

O level Sociology

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Methods of research

Questionnaires

A questionnaire is a list of written questions that can be completed in one of two basic ways. Firstly, respondents could be asked to complete the questionnaire with the researcher not present. This is a **postal questionnaire** and (loosely) refers to any questionnaire that a respondent completes without the aid of the researcher.

Secondly, respondents could be asked to complete the questionnaire by verbally responding to questions in the presence of the researcher. This variation is called a **structured interview**.

Although the two variations are similar (a postal questionnaire and a structured interview could contain exactly the same questions), the difference between them is important. If, for example, we are concerned with protecting the **respondent's anonymity** then it might be more appropriate to use a postal questionnaire than a structured interview.

Questionnaires are restricted to two basic types of question: **Closed-ended** (or "closed question") is a question for which a researcher provides a suitable list of responses (e.g. Yes / No). This produces mainly quantitative data.

Open-ended (or "open question") is a question where the researcher doesn't provide the respondent with a set answer from which to choose. Rather, the respondent is asked to answer "in their own words". This produces mainly qualitative data.

Strengths / Uses

- The researcher is able to contact large numbers of people quickly, easily and efficiently using a postal questionnaire (since all he / she has to do is identify the group that will be targeted and post them the list of questions).
- Questionnaires are relatively quick and easy to create, code and interpret (especially if closed questions are used). In addition, the respondent -not the researcher - does the time-consuming part of completing the questionnaire.
- A questionnaire is easy to standardize. For example, every respondent is asked the same question in the same way. The researcher, , can be sure that everyone in the sample answers exactly the same questions, which makes this a very reliable method of research.
- Questionnaires can be used to explore potentially embarrassing areas (such as sexual and criminal matters) more easily than other methods. The questionnaire can, for example, be both anonymous and completed in privacy. This increases the chances of people answering questions honestly because they are not intimidated by the presence of a researcher.

Weaknesses / Limitations

- Question of clarity: Where the researcher is not present (mostly with postal questionnaires), it's always difficult to know whether or not a respondent has understood a question properly.
- Literacy and numeracy: Most of the questionnaires as being closed ended and pre coded require the respondents to be literate enough to understand complex social issues as well as possess certain level of numeracy to fill up the questionnaires.
- Low response rate: it all depends on the goodwill of the people to fill the questionnaires completely and return to the researchers, in which case the response rate is very low.
- Unrepresentative data: When a response rate is very low the responses received may only be the opinions of a very highly motivated section of the sample (that is, people with strong opinions who take the time and trouble to complete and return a questionnaire). Therefore, a carefully-designed sample becomes unrepresentative of a target population.

Interviews

Interviews are spoken question and answer sessions between interviewers and interviewees, mainly are of three types.

1. Structured
2. Semi structured
3. Unstructured

Structured interviews

Structured interviews contain pre set questions that are asked in the same order every time. In its simplest form, a structured interview involves one person asking another person a list of predetermined questions about a carefully-selected topic.

The person asking the questions ("the interviewer") is allowed to explain things the interviewee (or "respondent" - the person responding to the questions) does not understand or finds confusing. The **advantages** of use of structured interviews are;

- All respondents are asked the same questions in the same way. This makes it easy to repeat ("replicate") the interview. In other words, this type of research method is easy to standardize.
- Provides a reliable source of quantitative data.
- The researcher is able to contact large numbers of people quickly, easily and efficiently

Disadvantages

- Can be time consuming if sample group is very large (this is because the researcher or their representative needs to be present during the delivery of the structured interview).

- The quality and usefulness of the information is highly dependent upon the quality of the questions asked. The interviewer cannot add or subtract questions.
- A substantial amount of pre-planning is required.
- There is the possibility that the presence of the researcher may influence the way a respondent answers various questions, thereby biasing the responses.

