wants answered and thus tailor her research methods to get the data she wants. The main methods sociologists use to generate primary data include social surveys (normally using questionnaire), interviews, experiments and observations.

The major primary research methods

Social Surveys

Social Surveys are typically structured questionnaires designed to collect information from large numbers of people in standardised form.

Social Surveys are written in advance by the researcher and tend to be pre-coded and have a limited number of closed-questions and they tend to focus on relatively simple topics. A good example is the UK National Census. Social Surveys can be administered (carried out) in a number of different ways – they might be self-completion (completed by the respondents themselves) or they might take the form of a structured interview on the high street, as is the case with some market research.

Experiments - aim to measure as precisely as possible the effect which one variable has on another, aiming to establish cause and effect relationships between variables.

Experiments typically start off with a hypothesis – a theory or explanation made on the basis of limited evidence as a starting point for further investigation, and will typically take the form of a testable statement about the effect which one or more independent variables will have on the dependent variable. A good experiment will be designed in such a way that objective cause and effect relationships can be established, so that the original hypothesis can be verified, or rejected and modified.

There are two types of experiment – laboratory and field experiments - A **laboratory experiment** takes place in a controlled environment, such as a laboratory, whereas a **field experiment** takes place in a real-life setting such as a classroom, the work place or even the high street.

Interviews - A method of gathering information by asking questions orally, either face to face or by telephone.

Structured Interviews are basically social surveys which are read out by the researcher – they use pre-set, standardised, typically closed questions. The aim of structured interviews is to produce quantitative data.

Unstructured Interviews, also known as informal interviews, are more like a guided conversation, and typically involve the researcher asking open-questions which generate qualitative data. The researcher will start with a general research topic in and ask questions in response to the various and differentiated responses the respondents give. Unstructured Interviews are thus a flexible, respondent-led research method.

Semi-Structured Interviews consist of an interview schedule which typically consists of a number of open-ended questions which allow the respondent to give in-depth answers. For example, the

researcher might have 10 questions (hence structured) they will ask all respondents, but ask further differentiated (unstructured) questions based on the responses given.

Participant Observation - involves the researcher joining a group of people, taking an active part in their day to day lives as a member of that group and making in-depth recordings of what she sees.

Participant Observation may be **overt**, in which case the respondents know that researcher is conducting sociological research, or **covert (undercover)** where the respondents are deceived into thinking the researcher is 'one of them' do not know the researcher is conducting research.

Ethnographies and Case Studies

Ethnographies are an in-depth study of the way of life of a group of people in their natural setting. They are typically very in-depth and long-term and aim for a full (or 'thick'), multi-layered account of the culture of a group of people. Participant Observation is typically the main method used, but researchers will use all other methods available to get even richer data – such as interviews and analysis of any documents associated with that culture.

Case Studies involves researching a single case or example of something using multiple methods – for example researching one school or factory. An ethnography is simply a very in-depth case study.

Longitudinal Studies – studies of a sample of people in which information is collected from the same people at intervals over a long period of time. For example, a researcher might start off in 2015 by getting a sample of 1000 people to fill in a questionnaire, and then go back to the same people in 2020, and again in 2025 to collect further information.

Factors Affecting Choice of Research Methods

Sociologists' choice of research method are affected by four broad factors:

1. Theoretical factors: Positivists prefer quantitative research methods and are generally more concerned with reliability and representativeness. Interpretivists prefer qualitative research methods and are prepared to sacrifice reliability and representativeness to gain deeper insight which should provide higher validity.

2. Practical factors: include such things as the amount of time the research will take, how much it will cost, whether you can achieve funding, opportunities for research including ease of access to respondents, and the personal skills and characteristics of the researcher.

3. Ethical factors: thinking about how the research impacts on those involved with the research process. Ethical research should gain informed consent, ensure confidentiality, be legal and ensure that respondents and those related to them are not subjected to harm. All this needs to be weighed up with the benefits of the research.

4. A fourth theme that runs all the way through this module is the Nature of the Topic studied. Some topics lend themselves to certain methods and preclude others!

Remember this by using the most handy and memorable mnemonic: **TPEN**

1. Theoretical factors effecting the choice of research method

Theoretical Factors include Positivism and Interpretivism, validity, reliability and representativeness

Positivism and Interpretivism in social research

As the AQA sees it, there are two general approaches to doing social research – Positivism and Interpretivism.

Positivists prefer quantitative methods such as social surveys, structured questionnaires and official statistics.

Positivists see society as shaping the individual and generally believe that one's position in society shapes one's actions. The positivist tradition stresses the importance of doing quantitative research such as large scale surveys in order to get an overview of society as a whole and to uncover social trends, such as the relationship between educational achievement and social class. This type of sociology is more interested in trends and patterns rather than individuals.

Positivists also believe that sociology can and should use the same methods and approaches to study the social world that "natural" sciences such as biology and physics use to investigate the physical world. By adopting "scientific" techniques sociologists should be able, eventually, to uncover the laws that govern societies just as scientists have discovered the laws that govern the physical world.

Positivists prefer research methods which allow for the researcher to remain detached from the research process – so they tend to use quantitative methods such as official statistics and social surveys in order to remain as objective as possible.

If you were to approach the question of why children from lower class backgrounds get worse GCSEs than children from middle class backgrounds using Positivist methods then you might do so using questionnaires designed to find out the differences between the lives of working class and middle class children – You would include questions about educational achievement, income and a range of questions designed to measure the affect of variables such as parental interest in education, amount of time spent on homework and so on, and you would aim to collect quantitative data from a thousands of households so you can measure the exact impact of these variables on educational achievement.

Interpretivists, or anti-positivists prefer qualitative, humanistic methods such as Unstructured interviews, participant observation and personal documents.

Interpretivists argue that individuals are not just puppets who react to external social forces as Positivists believe. According to Interpretivists individuals are intricate and complex and different people experience and understand the same 'objective reality' in very different ways and have their own, often very different, reasons for acting in the world.

Interpretivists argue that in order to understand human action we need to see the world through the eyes of the actors doing the acting. They aim to gain insight from the respondents, to gain an empathetic understanding of why they act in the way that they do from their own subjective point of view.

If you were to approach the question of why children from lower class backgrounds get worse GCSEs than children from middle class backgrounds you might just choose to focus on either

working class or middle class children, and just focus on a few respondents, and simply 'hang-out' with them for a few months, at-home and in-school, and you'd try and get them to tell their story from their point of view, to gain a rich in-depth picture of their lives in general and where education fitted into their broader world-view.

Validity, reliability and representativeness

These three key terms are fundamental to evaluating the usefulness of research methods. They should appear in any essay you do on any research method, without exception!

Validity – Research is valid if it provides a true picture of what is really 'out there' in world. Generally speaking, the more in depth the research, the fuller picture we get of the thoughts and feelings of the individuals acting, so the more valid the data and then more the researcher stands back and allows the respondents to 'speak for themselves' the more valid the data. In more quantitative research, such as social surveys, validity may be lacking because the researcher has decided on what questions should be answered by respondents, rather than letting the respondents decide on what they want to say for themselves.

Reliability – If research is reliable, it means if someone else repeats the same research with the same population then they should achieve the same results. In order to be reliable, research needs to be easily repeatable. Self-Completion questionnaires have high reliability because it is easy for another researcher to administer the questionnaire again. More in depth methods such as participant observation, where the researcher can spend several months or even years with a small group of respondents are not very reliable as it is impossible to replicate the exact procedures of the original research. More qualitative methods also open up the possibility for the researcher to get more involved with the research process, probing respondents for very detailed information.

Representativeness – Research is representative if the research sample reflects the characteristics of the wider population that is being studied. Whether a sample is representative thus depends on who is being studied. If one's research aim is to look at the experiences of all white male AS Sociology students studying sociology, then one's sample should consist of all white, male sociology students. If one wishes to study sociology students in general, one will need to have a proportionate amount of AS/ A2 students as well as a range of genders and ethnicities in order to reflect the wider student body.

2. Practical factors and research methods

All Social Research must take place within the practical constraints of the real world. Social researchers need to plan, collect, analyse and publish their data with limited budgets; they need to secure funding from somewhere willing to fund their research; they need to publish their research within a realistic time frame, otherwise, the data they collect may be worthless because it is so out of date; they also need to manage their own lives at the same time, and a final constraint on choice of research methods is the choice of topic itself!

Five practical constraints on social research.

Time – As a general rule, the more in-depth the method the more time consuming it is. Also, doing your own primary research tends to take longer than using secondary sources.

Money - As a general rule, the more in-depth the method the more money it costs. Also, doing your

own primary research tends to be more expensive than using secondary sources.

Funding - There are numerous organisations that fund sociological research including charities and businesses, but the largest by far is the government. In the past the government has been far more likely to fund quantitative research than qualitative. Can you suggest why this might be the case? The government is also more likely to fund research that fits in with its present aims. What kind of research topics would be more likely to get funding in contemporary Britain?

Opportunity and access to respondents – Some research topics and some kinds of respondents are more difficult to gain access to. It will probably be more difficult to gain access to research pupils in schools compared to teachers for example, and some people may be less willing to engage with research than others – those engaged in deviant or illegal activity might not want to be researched because what they are doing is not socially acceptable.

Personal situation, characteristics and skills of the researcher – Family and work commitments may prevent researchers from doing long term field work such as participant observation, and not everyone has the emotional intelligence or resilience required to engage in long-term empathetic field work. Some research topics might also be better suited to researchers with certain personal characteristics – girls in education might respond more openly to female researchers for example.

3. Ethical factors and social research

Ethical behaviour helps protect individuals and communities and offers the potential to improve the quality of life of individuals within society. Much social research is designed to tackle social problems such as social exclusion, and so sets out to collect knowledge in order to make the world a 'better place'. Understanding the causes of poverty, for example, can help us to reduce poverty, and understanding how people come to be involved in crime can help us to figure out how to prevent this from happening.

However, the actual process of doing research involves interfering with people's lives and so could potentially be harmful to those involved, and in order to minimise harm, most research follows ethical guidelines laid down by The British Sociological Association. There are five ethical criteria which should inform sociological research.

- Respondents should be able to give informed consent
- Information which the respondents give should be kept confidential (if they ask for it to be kept confidential)
- Research should not involve law breaking behaviour
- Research should not involve harming the respondents or anyone else involved in the research process
- Research should, ultimately, aim to do more good than harm for society.

Respondents should give informed consent

Respondents should be able to give informed consent to take part in the research process. In order to do this, they should know that research is taking place, what the purpose of the research is and what the researcher intends to do with the results.

Informed consent can be difficult with young children, because they may not have the capacity to fully understand the purposes of the research. Informed consent can also be a problem because

respondents might influence the results if they know the purpose of the research, and some experiments have deliberately misled respondents in order to ensure results are valid – Field experiments where actors act in a deviant way (vandalising property for example) in order to measure public responses are an example of this.

Informed consent is also not possible covert research – both in covert participant observation and in covert non-participant observation.

Respondents' information should be kept confidential.

It is often important for some aspects of research to remain confidential, especially when it could harm the respondents or an institution if others became aware of their responses. For example a teacher might have their career affected if a senior manager became aware of any negative comments she may have made, or accounts of disruptive behaviour of pupils were made public. For these reasons, researchers often have to guarantee anonymity and they often change the names of respondents and institutions when writing up results.

