Chapter 14

Methodology

Introduction

Any academic subject requires a methodology to reach its conclusions: it must have ways of producing and analysing data so that theories can be tested, accepted or rejected. Without a systematic way of producing knowledge the findings of a subject can be dismissed as guesswork, or even as common sense made to sound complicated. Methodology is concerned with both the detailed research methods through which data are collected, and the more general philosophies upon which the collection and analysis of data are based.

As we have seen in this book, most areas of sociology are riven with controversy. Methodology is no exception to this general rule. One of the main areas of disagreement concerns – in the most general terms – whether sociology should adopt the same methods as (or similar methods to) those employed in science.

Sociology first developed in Europe in the nineteenth century when industrialization resulted in massive social changes. Accompanying these social changes were intellectual changes during which science started to enjoy a higher reputation than ever before. Science appeared to be capable of producing objective knowledge that could be used to solve human problems and increase human productive capacity in an unprecedented way. It was not surprising, therefore, that many early sociologists chose to turn to science for a methodology on which to base their subject.

However, not all sociologists have agreed that it is appropriate to adopt the methodology of the natural sciences. For these sociologists, studying human behaviour is fundamentally different from studying the natural world. Unlike the subject matter of, for example, chemistry or physics, people possess consciousness, which means (from the point of view of some sociologists) that sociology requires a different type of methodology from science.

In the above terms, it was possible to identify two broad traditions within sociology:

1 Those who advocated the use of scientific and usually quantitative methods (numerical statistical methods).
2 Those who supported the use of more humanistic and qualitative methods.

However, it was never the case that all sociologists fitted neatly into these categories. Furthermore, as will become clear, there are divisions *within* these two broad camps as well as *between* them.

In recent years, some sociologists have questioned the need for such a rigid division between quantitative and qualitative methodology, and have advocated combining the two approaches. Other sociologists have advocated methods associated with critical social science or with postmodernism.

Critical social science tends to favour more qualitative methods but it is not exclusively associated with such methods. The central feature of critical social science is that it links research with trying to transform society. It therefore rejects the view of many sociologists – including many of the advocates of the two approaches discussed above – that researchers should be impartial. Instead, it sides with those it sees as the disadvantaged and oppressed groups in society. It seeks to develop any methods that will help to liberate these groups from their oppression.

Feminists are amongst the most influential of critical social scientists, and some feminists have argued that distinctive feminist methodologies should be adopted.

Postmodernists have developed their approaches to methodology relatively recently. They tend to reject the belief that researchers can ever discover some objective truth about the social world. Instead they believe that all that can be done is to examine the social world from the viewpoint of the different actors within it, and to deconstruct or take apart existing explanations of society. They reject the claims of traditional quantitative, qualitative and critical researchers that it is possible to determine the truth about society. Whatever method is used, researchers will be left with many different accounts of the social world, and no particular account can be singled out as being better than the others.

Critical social science and postmodernism will be examined in detail later in the chapter, but first the contrast between quantitative and qualitative approaches will be discussed in greater depth.

'Scientific' quantitative methodology

As the introduction suggested, some sociologists have tried to adopt the methods of the natural sciences. In doing so they have tended to advocate the use of quantitative methods. The earliest attempt to use such methods in sociology is known as positivism.

Positivism, Durkheim and sociology

The French writer Auguste Comte (1798–1857) was the first person to use the word 'sociology', and he also coined the term 'positive philosophy' (Comte, 1986, first published in the 1840s). Comte believed that there was a hierarchy of scientific subjects, with sociology at the pinnacle of that hierarchy. Comte was confident that scientific knowledge about society could be accumulated and used to improve human existence so that society could be run rationally without religion or superstition getting in the way of progress.

Emile Durkheim (1858–1917) advocated a similar methodology to that of Comte. He has been widely regarded as a positivist. Durkheim's classic study *Suicide* (1970, first published 1897) is often seen as a model of positivist research and it does indeed follow many of the methodological procedures of positivism. Certain aspects of Durkheim's work will be used to illustrate the positivist approach. However, strictly speaking Durkheim was not a positivist. As the discussion below will show, he did not follow the positivist rule which states that sociological study should be confined to observable or directly measurable phenomena.

1 Social facts

First, as a positivist, Comte believed that the scientific study of society should be confined to collecting information about phenomena that can be objectively observed and classified. Comte argued that sociologists should not be concerned with the internal meanings, motives, feelings and emotions of individuals. Since these mental states exist only in the person's consciousness, they cannot be observed and so they cannot be measured in any objective way.