(Example of structured interview as a tool of research: Gordon Marshall along with others conducted structured interviews in his study on social mobility in 1988)

Semi structured interview

A semi structured interview is a blend of structured and unstructured interviewing methods. This technique is used to collect qualitative data by setting up a situation that allows a respondent the time and scope to talk about their opinions on a particular subject. In this type, a number of pre determined questions are asked, but the interviewer may feel free to deviate from the planned method according to the need. The wording of questions will not necessarily be the same for all respondents. This type of interview is more frequently used and is seen as simply natural in style. The number of pre decided questions in the interview may vary according to the purpose of the research. This technique was used by Goldthorpe and Lockwood in the "Affluent workers studies".

Strengths / Uses of Method

- Positive rapport between interviewer and interviewee. Very simple, efficient and practical way of getting data about things that can't be easily observed (feelings and emotions, for example).
- High Validity. People are able to talk about something in detail and depth. The meanings behind an action may be revealed as the interviewee is able to speak for themselves with little direction from interviewer.
- Complex questions and issues can be discussed / clarified. The interviewer can probe areas suggested by the respondent's answers, picking-up information that had either not occurred to the interviewer or of which the interviewer had no prior knowledge

Weaknesses / Limitations of Method

- Depends on the skill of the interviewer (the ability to think of questions during the interview, for example) and articulacy of respondent.
- Time Consuming / expensive
- Not very reliable - difficult to exactly repeat a focused interview. Respondents may be asked different questions (non-standardized). Samples tend to be small.
- Depth of qualitative information may be difficult to analyze (for example, deciding what is and is not relevant).
- Personal nature of interview may make findings difficult to generalize (respondent effectively be answering different questions).

Unstructured interviews

Unstructured interviews are the opposite to structured interviews. Unstructured interviews are more like an everyday conversation. They tend to be more informal, open ended, flexible and free flowing. Questions are not pre-set, although there are usually certain topics that the researchers wish to cover. This gives the interview some structure and direction. An unstructured interview is “an interview without any set format but in which the interviewer may have some key questions formulated in advance. Unstructured interviews allow questions based on an interviewee’s responses and proceeds like a friendly, non-threatening conversation. However, because each interviewee is asked a different series of questions, this style can lack the reliability and precision of a structured interview. Unstructured interviews are also called non-directive interview.

Advantages

- Respondents may be more likely to discuss sensitive and painful experiences if they feel the interviewer is sympathetic and understanding. Joan Smith’s (1998) study about the family’s background of homeless young people produced detailed and in-depth information using constructive interviews.
- They give respondents time and opportunities to develop their answers. They give the respondent the opportunity to take control, to define properties and direct the interview into areas which they see as interesting and significant. This can lead to new and important insights for the researcher.
- If respondent feels at ease in the interview they are more likely to open up and say what they really mean. They are more likely to provide valid data. Gives the interview more chance to pursue a topic, to explore with any further questions, and ask the respondent to qualify and develop their answers. The data therefore will have a lot more depth.

Disadvantages

- Interviewer bias is unavoidable. To some extent the interviewer will affect the responses of the interviewee. J .Allan Williams Jr (1971) claims that the greater the status difference between the interviewer and the respondent, the less likely respondents are to express their true feelings. He found that African- Americans in the 1960’s were more likely to say they approved of civil rights demonstrations if the interviewer was black rather than white.
- Unstructured interviews can develop in all sorts of directions. This makes comparison between data from different interviews different.
- People like to present themselves in a favourable light. Respondents tend to be open about and even exaggerate aspects of their behaviour which they see as socially desirable, and to conceal or minimize aspects seen as undesirable.
- Respondents have the opportunity to tell lies. Episcopalians in the USA tend to exaggerate the frequency of their attendance at church in order to seem respectful.
- Unstructured interviews can take up a great amount of time and cost for the interviews to take place.

Experiments

This is the main method used by natural scientists. Experimentation normally involves the testing of a hypothesis about the relationship between an independent variable (cause) and a dependent variable (effect). Experiments are usually set up so that the scientist controls the introduction of possible independent variables. Used more by psychologists than sociologists, e.g. see Milgram, Zimbardo. In the natural sciences, such control is enhanced by use of a laboratory. Any change in the participant's behaviour should be the result of the change introduced by the experimenter. Interpretivist sociologists note that the experimental method is rarely used in sociological research for both practical and ethical reasons:

Practical reasons: Sociologists can never be sure that behaviour is caused by the social phenomena they are interested in. For example, people usually know they are taking part in an experiment. Their performance may be distorted by their desire to impress the experimenter. Moreover, only a limited number of social conditions can be re-created in the laboratory.