However, where case-studies are concerned and there is a lot of in-depth information being published about just a handful of people, confidentiality is less likely as the chances of being able to guess who said what might be fairly high. Anonymity also compromises reliability, as it makes it more difficult for other researchers to verify the results from particular respondents.

Some sociologists have taken the issue of confidentiality to extremes. While undertaking research on a particular prisoner In the USA Keith Tunnel (1998) discovered that the prisoner had taken on the identity of someone else in order to avoid a much larger prison sentence. The prison authorities became suspicious and investigated the prisoner's background. Thought Tunnel knew the truth, he felt he owed the prisoner confidentiality and deliberately lied, stating that he knew nothing about the 'identity theft'. As a result the prisoner was released many years early.

Research should avoid harming respondents

Research can often have an effect on the people being studied, and researchers need to think of this impact before they begin their research. When researching victims of crimes such as domestic abuse, or bullying in schools, this could bring up painful memories which could result in trauma in the respondents, and, if the abusers find out that respondents have spoken up to researchers this could result in further victimisation. Within the context of education, even researching something such as reasons for educational underachievement need to be treated sensitively, as people who have a past history of failing in school probably won't be happy about being reminded of it.

Research should not involve law breaking behaviour

Research should also take place within the boundaries of legality. This is only really an issue when researching criminal and deviant behaviour using participatory methods where researchers may have to take drugs to fit in with the group, or witness or even commit crimes in order not to blow their cover. A classic case of where this happened was with Sudhir Venkatesh' study Gang Leader for a Day where he participated in beating up a member of the gang he was studying as a form of punishment.

The social impact of research: research should do more good than harm

As mentioned earlier, much research aims to make society a better place, and choice of research

topic is sometimes based on this ethical decision to generate knowledge in order to improve society. The problem is that there are many competing (subjective) ideas about the kind of topics, the kind of data (quantitative or qualitative) and the kind of research process which are the best suited to improving society.

Positivists would argue that quantitative research which collects 'objective' and generalisable data about the causes of social problems such as crime, unemployment, educational underachievement is the best suited to improving society because governments can use this data to enact large scale social changes.

Marxists and Feminists would not necessarily agree, however, because people in power would not necessarily fund the type of research that could harm them, and would not act on any research which was done but was harmful to their interests. If research found that high levels of inequality is what causes educational underachievement among the lower classes, they would not expect those in power to adopt social policies to reduce inequality because that would mean the rich and powerful becoming poorer. For this reason some Marxist and Feminist researchers engage in smaller scale research and focused on highlighting social injustices in order to galvanise people into political action and make more radical changes. Some Marxist inspired sociologists have focused on issues such as Corporate Crime for example to highlight the extent to which this often hidden crime harms society, while a major focus of Feminist research has been to do with issues such as Domestic Violence and the persistence of sexist attitudes in social media.

Feminists and Interactionist researchers also believe the most ethical research is qualitative in nature – where the researcher co-creates the data on an equal basis with the respondents – using methods such as the unstructured interview – such methods are seen as ethical because they empower the respondents, allowing them to speak for themselves, which is especially useful when researching the powerless, or the voiceless, the kinds of people who are invisible (victims of domestic violence for example) or who are typically talked about in a negative way by people in power (criminals for example).

4. The nature of the topic to be studied

The methods chosen will vary with the topic being studied. If one wishes to find out more about criminal gangs, for example, these will not respond well to survey based research and other methods of study will need to be used. Similarly, if one wishes to do research on sensitive issues such as domestic violence, a closed question questionnaire may be a little 'cold' for such emotive issues.

Other topics lend themselves very naturally to survey based research, such as voting intentions in the run up to an election, or market research to glean people's feelings about new products.

The nature of the topic will also influence the way in which the research is administered. The British Crime Survey asks about people's experiences as victims of crimes, and so lends itself to a structured interview, given the sensitive nature of the topic and the possible need for clarification of the definitions of certain crimes.

Some of the questions addressed in in the sociology of education module include the following:

1. Researching how the values, attitudes, and aspirations of parents contribute to the achievement of certain groups of children
2. Why boys are more likely to be excluded than girls
3. Why white working class boys underachieve

4. Exploring whether teachers have 'ideal pupils' – whether they label certain groups of pupils favourably.
5. Looking at whether the curriculum is ethnocentric (racist/ homophobic)
6. Exploring the extent to which sexist 'bullying' disadvantages children
7. Examining how 'gender identities' enhance or hinder children's ability to learn
8. Assessing the relative importance of cultural deprivation versus material deprivation in explaining underachievement
9. Assessing the success of policies aimed to improve achievement such as 'employing more black teachers'

The research methods a researcher chooses will be influenced by the research aim or specific question. For example, questionnaire based research might be better suited to researching the influence of parental attitudes, while observational methods might be better suited to examine the influence of teacher labelling.

Official Statistics

Official Statistics are numerical information collected and used by the government and its agencies to make decisions about society and the economy. To the sociologist, they are a form of secondary quantitative data.

You need to be able to explain and assess the practical, ethical and theoretical strengths and limitations of different types of official statistic, such as those below:

Examples of Official Statistics

1. The UK National Census – A household Survey carried out every 10 years which collects basic information about households in the UK
2. Migration statistics – Which attempt to measure the number of people entering and leaving the UK.
3. Education Statistics – Such as GCSE and exam results published in the form of League Tables by the Department for Education
4. Crime Statistics – which include crimes recorded by the Police and The British Crime Survey.

Key Terms

Social Construction/ socially constructed – Interpretivists argue that official statistics are socially constructed – that is they are the result of the subjective decisions made by the people who collect them rather than reflecting the objective underlying reality of social life. For example Crime Statistics do not reflect the actual crime rate, only those activities which are defined as crimes by the people who notice them and who then go on to report those activities to the police.

Advantages of Official Statistics

Practical advantages

Many official statistics are freely available to researchers and the general public.

They are easy to access and to navigate – by using the Office for National Statistics (ONS) web site for example.

Theoretical advantages

Official Statistics make it very easy to get an overview of social life in Britain

The Census enables us to make easy comparisons between social groups and regions

They enable us to make historical comparisons over time because they often go back a long way – The UK Census goes back to 1841 for example

Some large data sets might not exist if they were not collected by the government

Official Statistics are favoured by Positivists because they allow us to spot trends, find correlations and make generalisations. They also allow the research to remain detached so there is less room for the subjective bias of the researcher to interfere with the research process.

Ethical Advantages

Official Statistics are collected in the 'national interest' and so avoid the biases of private research

They enable us to check up on the performance of public bodies such as the police and schools, making sure tax payers' money is spent efficiently.

Disadvantages of Official Statistics

Practical Disadvantages

They are far from cheap to collect. The ONS employs 4000 people merely to collate this data. The Census in 2011 cost hundreds of million pounds to produce.

They only exist in countries which have stable government. Many developing countries do not collect statistics on many areas of social life.

Official Statistics are collected for administrative purposes rather than for research purposes. Thus the data which exists and the categories and indicators used might not fit a researcher's specific research purposes.

Theoretical Disadvantages

Some Official Statistics lack validity. Crime statistics are a good example of this – certain crimes are notorious for being under-reported to the police – such as Domestic Violence for example.

The way that some social trends are measured changes over time – sometimes making historical comparisons difficult. For example, the way the Police Recorded Crimes changed twice in the 2000s.

Official statistics may also lack validity because they are collected by the state and massaged to make things look better than they actually are.

Marxist and Feminist Sociologists argue that official statistics serve the interests of elite groups and reflect the biases and prejudices of those in power

Ethical Disadvantages

The collection of some statistics can have harmful effects.

The introduction of school league tables and the requirement that schools publish their results has led to more teaching the test, a decline in creativity in education, and education generally being much more stressful for both pupils and teachers.

The collection of statistics is really about surveillance and control – The collection of data on school performance for example enables control of teachers while the collection of data on pupils allows 'problem pupils' to be identified and managed by social services from a young age.

Interactionist Sociologists and Feminists do generally not like Official Statistics because they provide no insight into the feelings of people in society. They are quite a cold, detached method to use to study society.

Exam Advice for Questions on Official Statistics

Examples of Exam Style Questions

Assess the strengths of using Official Statistics to study society (16)

Assess the limitations of using Official Statistics to study society (16)

HINT 1

Stick to the Practical, Ethical, Theoretical (Validity, Reliability, Representativeness) format and round off with Positivism vs Interpretivism.

HINT 2

Use specific Official Statistics to evaluate points – they each have different strengths and limitations – this will count as analysis!

HINT 3

NB – Assessing the strengths or limitations of a research method doesn't just mean juxtaposing random strengths and limitations from the lists above. It means SPECIFICALLY addressing the specific STRENGTHS with SPECIFIC EVALUATIONS.

An example of specifically evaluating a strength of Official Statistics:

One of the strengths of Official Statistics are that they are collected by the government and are often freely available to the researcher. HOWEVER, some governments do not collect data on many aspects of social life, especially those in poorer countries, meaning that their availability depends on the country, and in those countries where they are collected, free does not mean cheap, the ONS for example employs thousands of people to collect data in various areas, so the tax payer has to pick up the cost.

An example of not specially evaluating a strength of Official Statistics:

One of the strengths of Official Statistics are that they are collected by the government and are often freely available to the researcher. However a limitation is that official statistics lack depth and so Interpretivists wouldn't see the point in using them.

In the above example, the point and the evaluation match up as effectively in the first example.

Methods in Context: Secondary Quantitative Data in the Context of Education

How useful are official statistics for understanding differences in educational achievement by social class, gender and ethnicity?

Firstly, how do GCSE results vary by social class, gender and ethnicity?

The data below is taken from the Department for Education's document - GCSE and Equivalent Attainment by Pupil Characteristics 2014

GENDER - Girls Outperform Boys in Education - 61.7% of girls achieved at least 5 A*- C GCSEs compared to 51.6% of boys; this is a gap of 10.1 percentage points.

ETHNICITY - Chinese pupils are the highest achieving group. 74.4% of Chinese pupils achieved at least 5 A*- C GCSEs. This is 17.9 percentage points above the national average (56.6%).

Children from a black background are the lowest achieving group. 53.1% of pupils from a black background achieved at least 5 A*- C GCSEs. However, things are also improving: 75.5% of black pupils are making the expected progress in English and 68.4% in mathematics; both above the national average of 71.6% for English and 65.5% for mathematics.

SOCIAL CLASS- Here, instead of social class we need to use Pupils eligible for Free School Meals (FSM)- and 'disadvantaged pupils'.

33.5% of pupils eligible for FSM achieved at least 5 A*- C GCSEs compared to 60.5% of all other pupils. This is a gap of 27.0 percentage points.

36.5% of disadvantaged pupils achieved at least 5 A*- C GCSEs compared to 64.0% of all other pupils, a gap of 27.4 percentage points.

Some Strengths of Official Statistics on Educational Achievement by Pupil Characteristic

Good Validity (as far as it goes) -These data aren't collected by the schools themselves - so they're not a complete work of fiction, they are based on external examinations or coursework which is independently verified, so we should be getting a reasonably true representation of actual achievement levels. HOWEVER, we need to be cautious about this.

Excellent representativeness - We are getting information on practically every pupil in the country, even the ones who fail!