Durkheim agreed that sociologists should confine themselves to studying social facts. He argued that 'The first and most fundamental rule is: *Consider social facts as things*' (Durkheim, 1938, first published 1895). This means that the belief systems, customs and institutions of society – the facts of the social world – should be considered as things in the same way as the objects and events of the natural world.

However, Durkheim did not believe that social facts consisted only of those things that could be directly observed or measured. To Durkheim, social facts included such phenomena as the belief systems, customs and institutions of society. Belief systems are not directly measurable or observable since they exist in the consciousness of humans. Nevertheless, Durkheim saw them as existing over and above individual consciousness. They were not chosen by individuals and they could not be changed at will. Social facts, such as the customs of a particular profession, were external to each individual and constrained their behaviour. That is, each person had their options limited by the existence of customs and practices.

In Durkheim's view, society is not simply a collection of individuals, each acting independently in terms of his or her particular psychology or mental state. Instead, members of society are directed by collective beliefs, values and laws – by social facts which have an existence of their own. Social facts therefore make individuals behave in particular ways. Durkheim's definition and use of the term 'social facts' distinguish him from positivists such as Comte. In many other respects, though, he followed the logic and methods of positivism. (The differences between Durkheim's approach and positivism are further discussed on p. 976.)

2 Statistical data

The second aspect of positivism concerns its use of statistical data. Positivists believed it was possible to classify the social world in an objective way. Using these classifications it was then possible to count sets of observable social facts and so produce statistics. For example, Durkheim (1970) collected data on social facts such as the suicide rate and membership of different religions.

3 Correlation

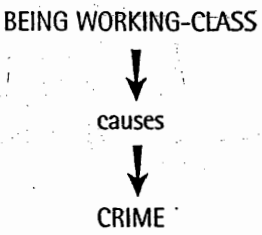
The third stage of positivist methodology entails looking for correlations between different social facts. A correlation is a tendency for two or more things to be found together, and it may refer to the strength of the relationship between them. In his study of suicide Durkheim found an apparent correlation between a particular religion, Protestantism, and a high suicide rate.

4 Causation

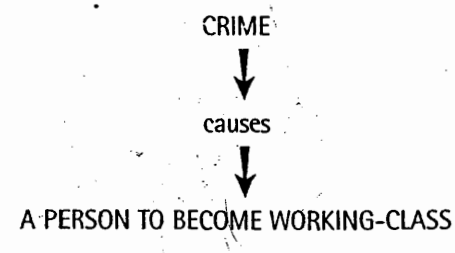
The fourth stage of positivist methodology involves a search for causal connections. If there is a strong

correlation between two or more types of social phenomena, then a positivist sociologist might suspect that one of these phenomena was causing the other to take place. However, this is not necessarily the case, and it is important to analyse the data carefully before any such conclusion can be reached.

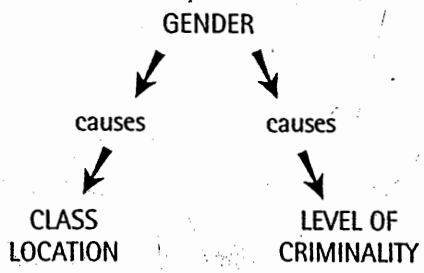
The example of class and criminality can be used to illustrate this point. Many sociologists have noted a correlation between being working-class and a relatively high chance of being convicted of a crime. This has led some (for instance, Robert Merton (1968)) to speculate that being working-class was one factor which might cause people to commit criminal acts. This can be illustrated simply as:



However, there are other possibilities that might explain the correlation. It could be that a similar proportion of criminals come from all social classes but that conviction for crime causes criminals of middle-class origin to be downwardly socially mobile, and to become working-class, since their criminal records might prevent them from obtaining non-manual work. In other words it is being criminal that causes a person to become working-class, and not the other way round. This is illustrated as:



Furthermore, there is the even more serious possibility that an apparent connection between two social phenomena might be a spurious or indirect correlation. This occurs when two or more phenomena are found together but have no direct connection to each other: one does not therefore cause the other. It may be that some third factor has a causal relationship to both the phenomena or factors being examined. For example, it may be that gender is related both to social class and to the likelihood of committing a crime, and that class and crime are not directly connected at all. Men may be more likely to commit crimes than women and may also be more likely to have manual jobs. Thus the original correlation discovered could be a product of the concentration of men in the working class, as the diagram below illustrates:



A further possibility is that the police discriminate against the working class and arrest more members of that class than of the middle class, even though the middle class are just as prone to crime.

