2 SOCIOLOGICAL RESEARCH   
 METHODS

2.1 RESEARCHING SOCIAL LIFE

p.89/90 Getting you Thinking

(Note: There is scope for some variation in answers here. The following provides a few pointers.)

**1.** Almost certainly not. Applicants are self-selected and are then subjected to a selection process to get into the Big Brother house. The producers of the programme are unlikely to be interested in ‘ordinary’ people since the point of the programme is to provide entertainment for viewers. They are likely to choose the extrovert, the eccentric, the deviant, rather than the ordinary.

**2.** The inmates are unlikely to act ‘naturally’ since they will be conscious of the fact that they’re being filmed. However, over time the presence of the cameras may become so taken for granted that their impact on the inmates’ behaviour may lessen.

**3.** Again, almost certainly not. Not only is their behaviour being filmed, but in order to remain an inmate, contestants must avoid being voted off by viewers by managing the impression they create on others   
(c.f. Erving Goffman’s concept: ‘the presentation of self’).

**4.** Clearly, only a small amount of what is recorded can be transmitted because of time constraints. It is likely that what is transmitted is what the producers calculate will keep the viewing figures up. Hence, the mundane, routine and non-confrontational is more likely to be left on the cutting-room floor.

**5.** Experiments in social science are normally used to check out a hypothesis. So if social scientists were to get a group of 12 strangers to live together they would be likely to have a clear hypothesis they wished to test. They would also be likely to wish to obtain a representative sample and would have to think about ethical issues carefully.

p.94 Focus on Research: Choice in Higher Education

**1.** The most likely reason not to quantify this is that the researchers did not intend to draw any quantitative conclusions from these interviews, but to use them simply to provide background information.

**2.** If the sample is not representative, the researchers have to be very cautious about using the results to make generalisations about their survey population.

**3.** If the students were asked to define their own ethnicity the results will be both subjective and unlikely to accord with the categories used regularly in survey research (e.g. in the decennial census) making it difficult to compare the results with other research.

**4.** Again, this is likely to make it difficult to compare the findings of this research with other research that used the full RG scale.

**5.** The research could be strengthened by:

**a)** making sure that the students interviewed were representative of the survey population

**b)** asking students to allocate themselves to pre-identified ethnic categories

**c)** using the full RG scale (or, now, the NS-SEC scale) to allocate the students to socio-economic groups.

p.95 Focus on Skills: Analysing Research

**1.** In terms of the information provided here, Willis and Rutter used primary research only, Gillborn and Youdell both primary and secondary.

**2.** Willis and Gillborn and Youdell appear to have collected just qualitative date, Rutter quantitative.

**3.** Willis conducted his research mainly in a boys’ secondary modern school in the Midlands, focusing on a friendship group of 12 boys. As such, it may not be representative of what happens in girls’ schools,   
co-educational schools, other types of state secondary schools, independent schools or other areas of England and Wales.

Gillborn and Youdell’s study covered “several London schools”. We aren’t told whether these were primary or secondary, state or independent, single-sex or co-educational. Consequently, it is difficult to know how representative they would be. The only thing we can be sure about is that the study covered just London schools, so may not be representative of schools outside London.

Rutter’s study covered 12 inner-London secondary schools, so it did not include primary schools. Again we don’t know whether this sample contained a range of schools in terms of the gender of their pupils, or whether it included both state and independent schools. Consequently, we can’t tell how representative it might be of these categories. The fact that the schools were located in inner-London means that it may not be representative of schools in outer-London or beyond London.

**4.** In principle all three could be replicated, but it would probably be very difficult to replicate Willis’s study because of the time commitment and interpersonal skills required.

**5.** Again, in principle, all three studies have the capacity to reveal the truth about what they chose to study, but each research technique used carries with it particular strengths and limitations in terms of validity. For example, participant observation requires the researcher to retain objectivity at the same time as immersing him/herself in a close set of relationships; interviews rely on the honesty of interviewees.

p.96 check your understanding 2.1

**1. Aim 1:** to gather data, i.e. collect information about the social world

**Aim 2:** to establish correlations, i.e. establish if and how aspects of society are related to each other, particularly in terms of causal relationships

**Aim 3:** to support, contradict or help to develop sociological theories, i.e. research is a crucial element in the production and testing of sociological theories.