They allow for easy comparisons by social class, gender and ethnicity. These data allow us to see some pretty interesting trends - As in the table below - the difference between poor Chinese girls and poor white boys stands out a mile... (so you learn straight away that it's not just poverty that's responsible for educational underachievement)

These are freely available to anyone with an internet connection

They allow the government to track educational achievement and develop social policies to target the groups who are the most likely to underachieve - These data show us (once you look at it all

together) for example, that the biggest problem of underachievement is with white, FSM boys.

Some Limitations of the Department for Education's Statistics on Educational Achievement

We need to be a little cautious about the validity of some of these results, especially when making comparisons over time. This is because until last year schools could count any one of 3000 'soft' subjects as equivalent to a GCSE, which could make the results look better than they actually are. Also, with coursework subjects there is a potential problem with 'grade inflation' within schools, and not to mention the fact that with coursework we are least partially measuring the degree to which parents have helped their children, rather than their children's actual personal achievement.

Comparisons over time might be difficult because of recent changes to the qualifications that are allowed to be counted towards attainment measurements. In 2014 the following changes were made:

- The number of qualifications which counted towards 'GCSE or equivalent' results were drastically reduced - around 3,000 unique qualifications from the performance measures between 2012/13 and 2013/14.
- The associated point scores for non-GCSEs was adjusted so that no qualification will count as larger than one GCSE in size. For example, where a BTEC may have previously counted as four GCSEs it will now be reduced to the equivalence of a single GCSE in its contribution to performance measures.
- The number of non-GCSE qualifications that count in performance measures was restricted to two per pupil.

All of this has had the effect of making the results look worse than they actually are:

These stats don't actually tell us about the relationship between social class background and educational attainment. Rather than recording data using a sociological conception of social class, the government uses the limited definition of Free School Meal eligibility - which is just an indicator of material deprivation rather than social class in its fuller sense. Marxist sociologists would argue that this is ideological - the government simply isn't interested in measuring the effects of social class on achievement - and if you don't measure it the problem kind of disappears.

Almost certainly the biggest limitation - **these stats don't actually tell us anything about 'WHY THESE VARIATIONS EXIST'** - Of course they allow us to formulate hypotheses - but (at least if we're being objective) we don't get to see why FSM children are twice as likely to do badly in school... we need to do further research to figure this out.

Secondary Qualitative Data in Sociology

Secondary Qualitative Data is information that already exists in written or audio visual format – in contrast to official statistics and secondary quantitative data more generally, it is non-numerical.

Secondary Qualitative Data typically take the form of documents – and there are a huge variety of them. They include government reports, newspapers, novels, letters, diaries, as well as pictures, and television and radio output.

It is useful to distinguish between public and personal sources of secondary qualitative data:

Public documents are produced by organisations such as government departments and their agencies as well as businesses and charities and include OFSTED and other official government enquiries. These reports are a matter of public record and should be available for anyone who wishes to see them.

Personal documents are first-hand accounts of social events and personal-experiences, and they generally include the writer's feelings and attitudes. They include such things as letters, diaries, photo albums and autobiographies.

Personal Documents may sometimes be referred to as Life Documents

Life documents are created by individuals and record details of that person's experiences and social actions. They are predominantly qualitative and may offer insights into people's subjective states. They can be historical or contemporary and can take a wide variety of forms. Ken Plummer (1982) illustrates this diversity when he says: "people keep diaries, send letters, take photos, write memo's, tell biographies, scrawl graffiti, publish memoirs, write letters to the papers, leave suicide notes, inscribe memorials on tombstones, shoot films, paint pictures, make music and try to record their personal dreams."

Some General Advantages of Using Documents in Social Research

There is a wealth of different types of secondary qualitative information available – **it is the richest vein of information available** to researchers in many topic areas.

Sometimes documents might be **the only means of researching the past**.

Interpretivists generally favour using life documents in social research as they are not produced by the researcher, but **written by respondents for their own purposes**. This means they should give us an insight into the author's own world view and meaning. This, of course, depends on us being able to verify the credibility and authenticity of documents (See limitations below).

At a practical level, many **public documents** are **freely available to the researcher**, and many of them are very in depth.

Ethically there are few issues with accessing public documents.

Some General Disadvantages of Using Documents in Social Research

John Scott (1990) identifies four potential theoretical limitations which might undermine the

usefulness of historical documents.

1. **The document may lack authenticity** – Parts of the document might be missing because of age, and we might not even be able to verify who actually wrote the document.
2. **The document may lack credibility** – We may not be able to verify why somebody wrote the document, and what their motive was. We need to know if the document has been distorted for political reasons, for example, because this would mean they would put a spin on the content.
3. **Meaning** – It may be hard to interpret the meaning of the documents if they are written in an archaic language. With older documents it is not possible to get the authors to clarify what they meant if they are dead.
4. **Representativeness** – Documents may not be representative of the wider population – especially a problem with older documents. Many documents do not survive because they are not stored, and others deteriorate with age and become unusable. Other documents are deliberately withheld from researchers and the public gaze, and therefore do not become available.

Using Documents in the Context of Researching Education

This section of the hand-out focuses on the following types of Public and Personal Documents which are produced in the context of education – i.e. produced by the Department for Education, OFSTED, schools themselves, or teachers and pupils.

The Strengths and Limitations of Using Public Documents to Research Education

Public documents available to the researcher of education include:

Ofsted and Inspection Reports

School Websites

School prospectuses

School policy documents

School text books

Theoretical Issues when using public documents to research education

In terms of validity, while school web sites and prospectuses can be trusted to provide some basic information about what subjects are on offer, GCSE results and extra-curricular activities, the credibility of such sites is undermined by the fact that they produced to advertise the school in a positive light, and all of these web sites put a positive spin on the school or college. For example, although schools are required to publicise their results, they do have some freedom to emphasise the way they report them so they can portray themselves in the best possible light.

OFSTED reports may provide greater insight into what's going on in a school than the statistical snap shot of the yearly GCSE results, but OFSTED inspections only last for three days, and are typically only done every four years, so it is quite easy for a school to put on an act for this short a period and produce a performance which is better than usual.

Conversely, there are many schools that feel as if they have been harshly judged by OFSTED inspectors, and question the validity of OFSTED reports, feeling that the grade they've been awarded does not reflect the reality of school life. This is partly because OFSTED inspectors only really get to see one lesson by each teacher, which is not representative, but also because the focus of different OFSTED inspectors will be different in different schools, raising the prospect that schools are not being judged by the same standard.

Policy documents produced by schools, such as student codes of conduct might be useful for seeing how schools function in an ideal-world, but they lack validity in that they tell you nothing about how many students actually stick to the code of conduct or what's done with students who break the code of conduct. If you wanted to get more of an insight into this, a researcher would have to gain access to individual reports of each student, which would be more difficult to obtain.

Representativeness and Public Documents in Educational Research

All schools and colleges are required to publish prospectuses and results, so these should cover a 100% sample of educational institutions, but the same cannot be said of OFSTED reports – schools graded outstanding go into 'light touch' mode and may not be observed for several years.

Practical Issues with public documents when researching education

Since the 1988 education act many Public documents on education are freely available to the public – OFSTED reports on schools are easily obtainable, and schools publish a wide variety of information about themselves in their prospectuses and on their websites.

Schools also publish a huge variety of policy documents – such as student codes of conducts, equal opportunities policies and information about how they implement every child matters and safeguarding policies – all of which are likely to be made available to researchers on request, since they are a matter of public record. These are useful as they give an account of the 'official' picture of schools in Britain from the perspective of management.

Using Personal Documents to Research Education

Personal documents in the context of education include school reports on pupils, pupils written work, pupils' and teachers' diaries and Notes and text messages passed between pupils

Validity and Personal Documents

Most personal documents available are likely to be of a public nature (social media accounts for example) and because they are public, they would have been subjected to impression management so they are acceptable – so while this can give us an insight into what teachers and staff think is socially acceptable, using these to give us a picture of what people actually think about school life is problematic. The more 'personal' and private a document is, then the higher the validity is likely to be – however, the number of people who write down in-depth personal accounts of their school experiences is tiny.

Representativeness

If one could gain access to social media accounts and personal messaging services, representativeness should be good as the majority of students have access and make use of these services.

As mentioned above, hardly anyone keeps diaries any more, and so representativeness here is a problem.

If a researcher is lucky enough to gain access to disciplinary records, these may not be representative of the actual underlying patterns of student disobedience – teacher bias may increase the number of certain types of students who have undergone disciplinary procedures.

Practical Issues

For a start, these will be very difficult to access. Things like teacher mark books, records of conversations with students, and disciplinary records may not be available because of the ethical requirement to safeguard children's privacy. The same could also be true of the written work of pupils.

Where private messages and texts are concerned, it is unlikely that researchers will be allowed access to students personal mobile phones or tablets, and even if they could gain access, threads of conversation may have been deleted shortly after they took place, and the more 'anti-school' such messages are, the more likely they are to have been deleted.

Ethical Issues when using public and private documents in educational research

There are no particular ethical problems with using publicly produced documents,

When using private or personal documents, there are some ethical concerns. If the researcher is given access to teacher mark books, records of conversations with students, and disciplinary records this won't necessarily be with the informed consent of the pupils for example.

Content Analysis of The Mass Media in Sociological Research

Mass Media resources are widely used in Social Research. NB For some reason, all of the AQA approved text books only seem to expect you to know about content analysis applied to film/ TV and Print Media, rather than applying this to online media (web sites/ social media/ dating sites) – So I'm only here focusing on analysis of 'traditional media' rather than 'new media' – DON'T SHOOT THE MESSENGER – if you want to know why AQA insist on being stuck in dark ages – ask them!

Some Mass Media sources may provide sociologists with information about the social world, but their main interest to Sociologists is as objects of study rather than as sources of information.

Sources produced for entertainment purposes (films/ TV shows, special interest magazines) cannot reasonably be expected to paint a true picture of the social world, but they of interest to sociologists because they can tell us what media producers think people want to see, and it also interesting to see how different groups are represented in fictional TV shows, and the extent to which distortion takes place. When we look at the issue of crime, for example, we find that violent crime is disproportionately featured in crime dramas, whereas 75% of crime is less-serious property crime, and where groups are concerned, sociologists are interested in the extent to which the media perpetuates stereotypes.

News sources may claim to provide accurate information about what is going on in society – but to most sociologists the news is a social construction – it may reflect reality to an extent, but it also reflects the selection biases (what people think are important) and political prejudices of journalists and news editors. NB In the UK Journalists disproportionately come from private school (wealthy middle class backgrounds) – and so there is an inherent right wing bias in media reporting.

Below I distinguish between two basic types of content analysis – formal (quantitative) content analysis and qualitative content analysis.

Formal (Quantitative) Content Analysis

Formal Content Analysis is a quantitative approach to analysing mass media content and involves developing a system of classification to analyse the key features of media sources and then simply counting how many times these features occur in a given text.

The simplest form of content analysis is a word or phrase count, which these days can be done on millions of books which have been scanned into Google's database, more complex forms involve looking at broader categories of content – which types of crime appear in news media for example, or what are the major categories of news (entertainment/ sport/ politics) – or one can analyse pictures to see the representation of men compared to women for example.

The advantages and disadvantages of formal content analysis

It minimises researcher bias and typically has good reliability because there is less room for the researcher's interpretations to bias the analysis.