Multivariate analysis

In order to overcome the problem of spurious correlation, Durkheim devised a technique known as multivariate analysis. This involves trying to isolate the effect of a particular independent variable upon the dependent variables. The dependent variable is the thing that is caused (in the example used above, crime); the independent variable(s) is/are the factor or factors that cause the dependent variable. In the diagram above, gender is an example of an independent variable.

To assess the influence of a particular independent variable – that is, to see if it is more or less important than another independent variable – it may be possible to produce comparisons where one variable is held constant, and the other is changed. For instance, the effect of gender on criminality could be isolated from the effect of class by comparing working-class men and women to see whether their crime rates were similar or different.

With the aid of computers and sophisticated statistical techniques, quantitative researchers can analyse the relative importance of many different variables. Durkheim had to make do with less sophisticated research procedures, but he used the same logic in his study of suicide. For example, he checked whether or not Protestantism was associated with a high suicide rate regardless of nationality by examining suicide rates in a range of countries.

Laws of human behaviour

Positivists believe that multivariate analysis can establish causal connections between two or more variables. If these findings are checked in a variety of contexts (for example, in different societies at different times), then the researchers can be confident that they have attained the ultimate goal of positivism: a law of human behaviour.

A scientific law consists of a statement about the relationship between two or more phenomena which

is true in all circumstances. Thus Newton's three Laws of Motion were supposed to describe the ways in which matter would always move. Similarly, Comte and Durkheim believed that real laws of human behaviour could be discovered.

Durkheim claimed to have discovered laws of human behaviour that governed the suicide rate. According to Durkheim the suicide rate always rose during a time of economic boom or slump.

Comte believed he had discovered a law that all human societies passed through three stages: the theological, the metaphysical, and the positive. In the first stage humans believed that events were caused by the actions of gods; in the second, events were held to be caused by abstract forces; but, in the third, scientific rationality triumphed so that scientific laws formed the basis of explanation.

Positivists and Durkheim, then, believe that laws of human behaviour can be discovered by the collection of objective facts about the social world in a statistical form, by the careful analysis of these facts, and by repeated checking of the findings in a series of contexts. From this point of view humans have little or no choice about how they behave. What takes place in their consciousness is held to be irrelevant since external forces govern human behaviour: people react to stimuli in the environment in a predictable and consistent way. They may also have little or no awareness of the factors shaping their actions. These can be uncovered through studying statistical patterns. The implication is that humans react directly to a stimulus without attaching a meaning to it first. (A simple example would be that if a motorist saw the stimulus of a red light, he or she would automatically react to it by stopping.) It is this implication of the positivist approach that has attracted the strongest criticism, as will become clear as the chapter develops.

Positivism is based upon an understanding of science that sees science as using a mainly inductive methodology. An inductive methodology starts by collecting the data. The data are then analysed, and out of this analysis theories are developed. Once the theory has been developed it can then be tested against other sets of data to see if it is confirmed or not. If it is repeatedly confirmed, then Durkheim and positivists such as Comte assume they have discovered a law of human behaviour.

Karl Popper – falsification and deduction

Despite the undoubted influence of positivist methodology within sociology, the inductive method on which it is usually based has not, by any means, been accepted by all scientists. Indeed, many scientists now advocate and use an alternative, deductive approach. Although the logic of the deductive approach is similar in many ways to positivism, the differences have important implications.

This alternative methodology in both natural science and sociology is supported by Karl Popper in his book *The Logic of Scientific Discovery* (1959). The deductive approach reverses the process of induction. It starts with a theory and tests it against the evidence, rather than developing a theory as a result of examining the data.

Popper argues that scientists should start with a 'hypothesis' or a statement that is to be tested. This statement should be very precise, and should state exactly what will happen in particular circumstances. On the basis of the hypothesis it should be possible to deduce predictions about the future. Thus, for example, Newton's Law of Gravity enables hypotheses to be made about the movement of bodies of a given mass, and these hypotheses can then be used to make predictions which can be tested against future events.

According to Popper it matters little how a scientific theory originates. It does not, as positivists suggest, have to come from prior observation and analysis of data. Scientists can develop theories however they wish – their theories might come to them in dreams or in moments of inspiration. What is important, and what makes them scientific, is their ability to be tested by making precise predictions on the basis of the theory.