**2.** Sociological research is more trustworthy than common sense because it requires objective evidence to validate its claims and because it seeks to be self-critical.

**3.** Two variables are correlated if, when one changes, the other does too. If they both move in the same direction they are *positively* correlated, if they move in opposite directions they are *negatively* correlated. The fact that two variables are correlated doesn’t necessarily mean that one is *causing* the other: it may just be coincidence or there may be a third variable causing both.

**4.** Quantitative data (quantity – y + active).

**5.** Primary data is information collected first-hand by the researcher him/herself. Secondary data is data already produced/collected by others.

**6.** It means the results can be seen as applying to cases beyond those studied.

**7. Primary data:** information produced by the researcher through social surveys or experiments.

**Secondary data:** information such as historical documents or official statistics.

**8.** A study is ‘valid’ if it provides a true and accurate account of the topic investigated. This is vital if the study is to be worthwhile.

**9.** In survey research, construct validity addresses the issue of how well whatever is purported to be measured actually has been measured. *Ecological validity* refers to the extent to which the findings of a research study are able to be generalized to real-life settings.

**10.** Research can never be completely valid because it inevitably represents a shorthand description of the social world.

2.2 CHOICES IN RESEARCH: METHODS, PRACTICALITIES, ETHICS AND THEORIES

P.99 Focus on Skills: Observing Primary Children Playing

**1.** This research was interested in studying differences in play by age and gender amongst children in a playground setting. They focused on two issues: how adult supervision affected play and how gender differences in play might be affected by the media.

**2.** It is likely that the sociologists were interested in gender issues, particularly in gender socialisation and the role of the media in this. They may well have had strong views about gender stereotyping by the media and thought it important to look at media influence. The researchers may have been influenced by structural and feminist perspectives, but without further information, this remains speculative.

**3.** **Ethical problems:** the researchers would have had to gain *consent* from the schools and, possibly, from the childrens’ parents to conduct the research; they would have had to guarantee the children and schools *anonymity;* they would have had to consider whether any *harm* could come to the children through the research (unlikely, in this case).

**Practical problems:** gaining *funding;* gaining *access;* allocating *time;* ensuring the camcorders weren’t stolen.

**4.** Provided the ethical issues identified above were addressed, the research could be considered ethical. It is possible that some people could object on the basis that the children were not old enough to provide informed consent (or, indeed, likely to have been asked whether or not they consented).

**5.** There is no reason to think that the research would not have provided valid data so long as the video recordings were analysed objectively.

P.104/5 Focus on Research: Ethnographic Studies in Educational Research

**1.** Among the factors are likely to have been: access to the research subjects through his employment as a teacher; an interest in minority ethnic groups (perhaps related to his own ethnic identity); an interest in differential educational achievement.

**2.** The researcher wished to understand how the students saw the world. This suggests he was influenced by interpretive theoretical perspectives. However, he also wished to collect factual data about the students’ experiences, which links to positivism.

**3.** The researcher carried out participant observation and made use of secondary quantitative data.

**4.** It is possible that the researcher found it difficult to remain objective as he befriended the students at the same time as researching them. However, this would not have inevitably compromised the validity of his research.

**5.** Practical issues he confronted included: negotiating the multiple roles of teacher, friend and researcher with the students and coping with conflict with colleagues in the staffroom. Access was not a problem as he taught in the institutions where he carried out his research.

P.108 Check your Understanding 2.2

**1.** A researcher’s *values* are likely to influence their choice of research topic since this will shape their ideas about what topics and what questions are worth researching. The availability of *funding* is another important factor since without it research may prove difficult.

**2.** *Ethical issues* are concerned with acting in a morally sound way.

**3.** One practical issue that affects choice of method is *time*. For example, this will influence the choice between using a cross-sectional or longitudinal survey. Another is the issue of *access*. For example, if only one organisation amongst those in which the researcher is interested grants access, he/she may decide to carry out a case study.

**4.** Sociologists influenced by feminist perspectives are likely to study topics that explore the position of women in society.

**5.** Sociologists influenced by interpretivism will wish to discover how the people whose behaviour they wish to explain see the world. They are therefore likely to choose qualitative research methods which will allow them to explore this in depth, such as semi/unstructured interviews or participant observation.

