**Experimental Method**

***Examine some of the practical, ethical and theoretical problems of using experiments in sociological research*** (*This was on the old syllabus – June 2005*)

What are experiments?

* The most rigorous and “scientific” method of testing an hypothesis available
* Involve acting upon the subject to test for changes as a result of those actions

BUT

* Rarely used by sociologists, or even by positivist sociologists in spite of their “scientific” approach ..

IMPORTANT : DO NOT CONFUSE “***EXPERIMENT***” WITH “***STUDY***” – YOU SHOULD ONLY USE THE TERM TO REFER TO THAT NARROW RANGE OF STUDIES WHERE PEOPLE ARE SPECIFICALLY “**ACTED UPON**”

**Key terms in experimental method**

* Field experiment
* Lab experiment
* [*Natural Experiment*]
* Experimental group
* Control group
* Variable
* Independent variable (IV)
* Dependent variable (DV)
* Environmental variable
* Confounding variable

Why use experiments?

They are …

* Rigorous
* Replicable
* Verifiable
* Reliable
* Objective
* Obtain information which other methods cannot – e.g., testing norms

**Why are experiments so rarely used by sociologists?**

**THEORETICAL & PRACTICAL ISSUES**

***LAB EXPERIMENTS***

* One cannot re-create the social situation of the subject in an “unnatural” setting
* Controlling variables effectively is difficult
* Hawthorne Effect
* One cannot often replicate the experiment in practice
* Subjects may react differently because they guess the intention of the study – demand characteristics – validity issue
* Volunteer samples (and informed consent)

***FIELD EXPERIMENTS***

* Controlling variables effectively is virtually impossible
* One cannot often replicate the experiment in the field – each situation is unique
* Subjects may react differently because they guess the intention of the study – demand characteristics – validity issue
* Opportunity samples (and informed consent)

Positivists prefer Surveys because …

Interpretivists prefer Ethnographic method because

**PARTICULAR ETHICAL ISSUES**

* The effect on subjects may be distressing, misleading, etc
* Gaining informed consent from experimental subjects is difficult without revealing the aim of the experiment – a problem in both lab and field experiments – often leads to use of volunteers

Evaluation/Conclusion?