Popper differs from positivists in that he denies that it is ever possible to produce laws that will necessarily be found to be true for all time. He argues that, logically, however many times a theory is apparently proved correct because predictions made on the basis of that theory come true, there is always the possibility that at some future date the theory will be proved wrong, or 'falsified'. For example, to Popper, the hypothesis 'all swans are white' is a scientific statement because it makes a precise prediction about the colour of any swan that can be found. But, however many times the statement is confirmed – if five, five hundred or five thousand swans are examined and found to be white – the very next swan examined may prove to be black and the hypothesis will be falsified. Laws, whether of natural science or of human behaviour, do not, from this point of view, necessarily have the permanence attributed to them by positivists.

Popper suggests that scientists have a duty to be objective, and to test their theories as rigorously as possible. Therefore, once they have formulated hypotheses, and made predictions, it is necessary to try constantly to find evidence that disproves or falsifies their theories. In the natural sciences one

method that has been developed in order to falsify theories is the laboratory experiment. This method, and its relevance to sociology, will now be examined. Popper's view of science will be evaluated later in the chapter (see pp. 1023–7).

The laboratory experiment and sociology

The word 'science' conjures up an image of researchers in white coats carrying out experiments in laboratories. This image is not usually associated, however, with sociology. Indeed sociologists very rarely carry out laboratory experiments even if they support the use of 'scientific' methods in their research. The reasons for this will be examined later, but first, why does the laboratory experiment enjoy such popularity in natural science?

The main reason why scientists use the laboratory experiment is because it enables them to test precise predictions in exactly the way that Popper advocates. Laboratories are controlled environments in which the researcher can manipulate the various independent variables however they wish. They can calculate the effects of a single independent variable while removing the possibility that any other factors are affecting the dependent variable they are studying. This is achieved through the use of a control with which to compare the experiment.

For example, if an experimenter wished to determine the importance of the independent variable, light, on the growth of plants, they could set up a laboratory experiment to isolate the effects of light from other independent variables. Thus the experimenter would set up an experiment and a control in which every variable other than the amount of light was held constant. Two sets of identical plants of the same species, age, condition and size would be kept at the same temperature, in an environment of the same humidity, planted in the same type and amount of soil, and given the same amount of water at the same time. The control group of plants would be exposed to a given intensity of light for a given period of time. The experiment group could be exposed to either more or less light than the control group. The results would be observed, measured and quantified. A single variable – light – would have been isolated to find the effects it had, independently of all the other variables.

The laboratory experiment allows researchers to be far more confident that they have isolated a particular variable than they would have been had they observed plants in the wild, where it would not be possible to regulate the various independent variables so tightly. Furthermore, the laboratory experiment facilitates replication: so long as the precise nature of the experiment is recorded, other scientists can reproduce identical conditions to see if the same results are obtained.

From Popper's point of view the experimental method is extremely useful because it allows the sort of precision in the making and repeated testing of predictions that he advocates. Laboratory experiments are quite frequently used in some 'social sciences', particularly psychology, but sociologists almost never make use of them. There are two main reasons for this:

1 Laboratories are unnatural situations. Members of society do not, in the normal course of events, spend their time under observation in laboratories. The knowledge that they are being studied, and the artificiality of the situation, might well affect the behaviour of those involved and distort the results so as to make them of little use.
2 It is impractical to carry out experiments in laboratories on many of the subjects of interest to sociologists. It is not possible to fit a community – let alone a whole society – into a laboratory. Nor is it possible to carry out a laboratory experiment over a sufficiently long time span to study social change.

Field experiments

As a consequence of the above difficulties, when sociologists do carry out experiments they are normally outside a laboratory. Such experiments are known as field experiments. They involve intervening in the social world in such a way that hypotheses can be tested by isolating particular variables.

For example, Rosenthal and Jacobson (1968) tested the hypothesis that self-fulfilling prophecies could affect educational attainment by manipulating the independent variables of the pupils' IQ (intelligence quotient) scores known to teachers (see p. 846).

In an experiment into gender role socialization carried out at Sussex University, girl babies were dressed up in blue clothes, boy babies in pink, and the reactions of adults to their behaviour were recorded. Not only did the adults assume that the boys were girls, and vice versa, but they interpreted their behaviour differently depending upon the sex they presumed them to be. Thus restless 'boys' (in reality the girls dressed in blue) were regarded as wanting to be active and to play, while restless 'girls' were regarded as being emotionally upset and in need of comfort (reported in Nicholson, 1993).