**6.** Positivists focus on objective social reality, interpretivists on subjective social reality; positivists see causes residing in the way society is organised, interpretivists in how people interpret the world; positivists see the methods of natural science as applicable to social science, interpretivists see the methods of natural science as problematic because human beings are conscious, unlike the objects of study of the natural sciences.

**7.** One ethical issue involved in interviewing young children is that they are not in a position to give *informed* consent to being interviewed.

**8.** Teachers are busy people, so their time is limited when it comes to helping researchers.

**9.** One theoretical issue would be that of gaining a *valid* picture of what is going on. For example, the presence of a researcher in a classroom might change the behaviour of both teachers and pupils.

**10.** Triangulation in social research means using a variety of methods to study the same topic. If researching the reasons for social class differences in GCSE attainment, it might be helpful to check pupils’ responses to interview questions by observing their behaviour in the classroom or to check what they claim to be their level of attainment against school records.

2.3 QUANTITATIVE RESEARCH METHODS

P.113 Focus on Research: Survey Research on Parents and Educational Advantage

**1.** Parents of children aged 5-16 years who attended school (geographical location not specified) who were on YouGov’s panel of people willing to take part in polling in return for a small fee (from whom a *sample* of 1,173 parents were selected).

**2.** It would appear that, in order to get onto YouGov’s panel, you must have internet access. The sampling frame therefore excludes people who do not have internet access (e.g. people who can’t afford it or who are not computer literate). The sampling frame is also made up of people who are interested in responding to opinion polls for a small fee. This would exclude people who are not interested in supplementing their income and/or people not interested in taking part in polls. All of these could possibly affect the representativeness of the sampling frame.

**3.** It is unclear how YouGov selected who they invited to participate amongst those on their panel who matched the criteria of living with children aged 5-16 years, apart from the fact that they stratified their sample in terms of gender and social grade. They also over-sampled those in the highest grade.

**4.** **Strengths:** the sample was more or less representative in terms of the gender of respondents. **Weaknesses:** the sample was not representative either in terms of class or of ethnicity.

**5.** Given the limitations of the sampling frame, the sample itself could have been improved by matching the proportions belonging to different classes and ethnic groups in the sample to their proportion in the survey population.

P.115 Focus on Skills: Comparative Research on Academy Chains

**1.** This study provides an example of comparative research because it compared educational achievement across different academy chains, and between academy chains and non- academy chain schools.

**2.** The independent variables examined were: academy chains, non-academy chains and type of academy chain.

**3.** The dependent variables were: GCSE performance, progress made in English and Maths and English Baccalaureate performance.

**4.** The research could not have used a field experiment format because this would have required the researchers to control the allocation of subjects (pupils) to different types of schools, schools moreover which the researchers had themselves set up.

**5.** It is unclear whether the researchers took account of the internal policies adopted within the schools in terms of exam entry. It could be that some less able pupils were diverted from GCSEs into other – vocational – qualifications in order to improve pass rates in some schools. It is also unclear whether they analysed the ability of the intake of the pupils in each school. Comparing the proportion of pupils in each type of school who obtained 5 or more GCSEs tells you nothing about the relative quality of the schools, if the ability of the intake is not taken into account.

**6.** This research indicates the value of the comparative method (with the provisos indicated above) in shedding light on an important aspect of educational policy. In particular, the desirability of handing over responsibility for education from LEAs to academy chains.

P.116 Check your Understanding 2.3

**1.** Quantitative research is research which generates data expressed in the form of numbers.

**2.** Sampling, if done well, allows the researcher to generalise the results of research focused on a relatively small number of cases to the larger group the sample relates to, so long as the sample is representative.

**3.** Random samples are not always representative since, by chance, certain categories of the population could end up being under- or over-represented. This is particularly likely if the sample is small.

**4.** Quota sampling involves deciding beforehand on the size of your sample, stratifying it in terms of the sub- categories you want to cover and then obtaining the appropriate number of representatives for each sub- category. A problem is that some of the people who could potentially fill any of the sub-categories may not be accessible to the researcher.

**5. Systematic:** names are chosen from the sampling frame in terms of a predetermined sequence.

**Stratified random:** key sub-categories are identified in terms of their proportion in the sampling frame and the sample is made up of people within each sub-category chosen at random.

