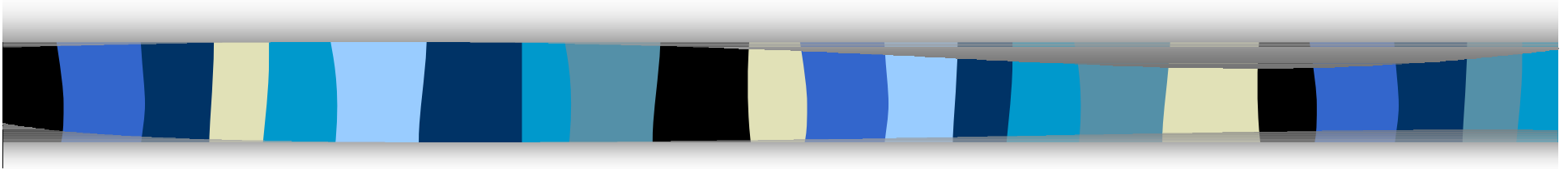


Sociological Research – chapter 2



Mariella Stivala



Aims of chapter

- To explain what social research is and how you will be expected to approach it.
- To identify the main criteria by which research is evaluated
- To explain what is meant by a research design, and identify some of the key research designs and strategies in sociology
- To introduce you to the main methods of sociological research



Learning objectives

- The nature of sociological research and why it is important to know how research is done
- The key criteria by which research is evaluated
- What is meant by a research design and how the nature of the research design influences the data that is collected
- The characteristics of survey, experimental, comparative and ethnographic research designs
- The key research methods: interviews, observations, the analysis of official statistics and documents
- How to approach questions on sociological research



My objectives

- To explain to you the principles of sociological research
- To discuss the concepts of objectivity and subjectivity in research
- To guide you through the different research designs in sociology and the various research methods available when carrying out research
- To explore advantages and disadvantages of every design and method. When would you use what?



Student's objectives

- To read chapter two of guide book and make a summary of the major points. By the end of it, you need to have a list of the major designs and methods. Write down their characteristics, advantages and disadvantages
- Make sure you understand the concepts of objectivity and subjectivity and their importance in social research
- Make a list of the sociological research mentioned in this chapter, so you can use them as an example in the exam.

Essential Readings



- One of these
 1. Fulcher and Scott Chapter 3
 2. Giddens Chapte 2
 3. Macionis and Plummer Chapter 3



Think

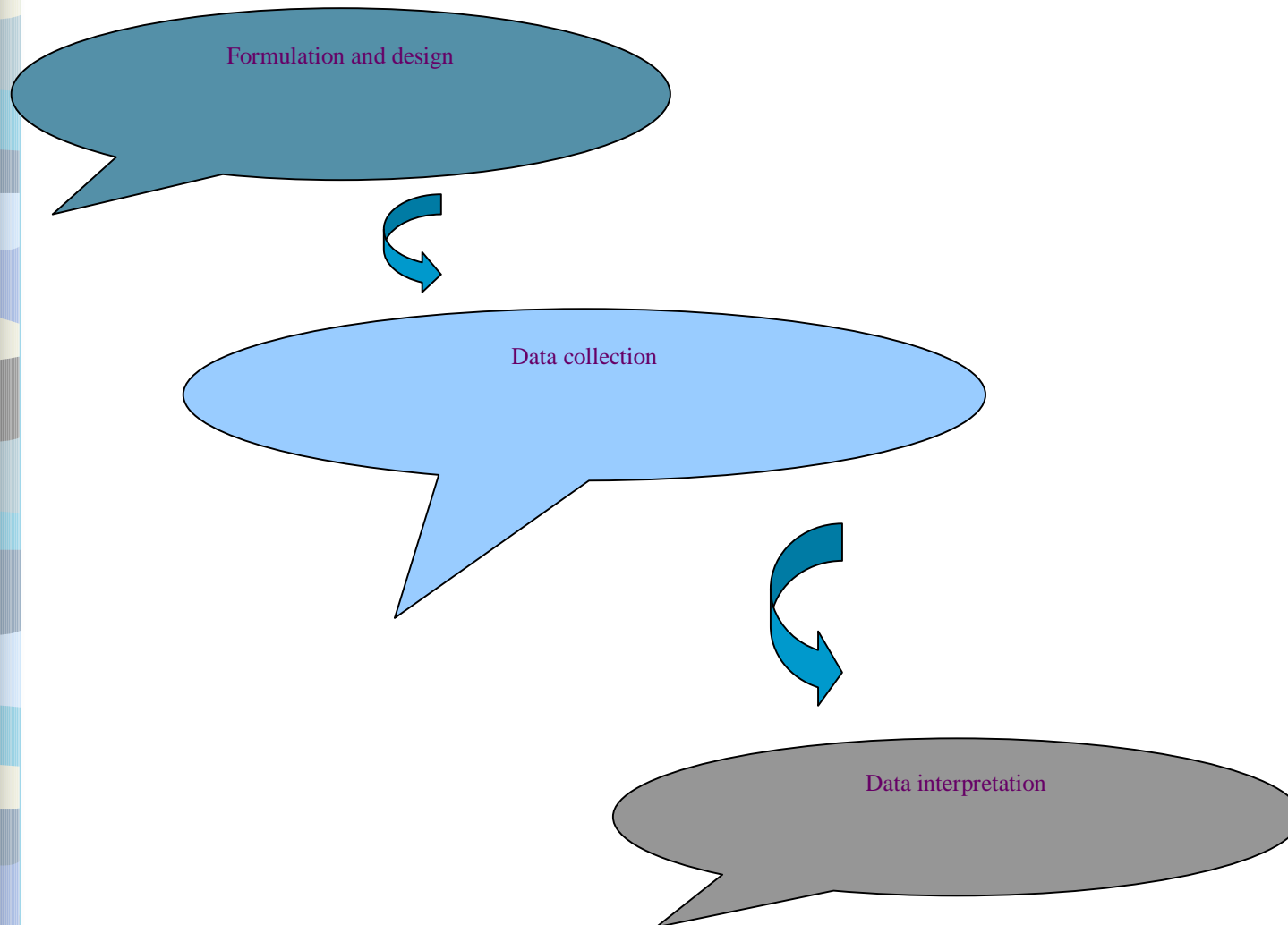
- Think about an area you would like to research, and list down ways and methods how you would go about it.
- What are the advantages and disadvantages for your choices?