In another experiment, Sissons observed the reactions of members of the public when they were asked for directions by an actor. The location of the experiment was held constant (it took place outside Paddington station), but the appearance of the actor varied. Halfway through the experiment the actor changed from being dressed as a businessman to being dressed as a labourer. Sissons found that the

public were more helpful when the actor was dressed as a businessman rather than as a labourer (discussed in McNeill, 1985).

Brown and Gay (1985) conducted field experiments in which they made bogus applications for jobs by letter and telephone, identifying themselves as being from different ethnic groups (white, Asian and Afro-Caribbean). They found that the applications from supposedly non-white candidates were less likely to lead to a job interview than those from supposedly white candidates (see pp. 282–3).

Although field experiments overcome the problem of experiments taking place in an unnatural setting, these experiments do have other problems associated with them. First, it is not possible to control variables as closely as it is in the laboratory. Thus in Sissons's experiment, for example, it was not possible to carry out the two experiments at the same time and the same place, and, since they took place at different times, factors such as the weather and the time of day might have affected the results.

Second, in some field experiments the fact that an experiment is taking place can affect the results. This is often known as the Hawthorne Effect, after a famous experiment conducted at the Hawthorne works of the Western Electricity Company in Chicago and analysed by Elton Mayo (1933). The experiment was intended to test various hypotheses about worker productivity. Variables such as room temperature, the strength of the lighting and the length of breaks were varied, but, irrespective of whether working conditions were improved or made worse, productivity usually increased. It appeared that the workers were responding to the knowledge that an experiment was taking place rather than to the variables being manipulated.

To avoid the Hawthorne Effect (which can render the results of experiments worthless), it is necessary that the subjects of experimental research are unaware that the experiment is taking place. This, however, raises a further problem: the morality of conducting experiments on people without their consent. Some sociologists strongly object to doing this. Some experiments, such as Sissons's, may not have great moral implications, but others do. In Rosenthal and Jacobson's experiment (described above) the researchers may have held back the educational careers of some children by lying to their teachers.

Although field experiments open up greater possibilities than laboratory experiments, they are still likely to be confined to small-scale studies over short periods of time. Experimentation on society as a whole, or on large groups in society, is only likely to be possible with the consent of governments. Few governments are willing to surrender their authority to social researchers who are keen to test the theories and hypotheses they have developed! In any case it would cost a fortune and funds for research are limited. In these circumstances sociologists normally rely upon studying society as it is, rather than trying to manipulate it so that their theories can be tested directly.

The comparative method

The comparative method, as its name suggests, involves the use of comparisons. These may be comparisons of different societies, of groups within one or more societies, and comparisons at the same or different points in time. Unlike the experiment, the comparative method is based upon an analysis of what has happened, or is happening in society, rather than upon the situations artificially created by a researcher. The data used in the comparative method may come from any of the primary or secondary sources discussed in detail later in this chapter.

The comparative method overcomes some of the problems involved with experimentation in 'social sciences'. Moral problems are not as acute as in experimentation, since the researcher is not intervening directly in shaping the social world. Furthermore, the researcher is less likely to affect artificially the behaviour of those being studied, since the data, at least in theory, come from 'natural' situations.

The comparative method uses a similar 'scientific' logic to that employed by positivists, or to that used in the deductive approach supported by Popper. Systematic comparisons can be used either to establish correlations and ultimately causal connections and supposed 'laws', or to rigorously test hypotheses.

This method can be used to isolate variables to try to uncover the cause or causes of the social phenomenon being studied. It can be a far less convenient approach than laboratory or field experimentation. There is no guarantee that the available data will make it possible to isolate variables precisely when comparing, for example, the development of two different societies. There may be many ways in which they differ, and determining which independent variables caused the differences in the societies may not be straightforward.

The comparative method is superior to the experiment, though, in that it allows the sociologist to study the causes of large-scale social change over long periods of time. The historical development of societies can be studied; this is not feasible using experiments.

The comparative method has been widely used in sociology, particularly but by no means exclusively by those advocating a 'scientific' quantitative approach to the subject. The major founders of the discipline – Marx, Durkheim and Weber – all employed the comparative method.