It is quicker to do than qualitative forms of content analysis.

Weaknesses emerge when you start to use broader categories – which can be interpreted differently by different people.

Simply counting the content of a media text tells you nothing about the context in which it takes place, or the broader meaning which the words or pictures convey.

Qualitative Content Analysis: Thematic and Textual Analysis

Thematic Analysis involves trying to understand the intentions which lie behind the production of mass media documents by subjecting a particular area of reportage to detailed investigation.

A good example of this is Soothill and Walby's (1991) study of newspaper reporting of sex crime. They found that the reporting tended to emphasise the danger of being raped in public places and the pathological nature of individual rapists. It tended to ignore the prevalence of rape by partners and friends of victims and the wider context of patriarchal power within sex crimes.

Textual Analysis involves examining how different words are linked together in order to encourage readers to adopt a particular view of what is being reported.

A classic example of this is the Glasgow University Media Group's reporting of the miner's strikes in the 1980s. They found that the miners 'demanded' better working conditions, while the managers 'offered' certain changes to working conditions.

Textual analysis also involves the use of **semiology** – which is the analysis of signs and symbols.

The advantages and disadvantages of qualitative content analysis

Qualitative content analysis allows the researcher to look at the full context in which media reporting takes place, it thus allows for a fuller description of what the media is portraying.

Both thematic and textual analysis lack objectivity and are reliant on the researcher's own interpretation of the meaning of media texts.

Critics of these forms of analysis have also suggested that those who use these methods tend only to pick samples which reflect their own views, and it would be difficult to do such detailed analysis on a wide range of texts.

Social Surveys

Social surveys are the most commonly used type of social research method. A social survey involves obtaining information in a standardised form from large groups of people.

Surveys are carried out by a wide range of organisations such as government departments, schools and colleges, businesses, charities, and market research and consumer groups. You may well have been stopped in a high street by a market researcher asking your opinion about a new design of chocolate bar wrapper, or phoned by an independent polling company such as Mori asking you to do a brief survey on any number of social issues.

Two well-known examples of Social Surveys in the United Kingdom include:

The UK National Census – which is sent out to every UK household every ten years and asks basic information about who lives in the household, employment, education, religion and health.

The British Social Attitudes Survey – which has a sample of around 3000 and asks people a range of questions to measure opinions on a range of topics – such as family life, religious belief, immigration and environmental issues.

Types of Social Survey and Key Terms

Social Surveys are typically questionnaires designed to collect information from large numbers of people in standardised form. Surveys are prepared in advance of giving them to respondents, and so they have a ‘structure’ to them. Most questionnaires will have a high degree of structure, and it is difficult to see how one could have an ‘unstructured questionnaire’. Because of this questionnaires tend to be a very formal means of collecting data, allowing the researcher little freedom to ‘follow her nose’ unlike other methods such as unstructured interviews or participant observation.

Pre-coded, or closed question questionnaires are those in which the respondent has to choose from a limited range of responses. Two of the most common types of closed questionnaire are the simply yes/no questionnaire and the scaled questionnaire, where respondents are asked to either strongly agree, agree, disagree, or strongly disagree with a particular statement. This latter form of scaling is known as a ‘Likert Scale’ (basically a strength of feeling scale).

One of the main problems of this type of questionnaire is the **imposition problem**, which refers to the risk that the research might be imposing their view, or framework on respondents rather than getting at what they really think about the issue.

Open-ended question questionnaires are less structured than pre-coded questionnaires. Although open-ended questionnaires will still usually have set questions, there is no pre-set choice of answers. Open questions allow individuals to write their own answers or dictate them to interviewers.

Different ways of administering surveys

The researcher has a choice of administering her questionnaire in a number of different ways. The most obvious difference choice is between whether respondents complete the surveys themselves, making it a ‘self-completion questionnaire’, or whether the researcher fills in the information, effectively making it a structured interview.

Some of the more obvious choices for ‘administering’ questionnaires include:

- Sending questionnaires by post, or by email.
- Simply putting the questionnaire online and leaving it to be completed
- Doing a structured interview in person, either on the street, house to house.
- Doing the interview by phone.

Structured interviews with closed questions

One obvious way of improving the response rate to questionnaires is to conduct a face to face interview by paying a researcher to read out the questionnaire to the respondent and writing down their responses on their behalf. Having an interviewer present can also reduce misinterpretation of questions as respondents can ask for clarification where necessary and an interviewer can also target specific groups if necessary, as with much market research.

On the downside, structured interviews are more time consuming. One researcher can only do one interview at a time (although focus groups are an exception to this, they too are limited in terms of the amount of respondents one can deal with in one go) whereas a self completion questionnaire can be administered to hundreds of people within minutes.

Structured Questionnaires and Interviewer Bias

At a more theoretical level, having an interviewer present opens up the possibility of interviewer bias occurring, where the presence of the researcher interferes with the results obtained. The social characteristics of the interviewer may affect the responses, depending on the age, gender and ethnicity of the researcher in relation to the respondent. If one is researching the prevalence of domestic violence against women, for example, one might reasonably expect a female victim to give different responses to a female researcher rather than a male researcher.

Each interviewer will have their own style of interviewing; right from selecting who they ask questions to if they are on the street, to the tone of voice, facial expressions, and pacing of the interview. Each of these nuances may affect the results, meaning the reliability of the research is compromised because it is difficult for another researcher to repeat the exact conditions under which previous interviews took place. To be fair, with closed question, structured interviews, and with trained researchers, such interviewer bias should be kept to a minimum, and such problems are likely to be more exaggerated with more qualitative unstructured interviews.

The Advantages of Questionnaires

Detachment, Objectivity and Validity

Positivists favour questionnaires because they are a detached and objective (unbiased) method, where the sociologist's personal involvement with respondents is kept to a minimum.

Hypothesis Testing

Questionnaires are particularly useful for testing hypotheses about cause and effect relationships between different variables, because the fact that they are quantifiable allows us to find correlations.

For example, based on government statistics on educational achievement we know that white boys on Free School Meals achieve at a significantly lower level than Chinese girls on Free School Meals.

We reasonably hypothesise that this is because differences in parental attitudes – Chinese parents may value education more highly, and they may be stricter with their children when it comes to homework compared to white parents. Good questionnaire design and appropriate sampling would enable us to test out this hypothesis. Good sampling would further allow us to see if those white working class boys who do well have parents with similar attitudes to those Chinese girls who do well.

Representativeness

Questionnaires allow the researcher to collect information from a large number of people, so the results should be more representative of the wider population than with more qualitative methods. However, this all depends on appropriate sampling techniques being used and the researchers having knowledge of how actually completes the questionnaire.

Reliability

Questionnaires are generally seen as one of the more reliable methods of data collection – if repeated by another researcher, then they should give similar results. There are two main reasons for this:

When the research is repeated, it is easy to use the exact same questionnaire meaning the respondents are asked the exact same questions in the same order and they have the same choice of answers.

With self-completion questions, especially those sent by post, there is no researcher present to influence the results.

The reliability of questionnaires means that if we do find differences in answers, then we can be reasonably certain that this is because the opinions of the respondents have changed over time. For this reason, questionnaires are a good method for conducting longitudinal research where change over time is measured.

Practical Advantages

Questionnaires are a quick and cheap means of gathering large amounts of data from large numbers of people, even if they are widely dispersed geographically if the questionnaire is sent by post or conducted online. It is difficult to see how any other research method could provide 10s of millions of responses as is the case with the UK national census.

In the context of education, Connor and Dewson (2001) posted nearly 4000 questionnaires to students at 14 higher education institutions in their study of the factors which influenced working class decisions to attend university.

With self-completion questionnaires there is no need to recruit and train interviewers, which reduces cost.

The data is quick to analyse once it has been collected. With online questionnaires, pre-coded questions can be updated live.

Ethical Issues

When a respondent is presented with a questionnaire, it is fairly obvious that research is taken place,

so informed consent isn't normally an issue as long as researchers are honest about the purpose of the research.

It is also a relatively unobtrusive method, given the detachment of the researcher, and it is quite an easy matter for respondents to just ignore questionnaires if they don't want to complete them.

Theoretical Disadvantages of Questionnaires

Issues affecting validity - Interpretivists make a number of criticisms of questionnaires

Firstly there is the imposition problem – When the researcher chooses the questions, they are deciding what is important rather than the respondent, and with closed ended questions the respondent has to fit their answers into what's on offer. The result is that the respondent may not be able to express themselves in the way that want to. The structure of the questionnaire thus distorts the respondents' meanings and undermines the validity of the data

Secondly, Interpretivists argue that the **detached nature** of questionnaires and the **lack of close contact** between researcher and respondent means that there is no way to guarantee that the respondents are interpreting the questions in the same way as the researcher. This is especially true where very complex topics are involved – If I tick 'yes' that I am Christian' – this could mean a range of things – from my being baptised but not practising or really believing to being a devout Fundamentalist. For this reason Interpretivists typically prefer qualitative methods where researchers are present to clarify meanings and probe deeper.

Thirdly, researchers may not be present to check whether respondents are giving **socially desirable answers**, or simply lying, or even to check who is actually completing the questionnaire. At least with interviews researchers are present to check up on these problems (by observing body language or probing further for example)

Issues affecting representativeness

Postal questionnaires in particular can suffer from a low response rate. For example, Shere Hite's (1991) study of 'love, passion, and emotional violence' in the America sent out 100, 000 questionnaires but only 4.5% of them were returned.

All self-completion questionnaires also suffer from the problem of a self-selecting sample which makes the research unrepresentative – certain types of people are more likely to complete questionnaires – literate people for example, people with plenty of time, or people who get a positive sense of self-esteem when completing questionnaires.

Practical Problems with Questionnaires

The fact that questionnaires need to be brief means you can only ever get relatively superficial data from them, thus for many topics, they will need to be combined with more qualitative methods to achieve more insight.

Although questionnaires are a relatively cheap form of gathering data, it might be necessary to offer incentives for people to return them.

Structured Interviews are also considerably more expensive than self-completion questionnaires.

Ethical Issues with questionnaires

They are best avoided when researching sensitive topics.

Social Surveys in the Context of Education

In 2001 Conor and Dewson used social surveys to research why teenagers from lower social class backgrounds are less likely to go to university, Below are details of the study and a discussion of some of the strengths and limitations of using this method to research this topic.

Background

Despite a major expansion in student numbers, which has enabled more people from wider backgrounds to take higher education (HE) qualifications, students from lower social class backgrounds continue to be under represented. Fewer than 20% of people from the lower social class groups (III_m, IV and V) participate in HE, which is well below the 45 per cent who participate from the higher social class groups (III_n, II and I).

In 2000 Conor and Dewson (2001) from the Institute of Education set out to add to the body of knowledge on why lower class students choose not to go to university **EVEN WHEN THEY ARE QUALIFIED TO DO SO.**

Methodology

The main method involved sending out 4000 questionnaires to students at 14 universities in England and Wales, and received 1600 back (a 40% response rate). Students were asked a range of questions about their motivations for going to university and off-putting factors, using Likert Scales.

Example Questions:

My parents encouraged me to go to university: strongly agree 5 4 3 2 1 strongly disagree

I was afraid of getting into debt strongly agree: 5 4 3 2 1 strongly disagree

The survey analysis used a social class measure based on parental occupation of individuals. These were grouped into the standard five classifications. The term 'lower social class groups' was used for Groups III_m, IV and V — covering skilled manual, partly skilled and unskilled occupations. 'Higher social class groups' referred to Groups I, II and III_n — professional, intermediate and skilled manual.