Definitions

- **Research** – a rational processes in investigating something
- **Sociological research** – the method and sociological theories used by researchers to investigative social life.
- **Data** – the information collected by the researcher.
- **Research design** – the way research is planned and designed.
- **Methods** – the tools used in collecting data
- **Methodology** is the study of sociological research methods

Key stages in the research process



Sociological research is a reflexive process



- Research involves exploring society in a number of ways.
- However it involves also continually reflecting on the processes by which the research is being undertaken.
- One must think on the methodology to be used i.e. How will I carry the research?



What influences a researcher's choice of design and method?

The nature of the problem being investigated
Practical considerations
Existing research
Theoretical considerations



CHOICES TO BE MADE

- There is no correct way of doing sociological research. Instead there are a number of ways, each with its own advantages and disadvantages. So you must learn to compare and contrast.

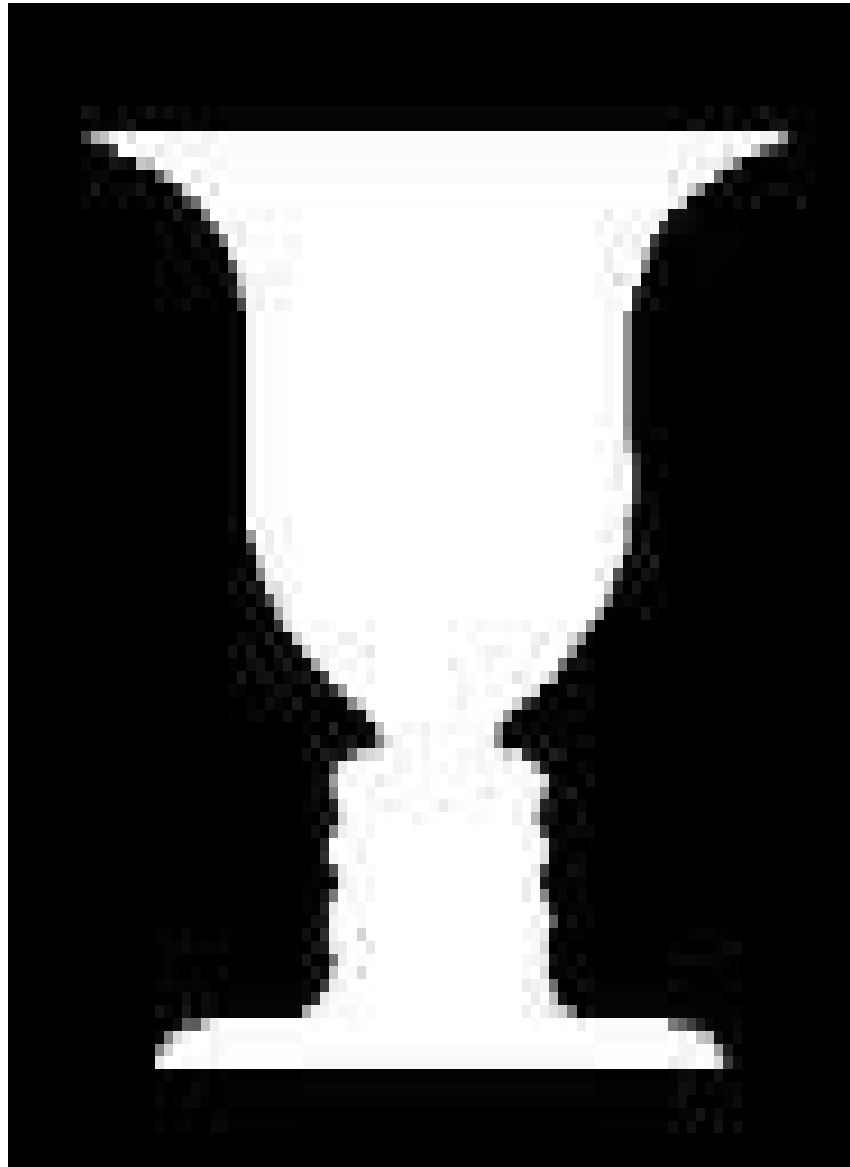
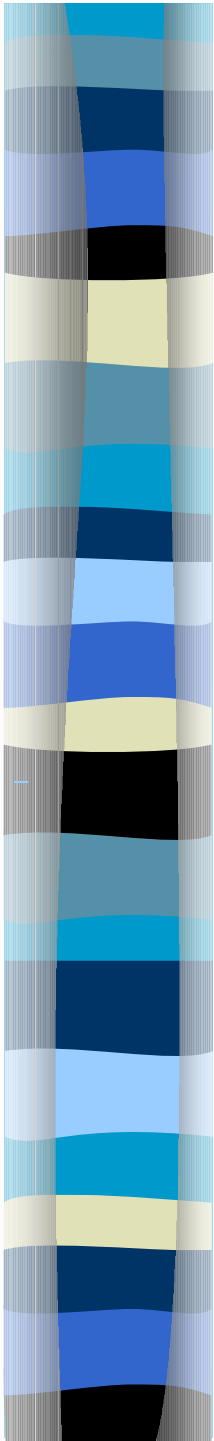




