

Sociology Factsheet



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Triangulation

This Factsheet will look at the following: What is triangulation? Why triangulation is used in Sociological research Sociological research that has been conducted using triangulation

What is triangulation?

Sociologists use many different research methods when conducting sociological research.



Sociologists recognise the advantages and disadvantages of the different methods of data collection that are available to them.

Triangulation is the use of more than one research method when carrying out a piece of research, so that the different kinds of data will compliment each other.

Denzin 1970 states that triangulation is a term used to assess the validity and reliability of research methods and data.

Validity

The ability of a research method to measure what it set out to measure

Reliability

When research can be repeated using exactly the same methods and produces the same results

Therefore, by using different research methods, a greater depth of information can be obtained and the data collected is more likely to be valid and reliable.

Activity

Make a list of the different sociological research methods you are aware of. Identify the strengths and weaknesses of these research methods.

Triangulation is used in Sociological research to overcome the weaknesses associated with each research method.

Triangulation can take various forms. These include:

1. Investigator triangulation

This involves the use of different researchers e.g. different observers and interviewers.

The aim of this approach would be to check for observer and interviewer bias by, for example, using interviewers from different social backgrounds.

2. Data triangulation

This involves collecting data at different times from different people in different places. It can involve combining primary and secondary data. Data triangulation serves as a cross-check for validity. It can serve as a means of assessing researchers' interpretations and conclusions.

Primary data

Information collected by the researcher at first hand, using any appropriate method

Secondary data

Information used by sociologists but which has not been collected by them.



3. Methodological triangulation

This takes two forms:

Within-method triangulation uses a variety of techniques within the same method, for example open and closed questions within a questionnaire.

Asking similar questions in a variety of ways can check on the validity of the answers and the reliability of the method.

Between-method triangulation refers to the combination of a number of research methods, for example questionnaires, unstructured interviews and participant observation. The data produced by each method can be checked by comparing it with the data produced by the other methods

Quantitative methods		Qualitative methods	
Advantages Preferred by positivists 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Study of trends • Test hypotheses • Reliable • Make comparisons • Establish causality • Easy to analyse • Representative • Objective 	Advantages Preferred by phenomenologists 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Close to reality • Provides in-depth feelings and meanings • Rich in detail
Disadvantages Criticised by phenomenologists	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Lack of depth • Lack meaning • Distorts reality • Numbers mask reality 	Disadvantages Criticised by positivists	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Subjective • Unreliable • Not scientific • Not measureable • Cannot generalise

Why triangulation is used in Sociological research?

Since research methodology allows us to be fairly sure about the relative strengths and weaknesses of the various techniques, more and more sociologists are seeking to use triangulation.

Triangulation will use both qualitative and quantitative methods so the weaknesses of one method can be overcome by the strengths of the other method.

Advantages of triangulation

- Advantage of one method compensates for the disadvantages of another
- Studying from different perspectives give a fuller picture
- Qualitative and quantitative data can be obtained
- Check on reliability
- Increases validity

Disadvantages of triangulation

- It is very time consuming
- Can be expensive

Triangulation allows research strategies to be developed that avoid the problems associated with using only one method.

However, triangulation does not completely eliminate the problems associated with a research method. It just covers the weaknesses by utilising other methods with strengths in the areas of weakness in the first method.

Tim May 1993 states that 'while triangulation might appear attractive, it is not a panacea for methodological ills'.

Sociological research that has been conducted using triangulation

Exam Hint:- Examiners will expect you to use sociological examples of triangulation as evidence. Make sure you can outline what the study was about and explain the different research methods that were used and why they were used. Explain how the study is an example of triangulation.

Barkers' (1984) study of the Unification Church (The making of a Moonie – choice or Brainwashing)

Barker used participant observation, questionnaires and interviews to conduct research with the Moonies. She interviewed a random sample of 30 members for 6 to 8 hours about themselves, their joining and life in the Church.

