

Sociology Factsheet



www.curriculum-press.co.uk

Number 20

Doing Social Research

This Factsheet examines the process of social research and the issues that a sociologist faces when carrying out research. It is useful for students sitting the exam on research methods or completing coursework.

Why do social research?

- Without social research, we would probably be unaware of many issues in society and would be unable to make changes. Everything that we find out in sociology stems from social research – Why do people commit crime? Who is more at risk of living in poverty? How do the media influence our lives?
- To make connections (or correlations) between different parts of society. For example, that working-class people tend to suffer more from health problems.
- Social research often leads to changes in policies, laws and legislation. It also informs us of what is going on in our society.
- Sociologists carry out research to support a theory that they have about society.

Exam Hint – At AS level, sociological methods is compulsory and at A2 level theory and methods is compulsory. The reason for this is that they are fundamental to sociology. Therefore pieces of research that you learn about in other modules can be used again in the methods module.

Coursework Hint – Coursework is an option at both AS and A2 level. If you are doing coursework choose a topic that will keep you interested and motivated. This may mean choosing a topic that you have not yet studied. Students usually find this daunting but the ones that choose this option find it much more exciting. However, choosing a topic you are studying can help support the work you are doing.

Key issues

There are three types of issue that a sociologist faces when carrying out a piece of research –

- Practical issues
- Theoretical issues
- Ethical issues

Exam Hint – An exam question may arise on practical and/or theoretical and/or ethical considerations. Remember, they all link together.

Coursework hint – By thinking about the issues in the next three boxes before deciding on the topic and methods, you are more likely to complete a successful piece of research.

Practical considerations

A sociologist must consider the 'hands-on' part of the research process. The following points outline some of the most important practicalities –

1. **Is the topic interesting?** Without interest, motivation is difficult and without motivation, the research will not be successful.
2. **Is the research affordable?** For students, the research has to be almost cost-free. For sociologists, funding may be available from research organisation, universities, governments, charities and so on.
3. **Is the necessary data available?** The data that you need should be easy to access. Some data may already exist (secondary data). Some may need to be collected first-hand by the sociologist/researcher (primary data).
4. **Is the sample accessible?** Some information will only be available from certain people and/or at certain times, eg. a study on 'Life in prison in 2006' would mean that prisoners would have to be accessed.
5. **Can the information be recorded efficiently?** Data needs to be accurate. A common problem in research is that researchers who are covert (undercover) are not able to make notes in front of the people they are researching because then the findings could be affected.
6. **Is there enough time?** The process of social research is very time-consuming and schedules may be difficult to adhere to, eg. people may take time to respond to postal questionnaires or people may ask to re-arrange interviews.

Key terms

Methods: The ways that sociologists collect their data – questionnaires, observations, interviews, etc.

Quantitative data: Data that is numerical.

Qualitative data: Non-numerical data eg. news reports, photographs, diary entries.

Primary data: Data that is collected by the researcher.

Secondary data: Data from a source other than the researcher that he/she can access eg. statistics from a website/social trends.

Sample: The people selected to represent the population under study.

Covert observation: This is where the researcher does not inform the respondents that they are being studied.

Overt observation: This is where the respondents are aware that they are being studied.

Theoretical considerations

There are two main approaches to research in sociology – positivism and interpretivism. These two approaches view society and people differently, therefore the methods that they choose in their research tend to be different.

Positivists

- Take a scientific approach.
- Prefer quantitative data.
- Seek to discover social facts.
- Look for correlations.
- Use methods that will produce statistical data – eg. questionnaires with closed questions.

Interpretivists

- Do not conduct research in the traditional scientific way.
- Prefer qualitative data.
- Seek to discover meanings and reasons.
- Interpret the data.
- Use methods that will give detailed data – eg. unstructured interviews.

More recently, sociologists have recognised both approaches have strengths and therefore they use methodological pluralism (a combination of two or more methods). For example, data may initially be gathered using a questionnaire. Some respondents may then be interviewed in a follow-up to the questionnaire. This therefore produces both qualitative and quantitative data and provides both the social facts and the reasons behind them.

Key term	Definition
Methodological pluralism:	Using two or more different methods to collect data in order to gain a better and more comprehensive picture of social life.
Closed questions:	Questions that have categorised answers eg. yes/no.
Open questions:	Questions that allow an unrestricted response eg. What is your opinion of the justice system?
Unstructured interviews:	Interviews that do not have a set list of questions. The response of one question determines the next question/s.
Structured interviews:	A set list of questions that are determined by the interviewer prior to the interview.
Semi-structured interviews:	Interviews that have some set questions but that are not restricted to those questions.