From subjectivity to objectivity

Subjective knowledge	Objective knowledge
<p>Knowledge belonging to the individual – perceptions, opinions, values and beliefs</p> <p>What do I think?</p>	<p>Knowledge that is free from bias, opinion and prejudice.</p> <p>Sociologists should aim to be emotionally detached from the objects of their research</p>

From subjectivity to objectivity





From subjectivity to objectivity

- A researcher can never be hundred percent objective.
True or False
- But one can try to be as objective as possible.
- How do researchers try to be more objective in their research? (V. Imp question for the exam)



Selectivity

- In sociological terms we say that people's stories/realities are selective reconstructions of a set of real events.
- I.e. We only select parts of what is actually going on.
- Researchers, too are influenced by their subjective views. Therefore, they need to be extra careful as to provide an objective account of social life as possible



From subjectivity to objectivity

■ Subjectivity -----→ objectivity

Standardisation

Reliability

Transparency

Validity



Maximising objectivity in research

Term	Definition
<i>Standardisation</i>	Standardise the collection and organisation of data by making research as systematic and consistent as possible.
<i>Reliability</i>	This is concerned with the question of whether research is repeatable and is most commonly used in relation to quantitative research
<i>Transparency</i>	This means that a researcher has shown exactly how the research was done.
<i>Validity</i>	This relates to the correspondence between a piece of data and the conclusions drawn from it. I.e. How justified are we in drawing these conclusions from this data?



Validity

- *Construct validity* refers to whether data represents what is supposed to represent. Does the sample chosen for my study represent the population of the people studied?
- *Internal validity* – are the conclusions you extract from the data valid. You might conclude that there is a link between educational achievement and social class but there might be other factors contributing to the end result.
- *Ecological validity* – is the data achieved real or perhaps the participants have somewhat given a different reality from what it really is, on purpose?



SOCIOLOGICAL QUESTIONS

- Sociological questions may be:
 1. Factual (how much and how many)
 2. Comparative (between one country and other)
 3. Developmental (how things have changed across time)
 4. Theoretical – (what sociological theories would shed knowledge on my findings and research question?)

RESEARCH DESIGN: PLANNING AND CHOICE

- What is a research design?



- The process of translating a researcher's original ideas and interests into a researchable journey



SELECTING A SYSTEMATIC AND STANDARDISED PROCESS

- To achieve a systematic, standardised, replicable and reliable process in research, one needs to:
 - **Use concepts** – theoretical tools that describe the social world (social class and educational achievement).
 - **Provide indicators** – operationalising devices that are used to measure the concepts in a quantitative manner (occupational ranking of the parents – professional, semi-professional, skilled, semi-skilled, unskilled would determine social class whereas the school grades of the children would determine the educational achievement).



Descriptive vs explanatory research designs

Descriptive research design	Explanatory research design
Descriptive presents how things work, based on literature and statistics available.	Explanatory research asks why a certain phenomena is occurring.
Descriptive research is <u>inductive</u> ; provide explanations from their observations.	Explanatory research is <u>deductive</u> ; says whether a theory or hypothesis between the cause and effect is true or not.

Quantitative research design



What are the characteristics of a quantitative research design?



Quantitative research designs

- Quantitative is based on quantities, measurable data.
 1. Positivist approach, similar to scientific research.
 2. Researcher usually detached from the participants and can therefore be more objective.
 3. Enable relationships between variables to be documented systematically
 4. Are more standardised, reliable and transparent.
 5. Is more concerned with how much and how many, inductive methods.

Qualitative research designs



Do all cemeteries have to be depressing places?

Recent research with cemetery users shows what they value most about the cemetery, and what they would wish to alter



Qualitative research designs

- Qualitative is based on quality; non-measurable but descriptive data.
 1. Helps us to observe and understand how different people perceive things differently
 2. Is more ecologically valid (reflects the social reality more).
 3. Reports how people behave in their environment.
 4. Make it possible for researchers to understand the meaning that people put to particular experiences, and how these meanings develop in time.

The expected and the unexpected

- Whether knowledge derived from research is expected or not, research would still be:
 - Providing information about the social world
 - Shaping the information already existent.
 - Organising the social world in such a way that it becomes more predictable.





Major Research Designs

Surveys

Experimental and
Evaluative Research

Comparative
Research

Ethnography



Surveys

- Offer information from a wide population of how they see things or how things are, at that particular point in time.
- Are usually quantitative.
- Used to collect information, test peoples' opinions or attitudes and mapping out relationships between things in a quantitative manner.
- Data is collected by asking people a set of questions by using a questionnaire or face-to-face interviews.
- Surveys are not a research method but a research design or strategy.
- Survey data may be collected by using documents or observation methods.



Surveys

- Subjects are usually asked a set of questions either by using a questionnaire or by using face to face interviews.
- Surveys are good in providing descriptive information.
- Questionnaires may be formulated by using close-ended questions (multiple choice or yes or no answers) or open-ended questions where participants can describe more. Data analysis is much easier with closed ended questions rather than open-ended ones.
- Interviews are formal when using surveys and use the same set of questions.

ISSUES OF SAMPLING

- Sampling is used because it is virtually impossible, too expensive and too time consuming to study the whole population, unless it is manageable.
- So probability and non-probability sampling measures are often used.
- Sample refers to that part of the population being studied.





Probability sampling

- Probability sampling – sample chosen randomly
- Simple random sampling – everyone in the population stands the same chance of being chosen.
- Stratified random sampling – the whole population is known and stratified and each category is represented in the study according to the percentage each category represents in reality. If 60% of the population in Malta are females and 40% are males, then you take 6 females and 4 males so that the sample would be more representative of reality.