She then lived with members of the Church at different centres in the UK and abroad and attended workshops and seminars. Using these methods she believed she would obtain a 'true to life' knowledge of the unification church. This knowledge provided her with the information to design a 41 page questionnaire which was issued two years after the start of the study. The data from the questionnaire allowed Barker to compare the Moonies with the UK population, on characteristics such as class, age and sex.

Barker argued that by combining these methods her study of the Moonies gained greater validity and reliability than would have been the case if she had conducted the study using only qualitative methods.

Metropolitan Authorities Recruitment Agency Study

A piece of research known as METRA (Metropolitan Authorities Recruitment Agency Study) – a large scale national survey examining the position of older male and female workers in local government used several different research methods.

The first stage of the METRA study involved a postal questionnaire to all local authorities in England and Wales in Spring 1992. The second stage involved case study field work in 11 local authorities looking at policies and practices of the authority. In depth interviews were then held with managers and group interviews were held with older employees. Finally, a self-completion questionnaire was sent to senior managers.

Hey 1997 studied girls' friendships in two London schools. The principle method used was participant observation but she also gathered girl's notes and examined their diaries.

Roseneil 1995 studied the actions of women at the Greenham Common 'peace camp'

She was first involved with the camp as a participant when she demonstrated at Greenham Common at the age of 16 in 1982.. She experienced the whole range of 'Greenham experiences' including arrest, court appearances, prison, harassment from police and general contribution to the camp but later went back to study it using the methods of observation, interviews and documentary sources. 35 women were interviewed between 1989 and 1991, up to 10 years after the events took place. Documentary sources included leaflets about the action, the Greenham Common newsletter, pamphlets and newspaper libraries.

Activity

These studies used triangulation. There were many problems associated with each of the methods used in each study. Choose one of the studies and make a list of the difficulties the research may have encountered with each research method used in their study.

As shown in these studies, triangulation allows research strategies to be developed that avoid the problems associated with using only one method.

Research

Choose a topic to research e.g. Is there a difference in the A level choices of males and females in your school? Conduct a small scale study using primary, quantitative methodology. Follow up the answers to this questionnaire by conducting an in-depth interview with one or two students (primary, qualitative methodology.) Why have they chosen the subjects they are studying?

Example Exam Questions

Assess the usefulness of questionnaires in researching sensitive areas of social life

Your answer may include the following:

- The advantages of questionnaires in sociological research particularly related to sensitive research. Use some appropriate sociological studies that have been conducted using questionnaires.
- The disadvantages of questionnaires in sociological research particularly related to sensitive research.
- Discussion of triangulation that could be used to overcome the weaknesses of using questionnaires. Reference could be made to a study that has used questionnaires and other research methods e.g. Barkers' (1984) study of the Unification Church

Explain the strengths of combining qualitative and quantitative methods when studying social issues

Your answer may include the following:

- Define terminology – what is qualitative and quantitative methodology.
- The strengths and weaknesses of qualitative methods with reference to sociological studies that have used qualitative methods
- The strengths and weaknesses of quantitative methods with reference to sociological studies that have used quantitative methods
- The strengths of using triangulation to combine qualitative and quantitative methods when studying social issues. Reference could be made to a study that has used both qualitative and quantitative methodology e.g. Barkers' (1984) study of the Unification Church and the strength of this study as a result of combining methodology.

Examiner's comments

Examiners have commented that it is not adequate to just outline the strengths and weaknesses of specific research methods when answering such questions. It is important to consider the use of triangulation and discuss the strengths of combining methods. Appropriate sociological studies should be referred to in your answers.

Test Yourself

1. Explain, using examples, the difference between quantitative and qualitative methodology
2. Explain, using examples, the difference between primary and secondary data.
3. Explain the three types of triangulation
4. Identify and explain one study that has used triangulation
5. Explain why triangulation is used by sociologists