Ethical considerations

Researchers must consider the effects that the research may upon others and/or themselves. If the research is seen to be harmful in any way then it is open to criticism for being unethical. There are five key areas to consider when it comes to being ethical in doing social research –

1. **The topic** – some sociologists argue that certain topics should not be studied because they are too sensitive, or because by selecting a specific topic, it could confirm assumptions/prejudices that exist. For example, rape could be seen as too sensitive a crime to study. By choosing to study the impact of 9/11 upon Muslim communities, the prejudice that Muslims are linked terrorism could be reinforced.
2. **The group** – some groups are easier to gain access to than others. Much of this has to do with the power that some groups have. However, it is argued by some sociologists that the powerful should be studied in order to gain a better insight into society.
3. **Effects upon the respondents** – the people being studied may be affected in some way. Covert research is one method that sociologists have to be particularly careful with – is it right to study people without their consent?
4. **Effects upon others in society** – relatives of respondents or other people in society may also be affected. For example, information may be revealed by the respondents that others would prefer not to be revealed.
5. **Illegal/immoral situations** – researchers may witness or commit criminal/immoral acts that they would not normally in order to gain insight into a particular group. They then have to make decisions as to whether they should report/own to the crime.

Advantages and Disadvantages of Different Research Methods

Research Method	Advantages	Disadvantages	Example of research
Experiment (lab)	Variables can be controlled. Comparisons can be made easily. Correlations can be identified.	Not a natural human environment, therefore not usually used by sociologists. Unethical?	Bandura (1973) – A group of children watched an adult mistreating a Bobo doll. Another group did not watch this. All of the children were then put in a room with lovely toys. Then they were told they could not play with them and taken to a room with unappealing toys and a Bobo doll. Bandura found that the children that had witnessed the adults mistreating the Bobo doll were more likely to copy this behaviour.
Experiment (field)	Takes place in the natural everyday environment for human beings.	More difficult to control variables. Unethical? Hawthorne effect (see next column)	Hawthorne Works (late 1920s) – In an electricity company in Chicago, researchers carried out an experiment to see if changing light and temperature had an impact upon productivity. The researchers found that if the light decreased or increased, and if the temperature decreased or increased then the workers were more efficient. They found this odd and the only explanation was that the workers improved no matter what was done to the variables simply because they were aware that they were part of an experiment. This impact has become known as the 'Hawthorne Effect'.
Questionnaire	Time/cost effective. Can access large numbers of people over a wide area. Quantitative data - comparisons, correlations.	Lack of qualitative data. Postal questionnaires = not always time/cost effective.	Many questionnaires are carried out on a national scale. Examples include the British Crime Survey , the General Household Survey and the Census .
Overt observation	Respondents are aware of being researched, therefore it is more ethical.	Respondents are more likely to alter their behaviour. May be difficult to get permission of respondents.	Hargreaves (1967) Observed teachers and found that the behaviour of some altered but that it did not alter for others. He suggests that the longer someone is observed, the more likely they are to act naturally.
Covert observation	Respondents are less likely to change their behaviour as they are unaware that they are being researched.	Unethical? Danger of being exposed. Danger of 'going native' – actually becoming part of the social scene under study.	Hobbs (1988) Carried out covert observation in pubs and had to take part in the scene ("go native") in order to get a true picture. However, he encountered problems of writing up notes accurately as he would often wake up with a hangover!
Structured interview	Set questions, therefore answers can be compared. Respondent will not stray from the information that is required by the researcher.	Does not allow respondent to give additional information. Time-consuming.	Laumann et al. (1995) A survey was conducted in the USA on sexual behaviour. It involved questionnaires but also face-to-face and telephone interviews. The study was heavily criticised as incentives were used to get a high response rate. However, detailed but comparable data was gathered.
Unstructured interview	Respondent is free to add information. Because the questions are not set, the researcher can ask questions that derive from the response to another question.	The respondent may end up leading the interview, giving information that is not relevant. Time-consuming.	Smith (1998) Studied family backgrounds of young, homeless people using unstructured interviews. He got detailed, in-depth information by using this method.

Acknowledgements: This Sociology Factsheet was researched and written by Rachel Jamieson.

Curriculum Press, Bank House, 105 King Street, Wellington, TF1 1NU. Sociology Factsheets may be copied free of charge by teaching staff or students, provided that their school is a registered subscriber. No part of these Factsheets may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted, in any other form or by any other means, without the prior permission of the publisher. ISSN 1351-5136