NON-PROBABILITY SAMPLING

- Non-probability sampling takes place when you do not know the exact population of that category being studied. No statistics is available with the names of drug users or those that have attempted suicide.
- Convenience sampling
- Snowball sampling.
- A quota sample –



PROBABILITY VERSUS NON-PROBABILITY SAMPLING

PROBABILITY SAMPLING IS POSSIBLE
IF YOU ARE OR CAN BE AWARE OF
THE WHOLE POPULATION OF THE
PEOPLE YOU WANT TO STUDY



SAMPLING ERROR & SAMPLING BIAS

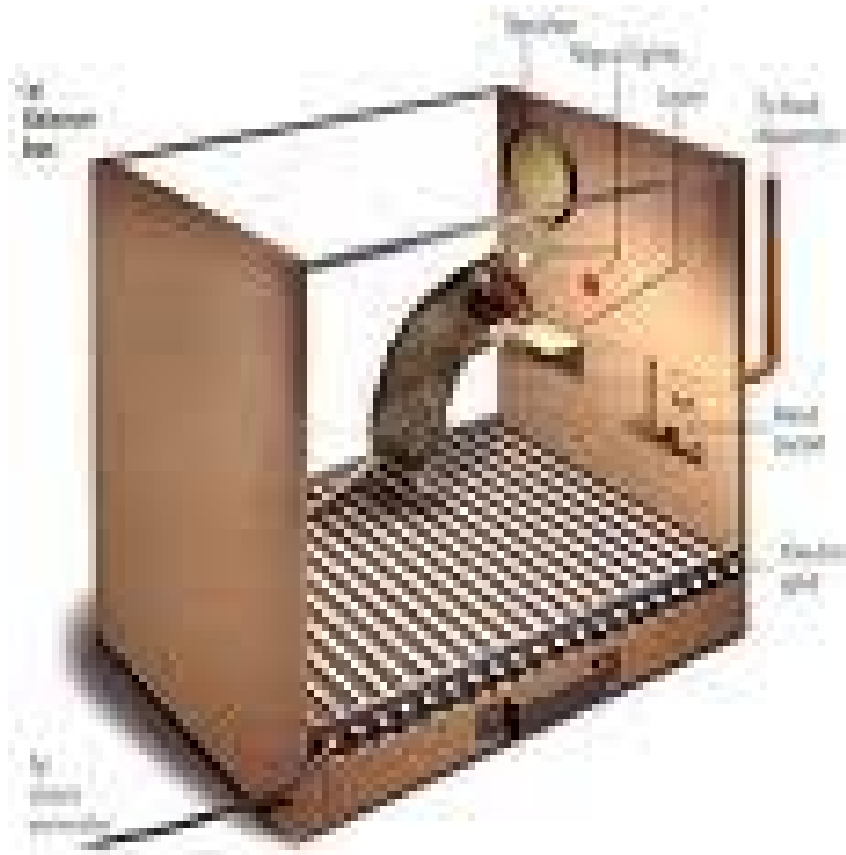
- Sampling error is said to occur because the results extracted by using a sample might not be exactly the same had one to carry out a survey with the whole population. It is calculated, however, that a sample size of 2,500 people reduces the sample error almost to nil, irrespective of the amount of people in the whole population.
- Sample bias occurs when non-probability sampling is used. In choosing the respondents there is obviously an element of bias because one cannot be aware of the whole population involved.



LONGITUDINAL APPROACHES

- Longitudinal studies take place when the researcher carry out the same research with the same people across a number of years to document changes in individuals and organisations.
- Not really a design in itself but used mostly in survey research
- The aim is to design a developmental theory – how children develop in child psychology for example.

An abstract graphic consisting of three vertical columns. The left and right columns are composed of thin, vertical, slightly wavy stripes in shades of grey and light blue. The central column is wider and features horizontal bands of color, including dark blue, light blue, yellow, and black, which are slightly wavy and overlap with the side columns.



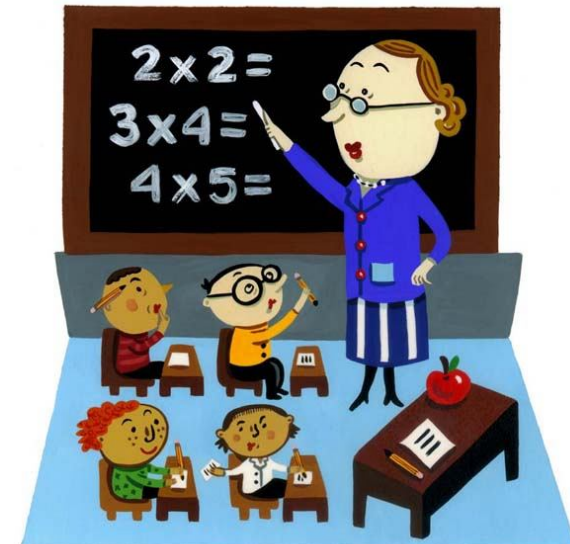


EXPERIMENTAL RESEARCH

- Dependent and independent variables
- Control groups – the aim is to see if there are differences in the behaviour of the experimental group and the control group
- Does smoking – independent variable – cause cancer – dependent variable?
- Experimental research studies are more reliable and transparent but often difficult to standardise, and lack full ecological validity – the natural environment is controlled.