**6. a)** Snowball sampling is likely to be used where no sampling frame is available.

**b)** Theoretical sampling involves the selection of a sample that would spread light on a particular theoretical issue. For example, the Affluent Worker studies carried out in the sixties in England by Goldthorpe and his colleagues to test the embourgeoisement thesis deliberately focused on manual workers who were *atypical* but most likely to be experiencing embourgeoisement if any workers were (on the basis that, if the process could not be observed amongst these workers, it was highly unlikely to taking place at all).

**7.** Sociology is concerned with the behaviour of groups and societies rather than individuals. It is not normally practicable to experiment on groups of people. Sociology is also concerned with social institutions. Sociologists are not in a position to set up social institutions. Experimental research involves the manipulation of variables. It is unlikely that manipulation of the kinds of variables in which sociologists would be interested would be ethical. For example, sociologists are interested in the impact of welfare states on the development of political radicalism. An experimental study would require the establishment of a society with a welfare state and one without, and the allocation of people at random to these two categories. Clearly, this isn’t going to happen!

**8.** Rosenthal and Jacobson’s study *Pygmalion in the Classroom* involved a field experiment. One problem with this research is the ethical problem that it involved misleading teachers about the results of a test that supposedly identified the children likely to ‘spurt ahead’ academically. Another ethical problem is the possible deleterious academic consequence for those children not identified as ‘spurters’.

**9.** Durkheim’s study of suicide. Margaret Mead’s study of gender roles in three ‘primitive’ societies: the Mundugumor, the Arapesh and the Tchambuli.

**10.** In comparative research it is not possible to control for all the variables that could affect the issue being examined, nor can you be sure that you have considered all the possible causes of whatever variation is apparent.

2.4 QUALITATIVE RESEARCH METHODS

P.124 Focus on Research: Gang Leader for the Day

**1.** It is far from clear that Venkatesh did ‘go native’ during the research since this would have involved him giving up his research and living life as a gang member for real. However, the fact that he kicked someone during a fight does certainly raise questions about the limits of ‘participation’ as a participant observer.

**2.** Venkatesh would have faced many practical problems in carrying out this research. For example, the initial problem of access and, subsequently, how to present himself, how to speak with the gang members, how much time to spend with the gang, avoiding being arrested, and so on.

**3.** Amongst the ethical issues Venkatesh would have faced are: how honest to be about the purpose of his research with the gang members; whether he should break the law as a result of his role as a participant observer; whether he should report illegal activities committed by the gang to the police.

**4. How honest to be about the purpose of his research with the gang members:** Venkatesh was not entirely honest about why he was doing the research, suggesting to J.T. that he wanted to write his biography. The justification is not presented in the text, but he presumably thought that this would ensure greater cooperation by J.T.

**Whether he should break the law as a result of his role as a participant observer:** again, the justification is not presented in the text, but he may have felt that if he was not prepared to break the law he would not have been allowed to continue his research.

**Whether he should report illegal activities committed by the gang to the police:** Venkatesh did not do this because he prioritised the protection of his sources (and because he would clearly have forfeited his research opportunity had he done so).

All of these points illustrate the complex ethical issues faced by participant researchers, particularly when observing groups involved in illegal activities. The fundamental question is whether the possible beneficial consequences of understanding why some people engage in criminal behaviour outweighs the negatives of deception and illegality.

**5.** Whether this makes Venkatesh’s study invalid depends on whether this resulted in his forming a distorted view of the gang or not. If what he did see provided a rounded picture of their life, it wouldn’t matter; if it didn’t provide a rounded picture, then it would matter.

P.126 Focus on skills: Review of Educating Yorkshire

**1.** The term ‘fly-on-the-wall documentary’ is meant to convey the idea that the viewer is provided with the same view as a fly would get, i.e. a view completely undistorted by the presence of a camera. (Note: the label assumes that the fly goes unnoticed by the people in the room!)

**2.** Observational research seeks to gain a similarly direct and undistorted view.

**3. Similarities:** both seek to record what happens directly on camera; both involve editing in the production of the broadcast.

**Differences:** wildlife is not going to alter its behaviour in the presence of cameras, which are usually carefully concealed; human beings may well alter their behaviour if they know they are being filmed.