Ethical reasons: Some sociologists argue that it is morally wrong not to tell people they are part of an experiment or to expose them to adverse social conditions. There are two ethical issues raised during conducting experiments in sociological research.

- a) **Experimenter's effect:** the experiments can produce lifelong effects on the people being experimented in a negative impact. For example Jane Elliot's work with primary school children in which discrimination was encouraged on the basis of the colour of children's eyes.
- b) **Question of power:** Generally, all quantitative/ scientific methods and particularly experiments are criticized for placing all control in the hands of the researcher. Subjects are simply powerless with no control on the outcome of the research.

Summary

- Experiments are a common, very powerful, method of research in the natural sciences.
- Ethical, practical and methodological problems make experiments like those conducted in the natural sciences less common in sociological research.
- Experiments in the natural sciences are a major method of research because scientists can have complete control over both the conditions under which an experiment takes place and all of the possible variables that are being tested. In sociology, this is not possible for:
 - a) Ethical reasons (we cannot force people to participate in an experiment).
 - b) Methodological reasons (will people behave "normally" under laboratory conditions, for example?).
- One of the main problems with experiments is the fact that people have consciousness. This means that they can participate actively in an experiment in a way that non-conscious matter cannot.

- A major problem with sociological experiments is that of the difficulty involved in the standardization of the conditions / environment under which an experiment takes place.
- It is possible to conduct “natural experiments” using a comparative methodology. For example, to study family life in different societies and to compare the similarities and differences.

Observational studies/ Observation

Observational methods are used to observe the behaviour of a group usually for an extended period of time. It ranges from mere eavesdropping to participating in the activities of the people involved. The observational research may be

- Participant
- Non participant
- Overt (open)
- Covert (secret)

Since the broader categories being participant and non participant observations, the further divisions (overt and covert) can best be understood by combining them together.

Participant observation

Overt participant observation

In this method the researcher actually joins the group under observation and becomes an accepted part of the group. People being studied are aware of the true reason for the researcher’s presence. In other words, before joining a group the researcher is likely to inform the group's members (either personally or through the agency of a sponsor) about such things as the purpose of the research, it's scope, how long the research will last and so forth. In this respect, therefore, the research is done with the permission and cooperation of the group.

Advantages: For many researchers this approach is more ethically acceptable because there is no deception over their identity and purpose of research. Some researchers also consider this method as appropriate since it develops a relationship of trust between the observer and the observed.

Disadvantages:

- Even though people are being studied in their natural environment, the presence of the observer might produce an impact on their behavior, and they don’t behave normally to go according to the pace of the research and the mood of the researcher. This is called “Observer effect”.
- It can be a very time consuming method as Paul Willis before conducting his study “Learning to labour” with school children had to wait for six months to get the permission from the head of the school.
- Social class of the researcher, if it is drastically different to the group can cause problems as it will hinder the researcher in getting totally immersed with the culture and norms of the group

Covert participant observation

This method involves a researcher secretly becoming a member of a group and taking a full part in group activities. In this method the researcher's true identity is unknown to the group throughout the research period. This method is usually employed to study the violent or criminal behaviour of the individuals. For example the study conducted by James Patrick (1973) namely *A Glasgow gang observed*. He infiltrated a gang in Glasgow to study their social cognitive behaviour as part of a gang, but didn't note his observations until he'd left the gang, for his own safety.

This method has certain advantages and disadvantages for the researchers, since they will have to balance the twin roles of **researcher** and **participant** whilst keeping the former role secret from other group members.