The researchers also used individual and focus group interviews covering more than 300 students to add further insight into the research.

Findings

- The main reasons why people from lower social class groups had decided against going on to HE study, though qualified to get a place, were twofold. They either wanted to start employment, earn money and be independent at an earlier age, or they had a career or job goal in mind which did not require a degree qualification.

- Affording the cost of studying and being in debt were also key reasons for not going to university.
- On the whole, students from lower social class groups in the survey also appeared to have lower levels of confidence about their ability to succeed in HE and in taking career decisions, than did those from higher social class groups.

Experiments in Sociology

Experiments aim to measure the effect which one or more independent variables have on a dependent variable. The aim is to isolate and measure as precisely as possible the exact effect independent variables have on dependent variables

For example, if you grow tomato plants as a hobby and wanted to find out the effect which the amount of water, the temperature, and the amount of light has on the amount of tomatoes each plant produces you could design a series of experiments in which you varied the amount of light etc. and then measure the effects on the amount of fruit produced.

In the above example, the amount of tomatoes is known as the dependent variable and the water, the temperature and the amount of light are the independent variables.

Experiments typically start off with a hypothesis which is a theory or explanation made on the basis of limited evidence as a starting point for further investigation. A hypothesis will typically take the form of a testable statement about the effect which one or more independent variables will have on the dependent variable.

For example 'tomato plants grown at a temperature of 21 degrees will produce more tomatoes than plants grown at 20 degrees.'

The above is a relatively simple hypothesis and testing it out is relatively straightforward – You would simply have to put a sample of tomato plants in an area heated to 21 degrees (known as the experimental group), and another sample in an area heated to 20 degrees (known as the control group). If you wanted to measure the precise effect temperature had on the amount of tomatoes produced, you would need to keep all other variables such as the amount of water, the type of soil etc. exactly the same, and only change the single variable of temperature (by 1 degree).

NB – This isn't an idle example – tomatoes are one of the most popular fruits in the world, and agricultural scientists have conducted thousands of experiments to find the ideal growing conditions for different varieties of tomatoes where they manipulate combinations of independent variables.

Laboratory Experiments

The laboratory experiment takes place in a controlled environment and is the main method used in the natural sciences such as Physics, Chemistry and Biology, and there are numerous experiments which have been designed to test numerous scientific theories about the temperatures at which various substances freeze or melt, or how different chemicals react when they are combined under certain conditions.

The laboratory experiment and is also commonly used psychology, where tests have been designed to measure the effects of sleep loss and alcohol on concentration and reaction time, and some very ethically dubious experiments designed to measure the effects of media violence on children and the responses of people to authority figures.

The logic of the experimental method is that it is a controlled environment which enables the scientist to measure precisely the effects of independent variables on dependent variables, thus establishing cause and effect relationships. This in turn enables them to make predictions about how

the dependent variable will act in the future.

Advantages of Laboratory Experiments

Accuracy and Precision- Laboratory experiments allow the precise effects of independent variables on dependent variables to be measured. This in turn makes it possible to establish cause and effect relationships between variables.

Isolation of Variables - The controlled conditions of laboratory experiments allows researchers to isolate variables more effectively than with any other research method. This further allows researchers to precisely measure the exact effect which one or more independent variables have on the dependent variable. With the 'tomato experiment' for example, laboratory conditions would allow the researcher to control precisely variations in temperature, moisture and light, this would not be possible in a field (no pun intended).

Controlled conditions also allow the researchers to eliminate the effects of '**extraneous variables**'. Extraneous variables are undesirable variables which are not of interest to the researcher but might interfere with the results of the experiment. If you were trying to measure the effects of alcohol on reaction time for example, keeping respondents in a lab means you could make sure they all ate and drank similar things, and did similar things, in between drinking the alcohol (or placebo) and doing the reaction time test.

Laboratory experiments have excellent reliability for two major reasons:

Firstly, the controlled environment means it is easy to replicate the exact environmental conditions of the original experiment and this also means it is relatively easy for the researcher to clearly outline the exact stages of the experiment, again making exact replication easier. This is not necessarily the case in a field experiment, where extraneous variables may interfere with the research process in different ways with repeat-experiments.

Secondly, there is a high level of detachment between the researcher and the respondent. In an experiment, the researcher typically takes on the role of 'expert' and simply manipulates variables, trying to have as little interaction with the respondents as the experiment will allow for. This means there is little room for the researcher's own values to influence the way the respondent reacts to an experiment.

In terms of **practical advantages** experiments (assuming they are ethical) are attractive to funding bodies because of their scientific, quantitative nature, and because science carries with it a certain prestige. Also, once the experiment is set up, if it takes place in a lab, researchers can conduct research like any other day-job – there is no travelling to visit respondents for example, everyone comes to the researcher.

Disadvantages with Laboratory Experiments

Laboratory experiments lack external validity - sociologists hardly ever use lab experiments because the artificial environment of the laboratory is so far removed from real-life that most sociologists agree that the results gained from such experiments tell us very little about how respondents would actually act in real life. Take the Milgram experiment for example – how likely is it that you will ever be asked by a scientist to give electric shocks to someone you've never met and who you can't see when they give the wrong answer to a question you've just read out? Moreover, when was the last time you were asked to do anything to anyone by a scientist? In the real world

context, many of the Milgram respondents may have responded to real-world authority figure's demands differently.

Deception and lack of informed consent - The Hawthorne effect gives rise to the first ethical disadvantages often found in experiments – it is often necessary to deceive subjects as to the true nature of the experiment so that they do not act differently, meaning that they are not in a position to give full, informed consent. This was the case in the Milgram experiment, where the research subjects thought the (invisible) person receiving the shocks was the actual subject rather than themselves.

A second ethical problem concerns **harm to respondents**. In the case of the original Milgram experiment, 'many research participants were observed to sweat, stutter, tremble, bit their lips and dig their nails into their flesh, full-blown, uncontrollable seizures were observed for three subjects'.

Practical problems include the fact that you cannot get many sociological subjects into the small scale setting of a laboratory setting. You can't get a large group of people, or a subculture, or a community into a lab in order to observe how they interact with 'independent variables'. Also, the controlled nature of the experiment means you are likely to be researching one person at a time, rather than several people completing a questionnaire at once, so it may take a long time to get a large-sample.

Milgram's Obedience Experiment

This is an interesting, classic laboratory experiment which demonstrates some of the advantages and disadvantages of the laboratory based experimental method.

Milgram (1963) was interested in researching how far people would go in obeying an instruction if it involved harming another person. Stanley Milgram was interested in how easily ordinary people could be influenced into committing atrocities for example, Germans in WWII.

Procedure

Volunteers were recruited for a lab experiment investigating “learning” (re: ethics: deception). Participants were 40 males, aged between 20 and 50, whose jobs ranged from unskilled to professional, from the New Haven area. They were paid \$4.50 for just turning up.

At the beginning of the experiment they were introduced to another participant, who was actually an associate of the experimenter (Milgram). They drew straws to determine their roles – learner or teacher – although this was fixed and the confederate was always the learner. There was also an “experimenter” dressed in a grey lab coat, played by an actor.

Two rooms in the Yale Interaction Laboratory were used - one for the learner (with an electric chair) and another for the teacher and experimenter with an electric shock generator.

The “learner” was strapped to a chair with electrodes. After he has learned a list of word pairs given him to learn, the "teacher" tests him by naming a word and asking the learner to recall its partner/pair from a list of four possible choices.

The teacher is told to administer an electric shock every time the learner makes a mistake, increasing the level of shock each time. There were 30 switches on the shock generator marked from 15 volts (slight shock) to 450 (danger – severe shock).

The learner gave mainly wrong answers (on purpose) and for each of these the teacher gave him an electric shock. When the teacher refused to administer a shock the experimenter was to give a series of orders / prods to ensure they continued. There were 4 prods and if one was not obeyed then the experimenter read out the next prod, and so on.

Prod 1: please continue.

Prod 2: the experiment requires you to continue.

Prod 3: It is absolutely essential that you continue.

Prod 4: you have no other choice but to continue.

Results

65% (two-thirds) of participants (i.e. teachers) continued to the highest level of 450 volts. All the participants continued to 300 volts.

Milgram did more than one experiment – he carried out 18 variations of his study. All he did was alter the situation (IV) to see how this affected obedience (DV).

Conclusion

Ordinary people are likely to follow orders given by an authority figure, even to the extent of killing an innocent human being. Obedience to authority is ingrained in us all from the way we are brought up.

People tend to obey orders from other people if they recognize their authority as morally right and / or legally based. This response to legitimate authority is learned in a variety of situations, for example in the family, school and workplace.

Source: <http://www.simplypsychology.org/milgram.html>

Despite the many ethical pitfalls of this experiment, some participants still believed the benefits outweighed the costs - below is the view of one participant... “While I was a subject in 1964, though I believed that I was hurting someone, I was totally unaware of why I was doing so. Few people ever realize when they are acting according to their own beliefs and when they are meekly submitting to authority... To permit myself to be drafted with the understanding that I am submitting to authority's demand to do something very wrong would make me frightened of myself... I am fully prepared to go to jail if I am not granted Conscientious Objector status. Indeed, it is the only course I could take to be faithful to what I believe. My only hope is that members of my board act equally according to their conscience...”

Field Experiments

Field Experiments take place in a real-life settings such as a classroom, the work place or even the high street. Field experiments are much more common in Sociology than laboratory experiments. In fact sociologists hardly ever use lab experiments because the artificial environment of the laboratory is so far removed from real-life that most Sociologists believe that the results gained from such experiments tell us very little about how respondents would actually act in real life.

It is actually quite easy to set up a field experiment. If you wanted to measure the effectiveness of different teaching methods on educational performance in a school for example, all you would need

to do is to get teachers to administer a short test to measure current performance levels, and then get them to change one aspect of their teaching for one class, or for a sample of some pupils, but not for the others, for a period of time (say one term) and then measure and compare the results of all pupils at the end.

The advantages of Field Experiments over Lab Experiments

Better external validity - The big advantage which field experiments obviously have better external validity than lab experiments, because they take place in normally occurring social settings.

Larger Scale Settings - Practically it is possible to do field experiments in large institutions – in schools or workplaces in which thousands of people interact for example, which isn't possible in laboratory experiments.

The disadvantages of Field Experiments compared to Lab Experiments

It is not possible to control variables as closely as with laboratory experiments – With the Rosenthal and Jacobson experiment, for example we simply don't know what else might have influenced the 'spurting group' besides 'higher teacher expectations'.

The Hawthorne Effect (or Experimental Effect) may reduce the validity of results. The Hawthorne effect is where respondents may act differently just because they know they are part of an experiment. The Hawthorne Effect was a phrase coined by Elton Mayo (1927) who did research into workers' productivity at the Western Electric Company's Hawthorne plant. With the workers' agreement (they knew that an experiment was taking place, and the purpose of the experiment), Mayo set about varying things such as lighting levels, the speed of conveyor belts and toilet breaks. However, whatever he did, the worker's productivity always increased from the norm, even when conditions were worsened. He concluded that the respondents were simply trying to please the researcher. NB – The Hawthorne effect can also apply to laboratory experiments.