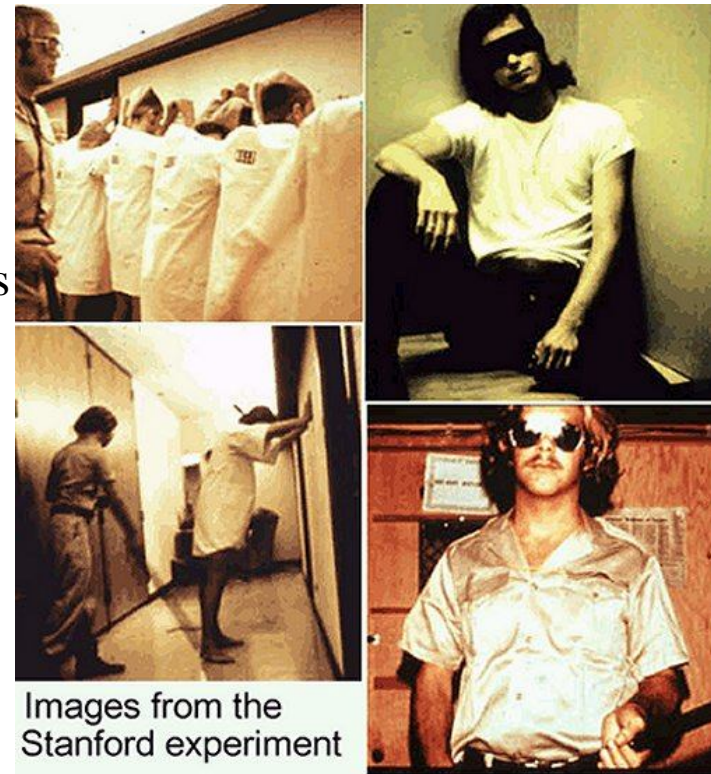
Examples of experimental research

- Rosenthal and Jacobson (1968) on teacher expectations



Examples of experimental research

- Phillip Zimbardo (1971) on the social psychology of prison life.
- The behaviour demonstrated by prisoners and guards had little to do with individual personalities and much more to do with the prison environment and the social roles within it.
- Ethical considerations – participants were not given full information about the purpose of the research and it is therefore questionable whether they could really have given informed consent.
- Sample selected were mainly students and males – not representative of the population and therefore one cannot generalize.



Images from the Stanford experiment

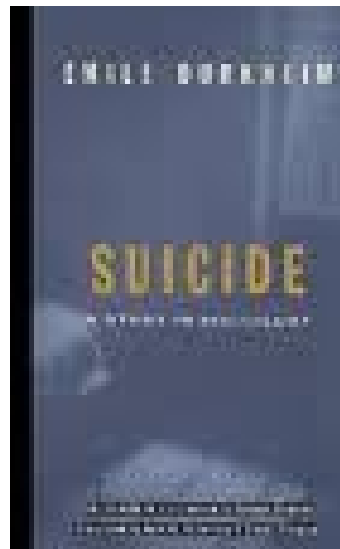
(with thanks to Philip Zimbardo)



QUASI-EXPERIMENTAL DESIGN

- In order for an experimental design to be more ecological, close to reality, the researcher might study the patterns of people, for example how much certain children watch television in reality, and compare it to the level of aggressive behaviour.
- So in this case you would not have a control group but you would take the reality as it is but still study them in their environment. So this would be more ecological but the researcher would have lesser control on the research population than in a control group.
- Example: Charlton et al (1998) on the coming of television

Comparative Research





COMPARATIVE RESEARCH

Comparative research is of central importance in sociology, because making comparisons allows us to clarify what is going in a particular area of research.

Eg:- comparing divorce rates across Europe.

Macro perspective- this research is utilised to examine larger cultural and historical questions.

John Braitwaite (1989) study of crime. He found that crime was lower in societies that tend to place collective interests over individual interests.