Advantages

- **Access:** The ability to gain access to groups that would not normally allow them to be studied is a useful strength of this method since it allows sociologists to investigate behaviour that is normally hidden from both researchers and the wider public. Using covert participation, therefore, a researcher can study illegal behaviour (a criminal gang, for example), deviant behaviour and various forms of "secret" behaviour.
- **Natural behavior:** The potential problem of an observer effect is avoided precisely because the group is unaware they're being studied. The researcher, therefore, can safely assume they really are observing people's "normal behaviour".
- **Personal experience:** By becoming a covert member of the group, the researcher is more able to understand meanings and motivations behind group behaviour and, by so doing, arrive at richer, more detailed conclusions.

Disadvantages

- **Going Native:** One of the major problems covert participant observers have is that of separating their role of participant from that of observer. The covert researcher is trying to be "two different people" at the same time and it may be difficult to remember which role is appropriate at which time. The researcher may become so involved in their participation they cease to accurately record data. Howard Parker ("A View from the Boys") frequently found himself in the position of engaging in criminal activity while in the gang (receiving stolen goods, for example). He argued that such involvement was necessary (although not totally ethical), if he was to maintain the trust, respect and friendship of the people he was researching.
- **Recording Data:** Recording information will be difficult because the researcher cannot simply take notes or record conversations openly. As a (largely) covert observer, Erving Goffman ("Asylums") found he had to trust his powers of observation and memory. He used a field diary to record information and, at the end of every day, Goffman wrote up his observations in this diary. While this may be one of the few ways available to the covert researcher to record their observations, it does raise clear problems of accuracy, memory and interpretation. This, in turn, must also raise questions about the reliability and validity of covert research

- As a result, what we may be getting from a piece of research may simply be the subjective interpretation of the researcher about "what was happening within the group" rather than the reality of the situation from the group's point of view.

Non participant observation

Overt non participant observation

This involves a researcher being known to the group without taking part in their activities such as well known Hawthorn studies undertaken by Elton Mayo (1933).

Advantages

- Through detachment from the subjects , the researcher can observe the people without any possible offence.
- The researcher doesn't require to have the same social characteristics as those of the subjects.

Disadvantages

- Not fair or ethical to many researchers.

Covert non participant observation

This method of observation is close to spying as the researcher secretly observes the group without taking part in any of its activities achieving a certain level of detachment from the group and remaining objective towards them.

Advantage: Complete freedom to observe social phenomenon objectively.

Disadvantage: Some researchers consider this technique to be absolutely ethical.

Case Studies

A case study is a research method that relies on a single case rather than a wider population (for example: Paul Willis's study of Hammer town school children). This may be one individual, one organization or one group. The aim is to carry out a detailed exploration or description of that case.

Advantages

- Case studies allow a lot of detail to be collected that would not normally be easily obtained by other research designs. The data collected is normally a lot richer and of greater depth than can be found through other experimental designs.
- Case studies tend to be conducted on rare cases where large samples of similar participants are not available.
- Within the case study, scientific experiments can be conducted.

- It gives the analytical power to the researcher to further increase knowledge about a social phenomenon.

Disadvantages

- One of the main criticisms is that the data collected cannot necessarily be generalized to the wider population. This leads to data being collected over longitudinal case studies not always being relevant or particularly useful.
- Some case studies are not scientific. Freud used case studies for many of his theories or studies. Such examples are that of Anna O and Little Hans. Both of these are not scientific nor are they able to be generalized. This can be attributed to them being case studies, but also Freudian theory in general.
- Case studies are generally on one person, but there also tends to only be one experimenter collecting the data. This can lead to bias in data collection, which can influence results more than in different designs.
- It is also very difficult to draw a definite cause/effect from case studies.

Longitudinal studies

A longitudinal study is an observational research method in which data is gathered for the same subjects repeatedly over a period of time. These projects can extend over years or even decades. Particularly it has been used to investigate the change in deviant behaviour over a passage of time. For example; Howard Parker (1974) used his method to study the effects of ageing on delinquent behaviour in his famous work: *“View from the Boys: Sociology of Downtown Adolescents.”*