Practical Problems – Access is likely to be more of a problem with lab experiments. Schools and workplaces might be reluctant to allow researchers in.

Ethical Problems – Just as with lab experiments – it is often possible to not inform people that an experiment is taking place in order for them to act naturally, so the issues of deception and lack of informed consent apply here too, as does the issue of harm.

Rosenthal and Jacobson's 1968 Field Experiment on Teacher Expectations (Pygmalion in the Classroom)

This classic field experiment illustrates some of the strengths and limitations of this method.

Aim

The aim of this research was to measure the effect of high teacher expectation on the educational performance of pupils.

Procedure

Rosenthal and Jacobson carried out their research in a California primary school they called 'Oak School'. Pupils were given an IQ test and on the basis of this R and J informed teachers that 20% of

the pupils were likely 'spurt' academically in the next year. In reality, however, the 20% were randomly selected.

All of the pupils were re-tested 8 months later and the spurters had gained 12 IQ points compared to an average of 8.

Rosenthal and Jacobsen concluded that higher teacher expectations were responsible for this difference in achievement.

Limitations of the Experiment

Firstly, deception/ Lack of Informed Consent is an issue - In order for the experiment to work, R and J had to deceive the teachers about the real nature of the experiment, and the pupils had no idea what was going on.

Secondly, there are **ethical problems** - while the spurters seem to have benefited from this study, the other 80% of pupils did not, in fact it is possible that they were harmed because of the teachers giving disproportionate amounts of attention to the spurting group. Given that child rights and child welfare are more central to education today it is unlikely that such an experiment would be allowed to take place.

Thirdly, **reliability is a problem** while the research design was relatively simple and thus easy to repeat (in fact within five years of the original study this was repeated 242 times) the exact conditions are not possible to repeat – given differences between schools and the type and mixture of pupils who attend different schools.

Finally, it's **not possible to rule out the role of extraneous variables**. Rosenthal and Jacobson claim that higher teacher expectation led to the higher achievement of the 'spurters' but they did not conduct any observations of this taking place. It may have been other factors.

Interviews in Social Research

An interview involves an interviewer asking questions verbally to a respondent. Interviews involve a more direct interaction between the researcher and the respondent than questionnaires. Interviews can either be conducted face to face, via phone, video link or social media.

Types of interview, and key terms

Structured or formal interviews are those in which the interviewer asks the interviewee the same questions in the same way to different respondents. This will typically involve reading out questions from a pre-written and pre-coded structured questionnaire.

Unstructured or Informal interviews (also called discovery interviews) are more like a guided conversation. The interviewer has complete freedom to vary the questions from respondent to respondent, so they can follow whatever lines of enquiry they think are most appropriated, depending on the responses given by each respondent.

Semi-Structured interviews are those in which respondents have a list of questions, but they are free to ask further, differentiated questions based on the responses given.

Group interviews - Interviews can be conducted either one to one (individual interviews) or in a group, in which the interviewer interviews two or more respondents at a time. Group interviews have their own unique strengths and limitations which we'll return to later.

Focus groups are a type of group interview in which respondents are asked to discuss certain topics.

The Interview Schedule – A list of questions or topic areas the interviewer wishes to ask or cover in the course of the interview. The more structured the interview, the more rigid the interview schedule will be. Before conducting an interview it is usual for the researcher to know something about the topic area and the respondents themselves, and so they will have at least some idea of the questions they are likely to ask: even if they are doing 'unstructured interviews' an interviewer will have some kind of interview schedule, even if it is just a list of broad topic areas to discuss, or an opening question.

Transcription of interviews -Transcription is the process of writing down (or typing up) what respondents say in an interview. In order to be able to transcribe effectively interviews will need to be recorded.

The problem of Leading Questions - In Unstructured Interviews, the interviewer should aim to avoid asking leading questions.

The advantages of unstructured interviews

Respondent led - unstructured interviews are 'respondent led' – this is because the researcher listens to what the respondent says and then asks further questions based on what the respondent says. This should allow respondents to express themselves and explain their views more fully than with structured interviews.

Flexibility – the researcher can change his or her mind about what the most important questions are as the interview develops. Unstructured Interviews thus avoid the imposition problem – respondents are less constrained than with structured interviews or questionnaires in which the questions are

written in advance by the researcher. This is especially advantageous in group interviews, where interaction between respondents can spark conversations that the interviewer hadn't thought would of happened in advance, which could then be probed further with an unstructured methodology.

Rapport and empathy - unstructured interviews encourage a good rapport between interviewee and interviewer. Because of their informal nature, like guided conversations, unstructured interviews are more likely to make respondents feel at ease than with the more formal setting of a structured questionnaire or experiment. This should encourage openness, trust and empathy.

Checking understanding - unstructured interviews also allow the interviewer to check understanding. If an interviewee doesn't understand a question, the interviewer is free to rephrase it, or to ask follow up questions to clarify aspects of answers that were not clear in the first instance.

Unstructured interviews are **good for sensitive topics** because they are more likely to make respondents feel at ease with the interviewer. They also allow the interviewer to show more sympathy (if required) than with the colder more mechanical quantitative methods.

Empowerment for respondents - the researcher and respondents are on a more equal footing than with more quantitative methods. The researcher doesn't assume they know best. This empowers the respondents. Feminists researchers in particular believe that the unstructured interview can neutralise the hierarchical, exploitative power relations that they believe to be inherent in the more traditional interview structure. They see the traditional interview as a site for the exploitation and subordination of women, with the interviewers potentially creating outcomes against their interviewees' interests. In traditional interview formats the interviewer directs the questioning and takes ownership of the material; in the feminist (unstructured) interview method the woman would recount her experiences in her own words with the interviewer serving only as a guide to the account.

Practical advantages - there are few practical advantages with this method, but compared to full-blown participant observation, they are a relatively quick method for gaining in-depth data. They are also a good method to combine with overt participant observation in order to get respondents to further explain the meanings behind their actions. So in short, they are impractical, unless you're in the middle of a year long Participant Observation study (it's all relative!).

Disadvantages of unstructured interviews

The main theoretical disadvantage is the **lack of reliability** - unstructured Interviews lack reliability because each interview is unique - a variety of different questions are asked and phrased in a variety of different ways to different respondents.

They are also difficult to repeat, because the **success of the interview depends on the bond of trust between the researcher and the respondent** – another researcher who does not relate to the respondent may thus get different answers. Group interviews are especially difficult to repeat, given that the dynamics of the interview are influenced not just by the values of the researcher, but also by group dynamics. One person can change the dynamic of a group of three or four people enormously.

Interviewer bias might undermine the validity of unstructured interviews – this is where the values of the researcher interfere with the results. The researcher may give away whether they approve or disapprove of certain responses in their body language or tone of voice (or wording of probing questions) and this in turn might encourage or discourage respondents from being honest.

The characteristics of the interviewer might also bias the results and undermine the validity – how honest the respondent is in the course of an hour long interview might depend on the class, gender, or ethnicity of the interviewer.

Unstructured interviews also lack representativeness – because they are time consuming, it is difficult to get a large enough sample to be representative of large populations.

It is difficult to quantify data, compare answers and find stats and trends because the data gained is qualitative.

Practical disadvantages - unstructured Interviews may take a relatively long time to conduct. Some interviews can take hours. They also need to be taped and transcribed, and in the analysis phase there may be a lot of information that is not directly relevant to one's research topic that needs to be sifted through.

Interpersonal skills and training - A further practical problem is that some researchers may lack the interpersonal skills required to conduct informal unstructured interviews. Training might need to be more thorough for researchers undertaking unstructured interviews – to avoid the problem of interviewer bias.

There are few ethical problems, assuming that informed consent is gained and confidentially ensured. Although having said this, the fact that the researcher is getting more in-depth data, more of an insight into who the person really is, does offer the potential for the information to do more harm to the respondent if it got into the wrong hands (but this in turn depends on the topics discussed and the exact content of the interviews).

Semi-Structured Interviews in the Context of Education

Semi-Structured interviews are the most common primary qualitative research method used in education. There are many studies which employ them. Here I focus on just one, which is adapted from 'Sociology Since 2000'.

Class, gender, (hetero) sexuality, and schooling: working-class girls' engagement with education and post-16 aspirations by Louise Archer, Anna Halsall and Sumi Hollingworth, 2007

Context

Working-class girls may not be doing as badly as working-class boys, but a significant number are leaving school at the age of 16 with few or no qualifications. In order to explain this, feminists have drawn attention to two processes. While at school, working-class girls may engage in subcultural forms of resistance to schooling by behaving in a hyper-heterosexual manner. This behaviour - which is focused on sexuality, dress and appearance - often results in teacher-pupil conflict as teachers interpret this behaviour as deviant. Second, a number of studies have suggested that the choices of working-class girls are structured by the expectation of leaving school at the age of 16 to work locally, settle down in a heterosexual relationship and have children.

Methods

The researchers used a multi-method, mainly qualitative, approach. First, data was collected from 89 pupils aged 14 to 16 using semi-structured interviews. Six London comprehensive schools were selected, chosen because they served working-class areas suffering from severe economic and social deprivation.

The sample of 89 pupils was made up of pupils who had been identified by their schools as being at risk of dropping out of schooling at 16. The sample included boys and girls from a variety of ethnic backgrounds, although over 50 per cent were White.

Discussion groups were set up with an additional 36 pupils. Third, eight female pupils were asked to complete photographic diaries, focusing on their everyday activities and interests. Finally, semi-structured interviews were conducted with 19 members of staff and a small sample of five parents.

Findings

The researchers found that most of the female pupils were keen to be seen as 'desirable' and 'glamorous'. They spent a great deal of time and effort working on their hair, make-up and dress styles, in order to construct what the researchers called a 'sexualised hyper-feminine identity'. This 'work' was regarded by the girls as far more important than the academic work demanded by the school. The primary importance placed on appearance was highlighted in the sample's photo-diaries, which included pictures of their favourite glamour products.

The researchers observed that the girls constructed their appearance by combining a range of styles taken from diverse sources such as sport, Black culture and global brands. For example, girls often combined elements of Black, urban US styles (notably 'bling-bling' fashion) with various items of sportswear (e.g. Nike trainers and tracksuits) and hyper-feminine 'sexy' clothes, make-up and hairstyles. This construction of a hyper-feminine identity gave these young women a form of cultural power, which they used to resist school rules about uniform. This capital also led to the acquisition of status from their peer group and boyfriends.

However, this identity often led to conflict with the school. For example, girls were frequently reprimanded for their failure to conform to school-defined standards of appearance. Teachers often

confronted them about the application of make-up or the maintenance of hairstyles during lesson time.

Interviews with staff suggested that they saw the girls' construction of appearance as the opposite to what they interpreted as a 'good pupil'. Working-class girls' appearances were generally seen by teachers as inappropriately 'sexual' and a distraction from learning. On the other hand, staff saw middle-class pupils as 'ideal pupils'. Middle-class girls were interpreted as high-achieving, hard-working, rule-following and respectable.