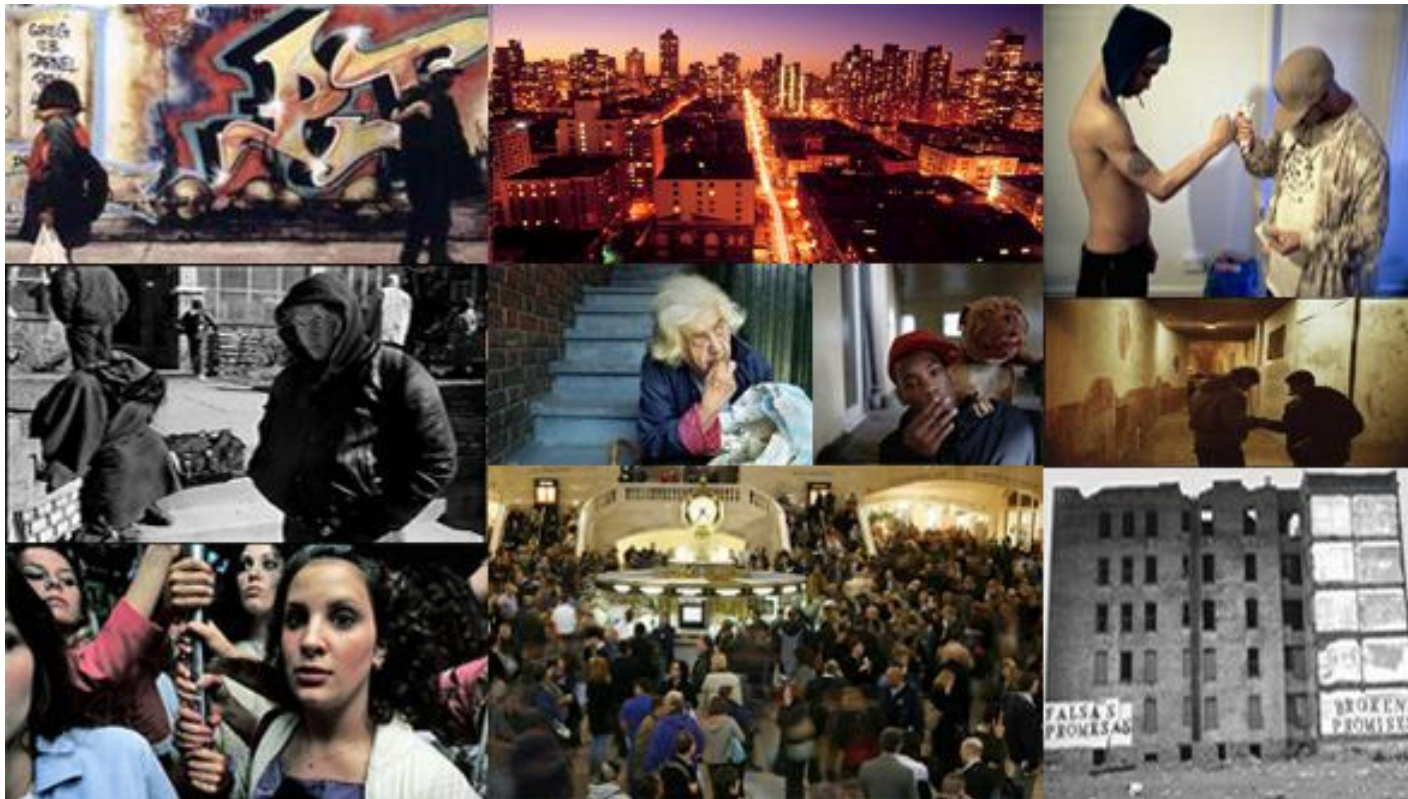


Emile Durkheim study of suicide

- Emile Durkheim studied suicide rates in different countries by using statistics available and found that the suicide rate in Italy was much lower than in Germany. Then he used another statistical information to determine whether this was due to the fact that the Italians were Catholics whilst Germans protestants.
- By looking into various suicide rates of Catholic and Protestant regions within the same country, thus keeping nationality controlled, he was then able to determine the relationship between suicide and religion

It is important to familiarize yourself with this research and understand the importance of this study even for our times.

Ethnography





ETHNOGRAPHY

- Ethnography refers to the ability to understand the reasons behind people's behaviour.
- Verstehen – a German word meaning empathic understanding.
- Ethnography research is usually carried out by looking into a number of case studies, observations, long conversational interviews and personal documents.
- The aim is to try to put yourself in that person's shoe to understand how that person must have felt in that situation and why s/he behaved in a particular manner.

Verstehen





Ethnography

Participant observation – the researcher observes people by joining them in their natural environment and becomes part of them.

Aim is to gain an inside look of that particular reality.

Ethnographic researchers have to abide to less hard-and-fast rules than those carrying out an experiment or surveys. They have to move with the flow of things

It might be very difficult for the researcher to pretend to be one of them and yet take a step back and record them for research purposes. It requires dual roles.

The notes taken in ethnographic research are usually recorded in less formal ways.

Notes should remain as close to the actual words of the subject as possible

A tape recorder might be used so that they may be transcribed in a written text. This however takes time and might be lengthy.

Ethnographic research

–Covert research – (totally hidden) the complete participant, the complete observer (may have unethical issues)



–Overt research – participants in the group know about the researcher. The Observer's effect i.e may influence the behaviour of participants.

Types of ethnographic research

1. Observations
2. Unstructured Interviewing
3. Long Conversations

Research Methods



How do I find
» What I am looking for?



What are research methods?

- Research methods are techniques used for collecting data.

Primary Data

Information that
researchers collect for
themselves

Secondary Data

Information that already
exists before the
research starts; not
collected primarily for
research purposes



V. Important to keep in mind

Keep in mind that sociologists' decisions about methods are not just influenced by practical and ethical considerations, but also by theory.

Methods involve making theoretical assumptions about the nature of the social world and how we understand it

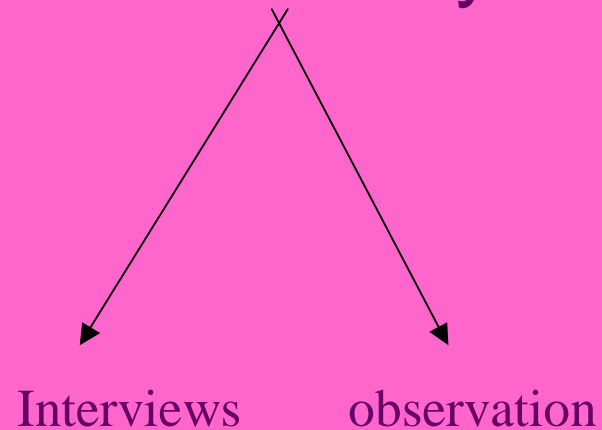


Make sure you understand:-

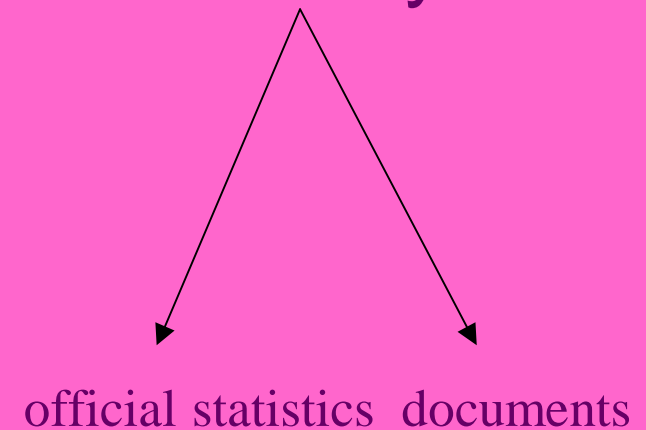
1. *The key sociological methods and their relationship to research design*
2. *Their strengths and limitations taking into account both practical and theoretical considerations*
3. *How they are linked to different theoretical viewpoints in sociology*

Four major research methods

Primary

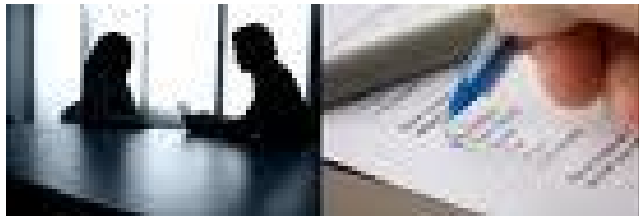


Secondary



Primary research – How to ask people questions?