Marx (1974) compared a wide variety of societies in order to develop his theory of social change and to support his claim that societies passed through different stages (see Chapter 15 for further details).

Durkheim, too, used the comparative method in his study of the division of labour and the change from mechanical to organic solidarity (Durkheim, 1947, first published 1893) (see pp. 691–3 for further details). Durkheim's study of suicide (which is considered later in this chapter) is a classic example of how detailed statistical analysis – involving the comparison of different societies, different groups within society, and different time periods – can be used to try to isolate the variables that cause a social phenomenon (see pp. 974–6).

In *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* (1958, first published 1930) Weber systematically compared early capitalist countries in Western Europe and North America with countries such as China and India to try to show a correlation between early capitalism and Calvinism (see pp. 446–51).

Modern sociologists have followed in the footsteps of Marx, Durkheim and Weber. There are numerous examples of the use of this method throughout this book, including David Martin's comparison of secularization in different countries (see pp. 490–2), Cicourel's comparison of juvenile justice in two Californian cities (see pp. 379–80), Michael Mann's comparison of networks of power in different territories (see pp. 633–5), and Fiona Devine's comparison of affluent workers in Luton in the 1990s and similar workers in the 1960s (see pp. 81–3).

Interpretive and qualitative methodology

Despite the considerable influence of the 'scientific' approaches to sociological methodology described above, an alternative series of interpretive or qualitative approaches has long existed within sociology. These approaches claim either that 'scientific' approaches are inadequate on their own for collecting, analysing and explaining data, or that they are totally inappropriate in a subject that deals with human behaviour. Thus some sociologists who advocate the use of interpretive and qualitative approaches suggest that they should be used to supplement 'scientific' quantitative methodology; others that they should replace 'scientific' approaches.

Qualitative data

Quantitative data are data in a numerical form: for example, official statistics on crime, suicide and divorce rates. By comparison, qualitative data are usually presented in words. These may be a description of a group of people living in poverty, providing a full and in-depth account of their way of life, or a transcript of an interview in which people describe and explain their attitude towards and experience of religion.

Compared to quantitative data, qualitative data are usually seen as richer, more vital, as having greater depth and as more likely to present a true picture of a way of life, of people's experiences, attitudes and beliefs.

The interpretive approach

Sociologists who take an interpretive approach are usually the strongest advocates of qualitative data. They argue that the whole basis of sociology is the interpretation of social action. Social action can only be understood by interpreting the meanings and motives on which it is based. Many interpretive sociologists argue that there is little chance of discovering these meanings and motives from quantitative data. Only from qualitative data – with its greater richness and depth – can the sociologist hope to interpret the meanings that lie behind social action.

Some interpretive sociologists reject the use of natural science methodology for the study of social action. They see the subject matter of the social and natural sciences as fundamentally different. The natural sciences deal with matter. Since matter has no consciousness, its behaviour can be explained simply as a reaction to external stimuli. It is compelled to react in this way because its behaviour is essentially meaningless. Unlike matter, people have consciousness. They see, interpret and experience the world in terms of meanings; they actively construct their own social reality. Meanings do not have an independent existence, a reality of their own which is somehow separate from social actors. They are not imposed by an external society that constrains members to act in certain ways. Instead they are constructed and reconstructed by actors in the course of social interaction.

People do not react automatically to external stimuli as positivists claim. Instead, they interpret the meaning of a stimulus before responding to it. Motorists who see a red light will not automatically stop in response to this stimulus. They will attach a meaning to the stimulus before acting. Motorists might conclude that the light is a decoration on a Christmas tree, and not a traffic signal, or alternatively that it indicates that a nearby building is a brothel. Having established the meaning of the stimulus to their own satisfaction, the motorists will then decide how they wish to respond. Motorists being pursued by the police might jump a red light rather than stop. If the stimulus is regarded as a decoration, motorists might stop to admire it, or continue on their way without giving the light a second thought. Clearly, the motorist who concludes that the red light is advertising a brothel might respond in a variety of ways!

Whatever action is taken by an individual, advocates of interpretive sociology would argue that the causal explanation of human behaviour is impossible without some understanding of the subjective states of the individuals concerned. Thus a positivist might be content to discover what external factors led to a certain type of human behaviour, while an advocate of a more qualitative approach would be interested in the meaning attached to the behaviour by those engaging in it.