**4.** Clearly, it is unavoidable that judgements will need to be made by the producers in reducing 2,000 hours of footage to approximately 8 hours of broadcast material: judgements about entertainment value, judgements about what might be damaging to the lives of particular pupils or teachers or to the reputation of the school if shown, judgements about representing the school fairly/honestly (though the latter assumes a certain amount of integrity on the part of the programme makers), etc. However, non-judgemental, in this context, probably means without expressing value-judgements about what is portrayed, and this is more feasible. Objectivity is problematic because the producers are aiming for a successful TV series, not for scientific credibility.

**5.** The crucial difference between sociological research and a television documentary has to do with the purposes of those involved. The primary goal of the sociological researcher is to produce a valid account of what is being observed which will be accepted for publication in a peer-reviewed journal; the primary goal of the TV producer is to produce an informative and entertaining series that will attract an audience. Also, research is likely to anonymise the identity of the people being observed; a TV documentary can’t avoid identifying those involved. Sociological research is therefore aiming for objectivity, even if it is difficult to achieve.

P.127 Check your Understanding 2.4

**1.** In overt observation the people being observed are aware of the fact; in covert observation, they are not.

**2.** In participant observation, the researcher joins in with the activities of the group being observed; in non- participant observation, they don’t.

**3. Advantages:** avoids the need for deception and sustaining a fake identity; avoids the need for a pretext to ask questions and seek a deeper understanding.

**Disadvantages:** if people know they are being observed they may alter their behaviour; you may have to gain the permission of those being observed.

**4.** Andy Bennett (2004) gained access to the hip-hop scene in Newcastle via his acquaintance with a local break-dancer who also worked as an instructor at a community dance project.

**5. Participant:** Paul Willis’s (1977) study of a boys’ secondary modern school *Learning to Labour.*

**Non-Participant:** David Hargreaves’s (1967) study of a boys’ secondary modern school *Social Relations in a Secondary School.*

**6.** A positivist would probably see participant observation as ‘unscientific’ because of its reliance on the subjective judgement of the researcher in terms of what to record and what to omit and because of the difficulty of replication.

**7.** An interpretivist would argue that it provides unparalleled access into the world view and the lives of the people being studied and to open up issues that the researcher may never have considered looking into or even been aware of otherwise.

**8.** A focus group involves a group of people discussing a topic suggested by a researcher in a relaxed setting.

**9.** In unstructured interviews, the responses of the interviewee are likely to shape the direction which the interview takes to a significant degree. As such, the outcomes of a series of such interviews are likely to be quite different and, consequently, would be difficult to quantify.

**10.** Willis’s study (see Q5):

**practical issue:** gaining the trust of the ‘lads’

**ethical issue:** whether or not to intervene in inappropriate behaviour by the lads

**theoretical issue:** how to combine a phenomenological approach with a Marxist theoretical stance.

2.5 ASKING QUESTIONS: QUESTIONNAIRES AND INTERVIEWS

P.133 Focus on Skills: Parents and Mathematically Gifted Children

[**Please note:** a typographical error appears in line 6 in the Student Book where the text refers to ‘unstructured questionnaires’. Questionnaires are, by definition, structured, so the text should simply refer to ‘questionnaires’.]

**1. Motivator:** a parent who encourages their child to be successful in Maths.

**Resource provider:** a parent who provides their child with the resources that will enable them to be successful in Maths.

**Monitor:** a parent who takes a keen interest in how they are coping with Maths.

**Maths content advisor:** a parent who is able to act as a supplementary Maths teacher.

**Maths learning counsellor:** a parent who supports their child in making progress in Maths by talking with them about their work even if not mathematically expert themselves.

**2.** The researcher needed to operationalise the concept of parental help in relation to mathematically gifted children. (The concept of ‘mathematically gifted’ would also have needed to be operationalised, but the researcher appears to have been happy to accept how others had previously operationalised this.)

‘Parental help’ was broken down into five dimensions (see Q1) and then each of these was measured in the questionnaire using what is called a ‘Likert scale’ – strongly agree, agree, disagree, strongly disagree.

**3.** A positivist would see it as an objective and reliable way of measuring parental help – reliable because it could be easily replicated.

**4.** Interpretivists would see the unstructured interviews as more useful because they would enable the researcher to explore what ‘parental help’ *meant to the parents* interviewed and to explore in depth what each parent did to help their child.

**5. Strengths:** the researcherthought carefully about how to operationalise the concept of ‘parental help’ for the questionnaire research; the research combined two different research methods which would have produced richer data; the researcher interviewed the parents twice, which would have increased the reliability of her findings.