Asking people to fill in questionnaires



telephone or internet



Formal face-to-face
interviews

asking questions formally in the context of field work



Interviews

Structured	Unstructured
Most commonly used method in survey research	Overcomes limits of unstructured interviews
The questions are identical to all participants exactly in the same way. Closed questions	No set interview structure – respondents answer in their own words
Used for large groups – can be done quickly and cheaply	Have more depth and flexibility than structured interviews. More valid as they give greater insight.
Data can be quantified – researcher detached from the process of data collection	Limitations – data collection is not standardised and is hard to generalise from.
Limitations – the meaning problem – am I understanding the question the way you meant it?	Too much data to reproduce in full i.e. Readers are dependent on what the researcher chooses to report
The problem of depth – lacks ecological validity	Less reliable than structured interviews as the results cannot be quantified and re-tested.



Limitations with all interview methods

People may simply have problems in recalling information accurately. A great deal of psychological research has shown just how unreliable memory can be

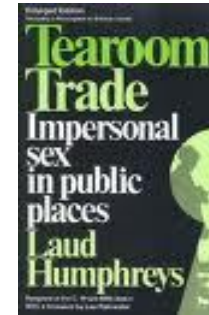
The interview effect - Interviewees MAY give the more socially acceptable answer, or they answer a question in the way they think the interviewer wants.

Researchers are **dependent on what people tell them**. If researchers want to find out how people really behave in their daily lives, than they have to go and take a look.

Observational Methods



- Watching people is another important way that sociologists find out about social life. Researchers using observational methods do not have to rely on what people say they do. They can see for themselves.



- As a doctoral candidate at Washington University, Laud Humphreys began researching what he referred to as "tea room trade" or the act of fellatio between two anonymous men in public restroom. Using the work of Evelyn Hooker as a foundation, his goal was to understand this phenomenon and to determine a rationale and classification for particular sexual behaviors.
- Humphreys spent time learning about this practice and determined to become an insider so that he could study these behaviors. Focusing primarily on the restrooms in public parks, Humphreys made himself a regular where these activities were displayed. He offered to be a look-out and warn the participants about unexpected visitors such as police officers by making noise to interrupt the sexual act before the participants could be caught and possibly arrested.
- Humphreys wanted to track those he observed so he would note the license plate on the vehicle of the participant. He observed and interviewed participants without their full disclosure regarding his intent to conduct research. He also manipulated information to obtain home addresses and used these later to interview participants again.



- In total, Humphreys observed a time and place representative sample of 134 men and finally reported on 100 men due to attrition. He conducted 50 interviews in the tearrooms and another 50 interviews with participants in their homes one year later, posing as a social health surveyor. In order for participants to open their homes to him, Humphrey's realized that he must change his appearance, demeanor and his automobile, so he did. None of the participants seemed to make the connection to their previous interactions with him.

As Humphreys gained entry into this private system of instant sex, he learned that many (over 50%) of these men did not consider themselves homosexuals, were in fact mostly happily married, carried on very important roles in their respective communities and preferred to have quick sexual encounters, with few words and with men, all the while maintaining the appearance of being typical heterosexual males.



Observational methods

Structured observations	Unstructured observations
<p>Most commonly associated with experimental or evaluative research design.</p> <p>Michelle Stanworth (1983) systematically recorded the amount of direct contact time teachers give to male and female students.</p>	<p>Participant observation. (covert and overt)</p> <p>Requires an attachment to and detachment from those you are studying.</p> <p>It is very important to gain access to the group and to gain their trust.</p> <p>Data gathered is more ecologically valid (tells it like it is). The limitation is the observers' effect. Solution is to use covert methods.</p> <p>Goffman observed behaviour in mental institutions – Asylums</p>

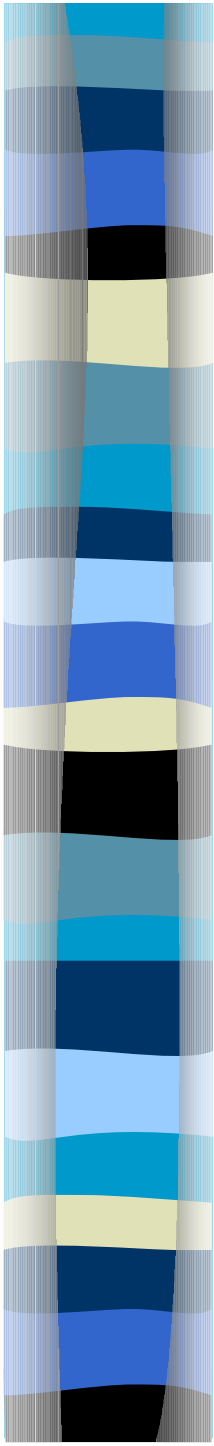
Secondary sources – analysis of official statistics and documents

- Analysis of official statistics –
- This is the mass of data collected by the state and its various agencies. E.g. National census, regular information by Government departments, Large and voluntary organisations. Statistics such as employment / unemployment, income / expenditure, birth / death rates, crime rates, examinations success rates
- Used in large-scale comparative research designs.
- Statistics are plentiful and cheap. The problem is whether they describe the same thing, are they accurate, how was information gathered?



Be cautious. Statistics are **SOCIAL CONSTRUCTIONS** (They reflect the conceptual categories and bureaucratic procedures through which they are collected) E.g. Townsend's study of poverty

Social constructs i.e. definitions



What is a
crime?

How would you define
poverty?

What constitutes a suicidal
death?