The researchers noted that peer-group pressure was mainly responsible for the construction of working-class femininity. Appearance was bound up with this because girls' inclusion in, or exclusion from, their peer group was based on their conformity to particular performances of style and appearance. Most girls wanted to avoid being ridiculed, mocked and called a 'tramp' for wearing the 'wrong' brand of trainers or style of clothing. Many girls indicated their desire to leave school and to start work in order to earn the money required to continue performing fashionable identities. Boyfriends, too, had a profound and negative effect on girls' engagement with schooling. Girls with boyfriends had low aspirations and attainment and many expressed the desire to leave and to live with or marry their boyfriend.

Evaluation

The strength of this study is its multi-strategy approach to gathering a range of qualitative data over a significant period of time. The longitudinal nature of the research allowed trends over time to be identified and the development of pupils to be regularly monitored in terms of their interaction with teachers and their peer group.

The sample appears to be representative of 'at risk' students in the London area. However, further research would be required to find out whether or not the findings are generalisable to other parts of the UK, as the cultures and types of deprivation found in London may be qualitatively different to those found in other places.

The qualitative nature of the data obtained from both the teachers and the pupils suggests that the researchers managed to obtain the trust of both parties. For the pupils, guarantees of anonymity and confidentiality contributed to this. However, although extensive qualitative data resulted from the group discussions, we need to be aware that the validity of the data can be affected by peer pressure and fears of ridicule and exclusion. If these discussions were not properly managed by the researchers, some pupils may have imposed their interpretations of schooling on the others.

Participant and Non-Participant Observation

Introduction and Key Terms

Sociologists usually divide observational methods into two basic types

Participant Observation is where the researcher joins in with the group being studied and observes their behaviour.

Non-Participant Observation is where researchers take a 'fly on the wall approach' and observe individuals and groups without getting involved in the life of the group. You would have come across this type of method in the form of the OFSTED lesson observation.

In addition, observation can also be overt or covert

Overt is where the group being studied know they are being observed

Covert is where the group being studied does not know they are being observed, or where the research goes 'undercover'

A related term associated with Participant Observation is **Ethnography**

An ethnographic study is one that takes an in depth look at the way of life of a group of people. Ethnographic studies use Participant Observation as their main method, but combine this with interviews and secondary data – looking at documents produced by the group.

Ethnography is favoured by Social Anthropologists – who are like sociologists but focus on small groups in mainly traditional societies in the developing world.

A good illustration of popular anthropology in the media is Tribe with Bruce Parry, although academic anthropological studies are much more thorough – with some anthropologists spending many years living with and recording the way of life of certain tribes.

Participant Observation

Theoretical Advantages

The most significant strength of both types of participant observation is the high degree of validity the method achieves. In contrast to questionnaires participant observation allows the researcher to see what people do rather than what people say they do. Participant observation allows the researcher to gain empathy through personal experiences. This closeness to people's reality means that participant observation can give uniquely personal, authentic data.

When completing questionnaires researchers begin with pre set questions. Even before starting to collect the data, therefore, the researchers have decided what's important. The problem with this is what if the questions the researcher thinks are important are not the same as the ones the subject thinks are important. By contrast, participant observation is much more flexible. It allows the researcher to enter the situation with an open mind and as new situations are encountered they can be followed up. Again, this achieves a high degree of validity.

Practical Advantages

There are few practical advantages with this method, but participant observation might be the only methods for gaining access to certain groups. For example, a researcher using questionnaires to research street gangs is likely to be seen as an authority figure and unlikely to be accepted.

Ethical Advantages

Interpretivists prefer this method because it is respondent led - it allows respondents to speak for themselves and thus avoids a master-client relationship which you get with more quantitative methods.

Theoretical Disadvantages

One theoretical disadvantage is the low degree of reliability. It would be almost impossible for another researcher to repeat given that a participant observation study relies on the personal skills and characteristics of the lone researcher.

Another theoretical disadvantage is the low degree of representativeness. Sociologists who use quantitative research methods study large, carefully selected, representative samples that provide a sound basis for making generalisations. In contrast, the groups used in participant observation studies are usually unrepresentative, because they are accessed through snowball sampling and thus haphazardly selected.

Critics also question how valid participant observation really is. They argue the method lacks objectivity. It can be very difficult for the researcher to avoid subjectivity and forming biased views of the group being studied. Also researchers decide what is significant and worth recording and what's not, therefore, it depends on the values of the researcher. In extreme cases, researchers might 'go native', where they become sympathetic with the respondents and omit any negative analysis of their way of life.

A further threat to validity is the Hawthorne Effect, where people act differently because they know they are being observed, although participant observers would counter this by saying that people can't keep up an act over long time periods: they will eventually relax and be themselves.

Also, the methods lack a concept of social structures such as class, gender or ethnicity. By focussing on the participants own interpretation of events, the researcher tends to ignore the wider social structures, which means giving only a partial explanation.

Practical Disadvantages

Firstly, this method tends to be time consuming and expensive in relation to the relatively small amount of respondents. It can take time to gain trust and build rapport, and so for this reason, it may take several days, weeks or even months, before the respondents really start to relax in the presence of the researcher.

Participant Observation also requires observational and interpersonal skills that not everyone possesses - you have to be able to get on with people and understand when to take a back seat and when to probe for information.

Gaining access can also be a problem - many people will not want to be researched this way, and

where covert research is concerned, researchers are limited by their own characteristics. Not everyone can pass as a Hells Angel if covert observation is being used!

Ethical Disadvantages

Ethical problems are mainly limited to Covert Participant Observation, in which respondents are deceived and thus cannot give informed consent to participate in the research.

Legality can also be an issue in covert research where researchers working with deviant groups may have to do illegal acts to maintain their cover.

Some advantages of Overt compared to Covert Observation

Students often think that Covert Observation is superior to Over Observation, however there are five reasons why Overt might be a better choice of research method:

1. You can ask awkward, probing questions
2. You can combine it with other methods
3. You can take on the role of the 'professional stranger' - respondents might tell you things because they know you are not 'one of them'
4. It is less stressful and risky for the researcher
5. It is easier to do follow up studies.

Non-Participant Observation

Non-Participant Observation is where researchers take a 'fly on the wall approach' and observes individuals and groups without getting involved in the life of the group. You would have come across this type of method in the form of the OFSTED lesson observation.

Non-Participant Observation can either be structured or unstructured – the former is where you have an 'observation schedule' and look for certain things happening, the latter is where you just observe and note down anything that stands out.

NPO can also be overt (like the OFSTED inspection) or covert, in which case it would either involve some infiltrating a classroom, or a workplace and observing without people being informed (as you can imagine this would be quite difficult to do in practice, or more realistically it might involve the use of hidden cameras to film covertly).

Some General Advantages of Quantitative Non Participant Observation

They have good reliability and are good for making comparisons
They are relatively quick and cheap to carry out

Some General Disadvantages of Quantitative Non Participant Observation

They lack validity because you are less able to ask why people are acting in the way that they do compared to participant observation
Ethically they can be dis empowering for respondents (OFSTED inspections)

Participant Observation in the Context of Education

Given the practical and ethical problems of conducting participant observation in a school setting, there are only a handful of such studies which have been carried out in the UK, and these are mainly historical, done a long time ago. They are, nonetheless interesting as examples of research. Below I consider two classic participant observation studies: Paul Willis' Learning to Labour (1977) and Mac an Ghail's (1988) Young Gifted and Black.

Learning to labour

Learning to Labour by Paul Willis (1977) is an ethnographic study of twelve working class 'lads' from a school in Birmingham conducted between 1972 and 1975. He spent a total of 18 months observing the lads in school and then a further 6 months following them into work. The study aimed to uncover the question of how and why "working class kids get working class jobs" (1977: 1) using a wide range of qualitative research methodologies from interviews, group discussions to participant observation, aiming to understand participants' actions from the participants' point of view in everyday contexts.

Sampling

Willis concentrated on a particular boy's group in a non-selective secondary school in the Midlands, who called themselves 'lads'. They were all white, although the school also contained many pupils from West Indian and Asian backgrounds. The school population was approximately 600, and the school was predominantly working class in intake. He states that the main reasons why he selected this school was because it was typical working class pupils.

Data Collection

Willis attended all school classes, options (leisure activities) and career classes which took place at various times. He also spoke to parents of the 12 'lads', senior masters of the school, and main junior teachers as well as careers officers in contact with the concerned 'lads'. He also followed these 12 'lads' into work for 6 months. NB He also made extensive use of unstructured interviews, but here we're focusing on the Observation aspects.

Participant observation allowed Willis to immerse himself into the social settings of the lads and gave him the opportunity to ask the lads (typically open questions) about their behaviour that day or the night before, encouraging them to explain themselves in their own words...which includes detailed accounts of the lads fighting, getting into trouble with teachers, bunking lessons, setting of fire extinguishers for fun and vandalising a coach on a school trip.

Findings

Willis' most important finding was that the lads were completely uninterested in school – they saw the whole point of school as 'having a laff' rather than trying to get qualifications. Their approach to school was to survive it, do as little work as possible, and to have as much fun as possible by pushing the boundaries of authority and bunking as much as they could. The reason they didn't value education is because they anticipated getting factory jobs which didn't require any formal qualifications. They saw school as a 'bit cissy' and for middle class kids.

Willis does not include an account of how he approached the 'lads' and built rapport with them. However considering the responses of the 'lads' during discussions and interviews, seeing that the 'lads' openly talk about their views and experiences and allow access to work at a later stage of the research, Willis seems to have built rapport effectively.

For more details the findings of this study see the Neo-Marxism section of the 'Perspectives on Education Hand-Out'

Practical Issues with Learning to Labour

The research was very time consuming – 2 years of research and then a further 2 years to write up the results.

It would be very difficult to repeat this research today given that it would be harder to gain access to schools (also see reliability)

Funding would also probably be out of the question today given the time taken and small sample size.

Ethical Issues with Learning to Labour

An ethical strength of the research is that it is giving the lads a voice – these are lads who are normally 'talked about' as problems, and don't effectively have a voice.

An ethical weakness is that Willis witnessed the lads getting into fights, their Racism and Homophobia, as well as them vandalising school property but did nothing about it.

A second ethical weakness is the issue of confidentiality – with such a small sample size, it would be relatively easy for people who knew them to guess which lads Willis had been focussing on

Theoretical Issues with Learning to Labour

Validity is widely regarded as being excellent because of the unstructured, open ended nature of the research allowing Willis to sensitively push the lads into giving in-depth explanations of their world view.

Critics have tried to argue that the fact he was obviously a researcher, and an adult, may have meant the lads played up, but he counters this by saying that no one can put on an act for 2 years, at some point you have to relax and be yourself.

Something which may undermined the validity is Willis' interpretation of the data – he could have selected aspects of the immense amount of data he had to support his biased opinion of the boys.

Representativeness is poor – because the sample size is only 12, and they are only white boys.

Reliability is low – It is very difficult to repeat this research for the reasons mentioned under practical factors.

Young Gifted and Black

In *Young, Gifted and Black* (1988) Mairtin Mac an Ghaill carried out two ethnographic studies in inner-city educational institutions where he worked. The first study looked at the relations between white teachers and two groups of male students with anti-school values – the Asian Warriors and the African Caribbean Rasta Heads – and the second study looked at a group of black female students, of African Caribbean and Asian parentage, called the Black Sisters.

Why study this subject?

Because of opportunity – He originally wanted to study Irish school students but no one could help him do this, so he was advised to study African Caribbean students instead. As to the Black Sisters he never intended to study them, but they found him - because he was perceived as being on the side of the students they were happy to talk to him about their views of racism.