**Weaknesses:** it is unclear how the 15 children chosen were selected and, therefore, whether they were representative of all mathematically gifted children in NZ (which has implications for the generalisability of the findings); the sample size is relatively small; the Likert scale used lacks a neutral option (i.e. ‘neither agree nor disagree’) which could distort the results.

P.137 Focus on Research: Stephen Frosh et al (2002) and the Youth Lifestyles Study

**1.** The questions used in their semi-structured interviews by Frosh et al were open-ended; those used in the Lifestyles Survey were closed.

**2. Open-ended questioning. Advantages:** reduces the risk of constraining the respondent’s answers, therefore increasing validity; allows the respondent to explain their views in depth, again increasing validity. **Disadvantages:** more time-consuming both to complete and to analyse; less easy to produce quantitative data from.

**Closed questioning. Advantages:** produces data that is relatively easily quantified; increases reliability. **Disadvantages:** no opportunity for respondents to qualify or clarify answers; of limited use for collecting information about feelings, meanings or motives.

**3.** Open-ended questioning is more time consuming since no limit is placed on the respondents’ replies to questions.

**4.** Closed questions are likely to be more reliable since there is little scope for interviewers to steer answers in different directions, thereby increasing the ease of replication.

**5.** Open-ended questions are likely to offer greater validity since the respondent is able to express themselves in words that they choose rather than in a format determined by the question setter.

**6.** In semi-structured interviews where the interviewer has scope to choose how to explore questions in depth, there is the possibility that different interviewers will emphasise different things, thereby producing answers that are not strictly comparable.

P.140 Check your Understanding 2.5

**1.** Operationalising concepts means turning them into something that can be measured.

**2.** Open-ended questions have the advantage of allowing respondents to answer questions using their own words, so there is less risk of their views being misrepresented. However, they require more of the respondents’ time.

**3. Advantage:** Questionnaires distributed via email can be easily sent to a geographically dispersed sample. **Disadvantage:** Your sample will be limited to those with internet access.

**4.** Coding is essentially a categorisation process for analysis of open-ended text. It involves looking for recurring themes in answers to open-ended questions so that the myriad individual responses can be grouped into a limited number of categories and thereby quantified.

**5.** Respondents may interpret the questions differently; there is a danger of the researcher imposing his/her preconceptions and priorities on the respondent; it is unlikely to generate new hypotheses as the researcher will only find out about the issues they have previously decided are the important ones; it is difficult to explore nuanced views.

**6.** Interviewees may answer a question in line with what they think the interviewer would want to hear rather than giving an honest answer; the characteristics of the interviewer (their age, gender, ethnicity, etc.) may inadvertently influence the answers given; the interviewer may, wittingly or unwittingly, lead the interviewee to answer in a particular way.

**7.** A semi-structured interview is one in which some, but not all, of the questions asked have been predetermined. It can be semi-structured in the sense that it uses a mixture of closed and open-ended questions and can include compulsory and optional questions.

**8.** One advantage is that it enables people to reflect on their own views in the light of what others say. One disadvantage is that people may be reluctant to express a minority opinion.

**9.** Head teachers may be reluctant to say anything that might damage the reputation of their school or undermine their position of authority.

**10.** Using two different research techniques allows results to be cross-checked, hence increasing validity. Questionnaires avoid the problem of interviewer bias, which could be significant in examining a potentially sensitive subject. Interviews would allow the exploration of ideas around masculinity at greater depth than is likely to be possible using a questionnaire.

2.6 SECONDARY SOURCES OF DATA

p.145 Focus on Skills: The Equality and Human Rights Commission: How Fair is Britain?

**1.** There are a number of possible reasons why the EHRC used existing sources to examine fairness in education: it would have been less costly and time consuming than commissioning its own primary research; by using a variety of existing sources it was able to examine a wide range of issues relating to fairness in education; by using both historical and contemporary data it was able to examine trends and changes over time; by using data produced by a wide variety of different bodies it could increase the credibility of its report.

**2. Strength:** the question is clearly worded and the possible answers appear to be comprehensive, so it is likely to provide the information sought.

**Weakness:** it would not discriminate between those who attended once and then dropped-out and those who attended a complete course.

**3.** The EHRC examined a wide range of issues in its report and looked at a wide range of possible sources of inequality, including disability, religion or belief, sexual orientation and transgender status besides those mentioned in this summary. The only obvious dimension missing is that of geographical inequalities.