Advantages

- **Capturing Change Over Time:** Longitudinal studies allow researchers to observe changes in variables over an extended period. This provides insights into developmental trajectories, trends, and patterns that may not be apparent in shorter-term studies.
- **Causal Inference:** By tracking the same individuals over time, researchers can better establish causal relationships between variables. They can control for individual differences and better isolate the effects of specific factors.
- **Identification of Individual Differences:** Longitudinal studies help identify individual differences within a population, such as variations in growth, development, or response to interventions. This granularity can inform personalized interventions or treatments.
- **Reduced Cohort Effects:** Longitudinal studies are less susceptible to cohort effects, where differences in results are due to generational or historical differences rather than actual changes in the variables being studied.
- **Rich Data:** Longitudinal data can provide rich, detailed information about individual trajectories, including life events, transitions, and experiences, offering a comprehensive understanding of complex phenomena.
- Disadvantages:

- **Time-consuming and Costly:** Longitudinal studies require substantial time, resources, and effort to recruit participants, collect data repeatedly over time, and maintain participant retention. This can make longitudinal studies more expensive and logistically challenging than cross-sectional or experimental designs.
- **Attrition and Loss to Follow-Up:** Participant attrition is a common challenge in longitudinal studies, as individuals may drop out, move away, or become inaccessible over time. Attrition can introduce biases and compromise the representativeness of the sample, undermining the validity of the findings.
- **Maturation and Practice Effects:** Longitudinal studies may be susceptible to maturation effects, where changes in participants' behavior or characteristics occur naturally over time, independent of the variables under study. Additionally, repeated assessments can lead to practice effects, where participants become more proficient or change their responses simply due to familiarity with the assessment process.
- **External Validity Concerns:** Longitudinal studies often involve specific cohorts or populations, limiting the generalizability of findings to broader populations. This can raise concerns about the external validity of the results.
- **Ethical Considerations:** Longitudinal studies raise ethical considerations regarding participant privacy, informed consent, and the potential impact of long-term participation on individuals' well-being. Researchers must carefully navigate these ethical considerations to ensure the rights and welfare of participants are protected throughout the study.

Sampling

Sampling is the process of selecting units (e.g., people, organizations) from a population of interest so that by studying the sample we may fairly generalize our results back to the population from which they were chosen. Sampling is done because we usually cannot gather data from the entire population. Even in relatively small populations, the data may be needed urgently, and including everyone in the population in our data collection may take too long.

Key terms:

Sample: A sample is simply a small group drawn from the survey population. Taking a sample is a way of making general statements about the whole survey population based on the responses of only small percentage of the total survey population.

Representative sample: To make a valid/ true generalization about the survey population it is important that the sample is representative. A **representative sample** is one that contains a good cross-section of the survey population such as people of different ethnic origin, ages, classes and sexes.

Sampling frame: A sampling frame is simply a list of names of all those included in the survey population from which the sample will eventually be selected. A commonly used sampling frame is the Electoral Register, which includes nearly all the names and addresses of adults over the age of 18 who are eligible to vote in elections. Telephone directories had also been used as sampling frames.

Sampling unit: every individual who is a part of a target population in a survey is called a sampling unit.

Types of sampling

1. **Random Sampling:** Random sampling involves selecting participants from a population at random, giving each individual an equal chance of being chosen. This method helps reduce bias and ensures that the sample is representative of the population, making statistical inferences more reliable. Random sampling methods include simple random sampling, stratified random sampling, and cluster sampling.
2. **Stratified Sampling:** In stratified sampling, the population is divided into subgroups or strata based on certain characteristics (e.g., age, gender, income), and then random samples are drawn from each stratum. This ensures that each subgroup is adequately represented in the sample, allowing for more accurate analysis of specific groups within the population.
3. **Convenience Sampling:** Convenience sampling involves selecting participants based on their availability and proximity to the researcher. While convenient and cost-effective, this method may introduce bias because individuals who are easier to access may not be representative of the entire population. Convenience sampling is often used in exploratory or preliminary studies.
4. **Snowball Sampling:** Snowball sampling relies on referrals from initial participants to recruit additional participants. This method is useful when studying hard-to-reach or hidden populations, such as marginalized communities or groups with low visibility. However, snowball sampling may lead to sample bias if participants share similar characteristics or if the initial contacts disproportionately refer individuals with certain traits.