Up till some years ago
being gay was considered
as a mental illness

Define domestic violence

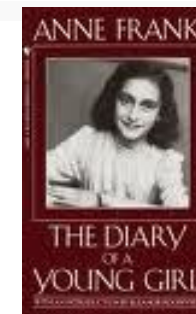


Official Statistics

- Are official statistics standardised?
Yes or No
- Why is it that official statistics may lack validity?
- Townsend's research on poverty showed that the official statistics were wrong. Comment.
- Sociologists should never use official statistics, because they are not valid. Comment

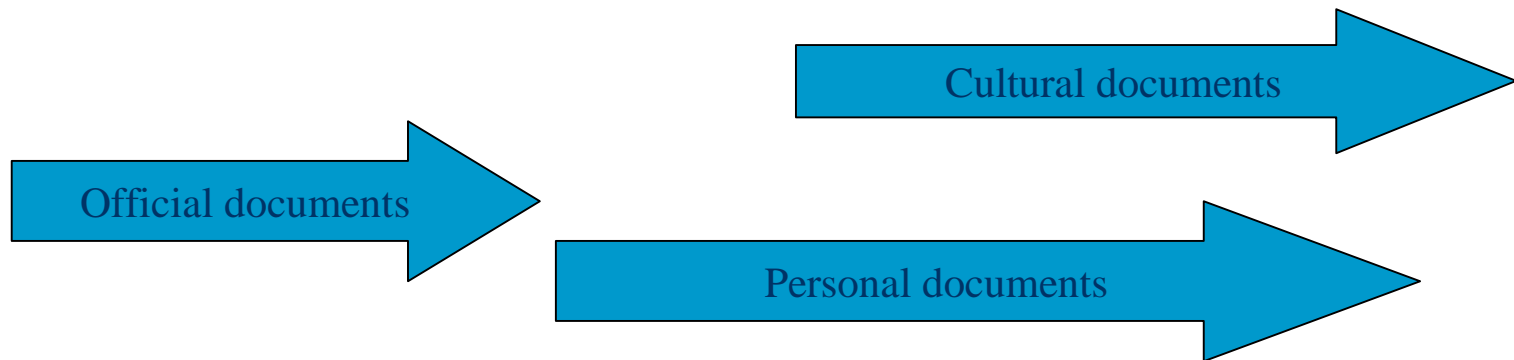
The analysis of documents

- This is the major method used in comparative and historical research designs. Also used for ethnographic research.



Analysis of documents

- Documents used when subjects cannot be observed or interviewed. However do not see them as a substitute for primary data since, what you write in a diary might be more real than what you tell me in an interview.



- One main question to ask is whether the document is **authentic?**
- Another question is the **validity** of the document's content.



Content analysis

- Imagine you are doing a content analysis of the news programmes on your local TV stations, looking at the proportions of time given to:
- Local, national and international news stories
- Using the criteria outlined in the beginning of this chapter, discuss what you think are the advantages and limitations of this approach.



Selection methods

<i>Research design</i>	<i>Typical subjects</i>	<i>Typical methods</i>
Survey	Samples of large populations	Structured interview questionnaire
Experimental / Evaluative	Small groups of subjects	Structured observation
Comparative / Cross cultural	Institutions, societies, groups of societies	Official statistics, documents
Ethnographic	Case studies	Participant observation, unstructured interview, personal documents



Ethics

Ethical issues are considerations that researchers need to take to make sure that the research participants are in no way harmed whilst or after the research has been carried out. Researcher therefore should feel a sense of responsibility versus the participants.

Research ethics – guidelines of ethics – need to balance the importance of the research findings. Sometimes you would be able to get the same type of information without jeopardising the lives of the research participants

It is important to plan and think about these ethical considerations to minimise them as possible in your research.



Summary of major points

- Some of the most important influences on researchers' choices of design and method are:- i) the nature of the problem being investigated ii) practical considerations iii) existing research iv) theoretical considerations
- Subjectivity vs Objectivity- Subjectivity refers to knowledge that is based on the individual's perceptions, including their values, opinions and preferences. Objectivity is knowledge that is free from bias, opinion and prejudice.
- Criteria of objectivity – Standardisation, reliability, transparency and Validity
- Research Designs – Surveys and longitudinal research, experimental research, comparative research and ethnography



Summary of major points

- Research methods – Primary data is information that researchers collect for themselves. Secondary data is information that is already in existence before the research starts.
- Interview methods –structured and unstructured.
- Observational methods
- Statistics and documents



Revision check – true or false

- Reliability and validity are different from each other
- Verstehen means measurement in sociology
- Concepts and indicators are closely related
- Ecological validity is the same as authenticity
- Validity is an indicator of the reliability of research



Revision check

- The managers of a college want you to undertake a participant observation study of student life. Advise them on the following:
 1. Explain the difference between covert and overt participation observation (2 marks)
 2. Explain two of the likely difficulties in setting up a participant observation research study (2 marks)
 3. Describe and explain two major benefits of studying student life through participant observation (3 marks)



Revision check

- 1 You have been asked to advise a government department about undertaking a research project on the extent of drug use among youths in a large city
 - What research method would you recommend ? (1 mark)
 - What potential difficulties would you warn them about ? (4 marks)
- 2 You have been asked to find out about the experience of unemployment in a small town.
 - Identify the method that you would use (1 mark)
 - Discuss what difficulties you might face when carrying this research (4 marks)



Revision check

- *There is a richness of detail in participant observation research that tends to be lacking in other methods and I have to confess it has always been my favourite research method. Some of the most vivid and interesting studies in sociology have used participant observation. (subject guide p.58)*
- Identify one sociologist who used participant observation in their research (1 mark)
- What is meant by the phrase “there is richness of detail in participant observation research?” (3 marks)
- What are the major problems in undertaking research using participant observation? (4 marks)



Revision check _ 2008 zone b

- Ecological validity is concerned with whether the results of social research are applicable to the reality of people's everyday lives
- Random sampling is achieved by selecting people who are willing to answer the survey questions
- Sociologists can use statistics to correlate variables in social research
- Participant observation is an example of a quantitative research strategy