**4.** The EHRC itself acknowledges some gaps in the data available to it (Executive Summary, p.41). For example, a reliable baseline estimate of how many people self-identify as lesbian, gay, bisexual or transgender; basic information about people who are institutionalised, and people who do not live in fixed locations. Primary research could provide information relating to the latter two, but the first is likely to prove very difficult to establish as people may be reluctant to be open about their sexual orientation.

p.148 Focus on Research: The Internet as a secondary Source on Sex Work

**1.** Sanders is here borrowing from the notion of ‘virtual reality’, which is the creation of a virtual environment through computer technology presented to our senses in such a way that we experience it as if we were really there. So ‘virtual observation’ seeks to convey the idea that, by accessing these internet sources, Sanders is able to ‘see’ what is going on in terms of interactions between clients and sex workers in cyberspace.

**2.** Both sex work and the purchasing of sex are widely stigmatised and hedged around by legal restrictions, so seeking to gain information about either through primary research is likely to prove problematic. There would be problems of access, of sampling and of candour, to mention just a few, so the internet provides a unique source of data that overcomes these problems.

**3.** One possible reason is that only some sex workers advertise their services online, so if she had relied simply on the internet she would have excluded some aspects of the business. Also, there are aspects of the business that would not be visible online – for example, how sex workers viewed their work – which primary research could shed light on.

**4.** The use of internet sources does not raise ethical issues for the reasons given. (Note: It is important to distinguish between ethical issues in relation to research in this area and the ethical issues raised by sex work itself.)

**5.** This is an important idea for sociology since there is good evidence that the way people behave in cyberspace is different from how they behave in face to face situations (think of cyber-bullying, for example). Whether and, if so, how far these two social worlds differ is so far both under-researched and under- theorised.

**6. Sociologists could make use both of forums of students (e.g. www.thestudentroom.co.uk), parents (e.g. www.netmums.com) or professionals (e.g. www.teacherstalk.co.uk) and of blogs written by members of any of these groups to explore attitudes to education.**

p.151 Check your Understanding 2.6

**1.** To save time and money; to examine issues about which it would be impossible for them to collect the data themselves; to examine historical trends; to supplement primary data.

**2.** The data may not be authentic (e.g. may be a fake); the data may be biased; the data may be organised or conceptualised in a way that limits its usefulness for sociological purposes.

**3. The positivist view:** official statistics can be useful so long as they are not taken at face value.

**The interpretivist view:** official statistics are social constructs that lack any objective validity.

**The radical view:** official statistics are likely to present a distorted view of reality that reflects the power of dominant groups to define what matters and how this should be measured.

**4.** Statistics on households and family structures; statistics on the ethnic composition of the UK.

**5.** Stephen Ball (1994) used secondary data, including statements of admissions policies and school marketing material, to examine how the education market worked.

**6.** A sociologist might read an **autobiography** – a document in the public domain – to gain an insight into a particular area of social life e.g. the autobiography of ‘Razor’ Smith *A few kind words and a loaded gun* (2004) provides a powerful insight into the life of a career criminal, both outside and inside prison.

Sociologists have used **diaries** – a private document – in their research. For example, Atkinson (1978) used diaries in his study of the different meanings that suicide can have for people who take their own lives.

**7.** Meta-analysis involves carrying out an analysis of two or more studies of a particular topic. By combining the findings of numerous studies of a specific issue you are likely to arrive at a more valid picture.

**8. Formal content analysis:** content is classified and counted

**Thematic analysis:** involves the search for dominant or recurring themes in the mass media

**Textual analysis:** involves analysing the words used to describe the world by the media.

**9. Advantage:** it may provide an insight into a person’s most private thoughts, which they may be reluctant to verbalise.

**Disadvantage:** the person writing it may have anticipated its eventual publication, in which case it might not be entirely truthful.

**10. Advantages:** a researcher would be unlikely to be able to access these informally; they provide relatively objective measures of educational attainment; they involve a standardised basis for comparison.

**Disadvantages:** if they are used to compare different types of schools, they can be highly misleading since they do not provide information about the social background of a school’s pupils; they only measure pupil attainment, not progress; they provide no information about the exam-entry policy of the school and whether this is manipulated to boost exam results.