Because Mac an Ghaill wanted to gain a close insight into the culture and values of respondents, he chose participatory methods – he became friendly with the students and they visited his home regularly... 'The experience of talking, eating, dancing and listening to music together helped break down the potential social barriers of the teacher-researcher role that may have been assigned to me and my seeing them as students with the accompanying status perception'

At the time the dominant theories argued that black underachievement was due to subcultures of resistance – the problem was seen as being with the students themselves.

However, following his in-depth research, and his adoption of a 'black perspective' he realised that racism rather than the students themselves was the biggest problem in their schooling – their subcultures were a response to a racially structured institution.

Ethical Issues

Mac an Ghaill does not claim to be value free in his research – he was committed to helping students overcome their perceived racial barriers.

The research also brought him into conflict with some other members of staff, as he found himself becoming the defender of ethnic minority students against what he perceived to be a racist institution.

Practical Issues with this research

Mac an Ghaill was only able to do this research because of his position as a teacher, it would have been practically impossible otherwise.

Theoretical Issues

Reliability and Representativeness are both low.

Validity is an interesting one – given the in-depth and participatory nature of the method we might assume that we are gaining a true insight into the thoughts and feelings of the respondents. However, the research has only given us an insight into student perceptions of racism, not whether the institution was actually racist. However, even if the institution wasn't actually racist, understanding the students perception that it was provides us with new insight into why they formed subculture.

Finally, given that Mac an Ghaill was both researcher and teacher, this may have meant some of the student respondents didn't open up to him fully.

Structured Non-Participant Observation in Education

The most commonly used form of observation in education are lesson observations carried out as part of OFSTED inspections – technically these are a form of quantitative non-participant structured observation: OFSTED inspectors have half a dozen criteria to look out for and grade each criteria 1-4, with 1 being outstanding and 4 meaning unsatisfactory; observers will also add in some qualitative notes.

If a researcher is using previously gained records of lesson observations from OFSTED, this of course would count as a form of secondary data, but such a method is relatively easy (compared to participant-observation) for researchers to carry out as a part of their own primary research into schools.

One example of a structured observational schedule which has been used by education researchers is the Flanders System of Interaction Analysis (FIAC) which has been used to measure pupil and teacher interaction quantitatively. The researcher uses a standard chart to record interactions at three second intervals, placing each observation in one of ten pre-defined behaviour categories:

Teacher Talk

- Teacher accepts pupils' feelings
- Teacher praises or encourages pupils
- Teacher accepts or uses ideas of pupils
- Teacher asks questions
- Teacher lectures
- Teacher gives directions
- Terrace criticises pupils or justifies authority

Pupil Talk

- Pupils talk in response to teacher
- Pupils initiate talk

Silence

- Silence or confusion.

Flanders used this form of quantitative behavioural analysis to discover that the typical American classroom is taken up by teacher talk 68% of the time, pupil talk 20% of the time with 12% spent in silence or confusion.

The advantages and disadvantages of OFSTED style non-participant observations applied to education

Practical Issues

A practical problem is gaining access to observe lessons – although this is easier than with participant observation, it would still be relatively difficult to get schools and teachers to agree to this

Structured observations are relatively quick to carry out and don't require much training on the part of the researcher.

Funding would be more likely than with more unstructured forms of observation.

Theoretical Issues

Validity might be an issue – You can only observe with Non Participant Observation, you have little opportunity to get people to explain why they are doing what they are doing.

The Hawthorne Effect can be an issue – students and teachers act differently because they know they are being observed.

Reliability is good if the observation is structured because someone else can repeat the research looking for the same things.

Representativeness is easier than with unstructured observations because they are quicker to do thus larger samples can be achieved. HOWEVER, it is likely that you'll end up with a self-selecting sample because better schools and teachers are more likely to give their consent to being observed than bad ones.

Ethical Issues

Dis-empowering for teachers and pupils – The observer is detached and acts as an expert. Schools might give permission for observers to come in without getting the consent of the pupils.

The Stages of the Research Process

The key areas that have not yet been dealt with above but are dealt with in this section are:

- *Operationalising concepts*
- *Sampling techniques*
- *Triangulation*
- *Pilot Studies*

There are several stages of the research process, and the actual data-collection phase is often only a small part of this process. Preparation for data collection and analysis of data post-data collection often take up considerably more time than the actual gathering of data itself.

The process of data collection will of course vary depending on the topic being studied, and the situation of the researcher, but the following stages of research are common to many research studies.

1. Deciding on a topic to research and narrowing down a field of study
2. Doing an extensive literature review
3. Devising research questions and (if desirable) operationalising concepts
4. Selecting a sample of the population to be studied
5. Conducting a pilot study
6. Carrying out the research (gathering data)
7. Interpreting and analysing one's findings – thick description versus correlation and causation
8. Publication, publicity and follow up tasks
9. Using one's research data - developing theories and making an impact

The discussion below compares a Positivist and Interpretivist approach to conducting research through these nine stages:

1. Deciding on a topic area to research

There are many broad topics within Sociology, and many sub-topics within those topics. In a two year A level Sociology course we cover the sociology of the family, education, crime and deviance and global development, and the range of topics under investigation becomes even broader when you get up to university level.

As a general rule Sociologists tend to focus on just one broad subject area and within that topic area they specialise in just one sub-topic – For example Becky Francis has tended to specialise in researching the relationship between social class, gender and identity within education, while Tony Sewell has tended to focus on the experience of black boys in the education system.

What are the factors which influence a sociologist's choice of research topic?

- The personal interests and values of the researchers themselves. A Sociologist is obviously going to be more motivated to study something they are interested in – and nothing motivates quite like personal experience – Tony Sewell and Marc McCormack are two examples of Sociologists who studied groups with whom they shared personal characteristics.
- Theoretical perspective/ political beliefs. Whether one is a Feminist, Marxist or Functionalist/ New Right Thinker/ or Post-Modernist can influence what one studies. Feminists emphasise the importance of focussing on issues of gender inequality, so might choose to research

issues such as domestic violence or the impact of the Beauty Myth, while Marxists focus on researching the impact of wealth inequalities, so might research things such as class inequalities in education. All of this raises the question of whether Sociology can remain value-free (unbiased)

- Opportunity also matters when it comes to research topic – Mac An Ghail wanted to study the experiences of Irish students but he couldn't study, so instead he focussed on the black and Asian students in his own college.
- Funding – Sociologists are professionals and need get funding for their research, so funding bodies can influence topics of research.
- Society – Societies change, and so new topics of study will emerge with social changes. For example, sociologists have studied things such as rave culture, and virtual gaming communities as these have emerged, which overlaps with the first point above!

2. Doing an extensive literature review of existing research

Before undertaking research it is customary to do an extensive review of existing research relevant to one's topic. There are several reasons for doing this:

- To make sure no one else has already done what you're about to do
- So you can locate your research in wider research and develop already existing knowledge and theories
- To find ideas about questions to ask respondents
- To find ideas about how to go about conducting the research
- To uncover any potential problems you may encounter during the research process.

This links to secondary qualitative and quantitative data.

3. Devising research questions and (if desirable) operationalising concepts

A Positivist approach to devising research questions

Broadly speaking Positivists aim to conduct social research using the methods of the natural sciences – which means using methods such as social surveys so that data can be easily quantified and correlations between variables uncovered.

Positivists will typically start off with a relatively narrow research agenda, seeking to find how a handful of independent variables effect a dependent variable. For example, when researching differential educational achievement, positivists might be interested in seeking to find what aspects of home background are most closely correlated with educational success or failure.

This means that Positivists need to think up their questions in advance, In order to successfully address the above question, you need a whole range of sub-questions to make up the survey – you need to ask about educational achievement, social characteristics such as class, gender and ethnicity and your need to ask about a whole range of things which may have affected achievement – level of parental interest, income of parents and so on.... If you don't put it in the questionnaire, then you can't find out about it! In Positivist research operationalising concepts in advance of data collection is crucial.

Operationalising concepts

Operationalising a concept means translating abstract concepts into specific questions that can be understood and measured in practice.

In the above example, almost everything has to be operationalised – you can't ask about class, for example, you need to ask about occupation, and you can't ask about 'parental interest', you have to think of other questions that would measure this.

A Interpretivist approach to designing research questions

Given that Interpretivists are interested in qualitative data collection, and want to here respondents talk in their own words, all they need to do in advance of the research is have an idea of the kind of questions they want to ask, and some sensitive ways of prompting for further information. Essentially, Interpretivists don't start off with specific research questions, they start off with a general aim and a few starter questions and then ask further questions as the research evolves.

4. Selecting a Sample

Sampling is the process of selection a section of the population to take part in social research. Key terms associated with sampling include:

The Target Population – All people who could potentially be studied as part of the research

The sampling Frame – A list from which the sample will be drawn

The research sample – The actual population selected for the research – also known as the respondents.

A sample is said to be representative if the characteristics of the sample reflect the characteristics of the target population.

There are many different types of sampling technique which you need to know about, including Random sampling

- Random sampling
- Systematic sampling
- Stratified random sampling
- Quota sampling
- Multistage sampling
- Snowball sampling

5. Doing a Pilot Study

A pilot study is a test study done in advance of the actual study. Some of the advantages of doing a pilot study include:

- To find out any practical difficulties you might come across before the actual research.
- To see if the questions you are asking make sense to respondents
- To see if response rates differ between different groups (in which case you might need a 'booster' sample of under-represented groups
- To familiarise yourself with respondents so you feel more at ease when doing the actual research.

Pilot studies are easier with more quantitative methods, and may not be possible with more in-depth,

qualitative research.

6. Conducting the research/ gathering data

Once the researcher has gone through all of the above stages, they are finally ready to collect data, where all of the practical, ethical and theoretical issues discussed in the previous pages apply.

For positivist inspired quantitative researchers this is a relatively easy phase of the research process. With some survey based research, for example, researchers don't need to interact with respondents, and all you need do is to keep an eye on response rates, and maybe prompt certain groups to respond as necessary.

Obviously this is going to be more difficult with qualitative research where the researcher is more involved with the respondents – here the researcher needs to think about how to record data – interviews need to be taped for example, and with observational studies, a field diary is often used to keep track of observations.

7. Analysing the Data

With Positivist research where researchers have used closed questions such as yes/ no answers and Likert scales which are pre-coded, the questionnaires can be fed straight into a computer which will read and analyse the data, turning it into statistics automatically. This can then be presented in the form of a bar chart or graph so we can easily see the relationship between such things as class and educational achievement.

Interpretivist research which is qualitative, and may amount to thousands of sides of notes may take much longer to analyse after data has been collected and cannot so easily be translated into statistics.

Stages 8 and 9: Publication and following up research

During the final write up of the research it is usual for Sociologists to comment on whether their data supports or refutes existing theories, hence relating their research back to wider theoretical debates (structure/ agency etc.)

Following research, researchers also need to think about how much effort they are going to put into feeding back to respondents and taking their views on board, which could be challenging in Interpretivist research where some of the respondents may not agree with the information the sociologist has selected for publication.

There is also the issue of how the data is to be used – Should Sociologists publicise their findings to the broader public, or should they leave this to their employers and the media? Should Sociologists get involved in government policy, or leave this to public officials?

Other Methods:

Other Methods you should revise include 'Longitudinal Studies'