It is at this point that opponents of positivist and 'scientific' methods begin to diverge. While some, like Weber, regard the understanding of meaning as necessary to making causal explanations possible, others, such as phenomenologists, regard understanding as the end product of sociological research and they reject the possibility of producing causal explanations at all.

The implications of three qualitative interpretive sociological approaches for methodology will now be briefly examined. They are dealt with in more detail in the next chapter.

1 Max Weber

Weber defined sociology as the study of social action (Weber, in Gerth and Mills (eds), 1948). Action is social when it takes account of other members of society. Weber believed that an explanation of social action necessitated an understanding of the meanings and motives that underlie human behaviour. The sociologist must interpret the meanings given to actions by the actors themselves. For instance, in order to explain why an individual was chopping wood, the sociologist must discover the person's motives for doing so – whether they were doing it to earn money, to make a fire, to work off anger or for some other motive. According to Weber, understanding motives could be achieved through *verstehen* – imagining yourself to be in the position of the person whose behaviour you were seeking to explain.

Weber's emphasis on meanings and motives is obvious throughout his work. For example, in *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* (1958), one of his main concerns was to interpret the beliefs and motives of the early Calvinists (see pp. 446–51). However, he was not simply concerned with understanding meanings and motives for their own sake. Weber wanted to explain social action and social change. He was interested in causality.

This can be seen clearly from The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism. Using the comparative method, Weber systematically compared the characteristics of early capitalist countries and technologically advanced oriental societies. By doing so he claimed to have isolated 'ascetic' Protestantism as a variable that contributed to the rise of capitalism. He saw the moral and religious beliefs and motives of the early Calvinists as one of the main factors accounting for the emergence of capitalism in the West. (For a fuller account of Weber's methodology, see Chapter 7.)

2 Symbolic interactionism

Symbolic interactionists do not reject the attempt to establish causal relationships within sociology; indeed they see this as an important part of the sociologist's work. However, they tend to believe that statistical data does not provide any great insight into human behaviour. Interactionists see human behaviour as largely governed by the internal processes by which people interpret the world around them and give meaning to their own lives.

In particular, interactionists believe that individuals possess a 'self-concept', or image of themselves, that is built up, reinforced or modified in the process of interaction with other members of society. Thus human beings have an image of what sort of person they are, and they will tend to act in accordance with that image. They might see themselves as caring or tough, honest or dishonest, weak or strong, and their behaviour reflects this sense of their own character.

The responses of others to an individual may make it impossible for him or her to sustain a particular self-concept; the self-concept will change, and in turn the behaviour of the individual will alter accordingly. Thus interactionists have tried to show how the labelling of people as deviant, or as educational successes or failures, can produce self-fulfilling prophecies in which their behaviour comes to live up (or down) to the expectations of others.

(For details of these labelling theories, see pp. 372–9 and 843–9.)

The implications of these views for sociological methodology have been developed by the American interactionist Herbert Blumer (1962). Blumer rejects what he regards as the simplistic attempts to establish causal relationships which characterize positivist methodology.

As an example, Blumer refers to the proposition that industrialization causes the replacement of extended families with nuclear families. He objects to the procedure of isolating variables and assuming that one causes the other with little or no reference to the actor's view of the situation. He argues that data on the meanings and interpretations which actors give to the various facets of industrialization and family life are essential before a relationship can be established between the two factors.

Blumer claims that many sociologists conduct their research with only a superficial familiarity with the area of life under investigation. This is often combined with a preoccupation with aping the research procedures of the natural sciences. The net result is the imposition of definitions on the social world with little regard for their relevance to that world. Rather than viewing social reality from the actor's perspective, many sociologists have attempted to force it into predefined categories and concepts. This provides little chance of capturing social reality, but a very good chance of distorting it.

In place of such procedures Blumer argues that sociologists must immerse themselves in the area of life that they seek to investigate. Rather than attempting to fit data into predefined categories, they must attempt to grasp the actor's view of social reality. This involves 'feeling one's way inside the experience of the actor'. Since action is directed by actors' meanings, the sociologist must 'catch the process of interpretation through which they construct their action'. This means that the researcher 'must take the role of the acting unit whose behaviour he is studying'.

Blumer offers no simple solutions as to how this type of research may be conducted. However, the flavour of the research procedures he advocates is captured in the following quotation:

> *It is a tough job requiring a high order of careful and honest probing, creative yet disciplined imagination, resourcefulness and flexibility in study, pondering over what one is finding, and a constant readiness to test and recast one's views and images of the area.*
>
> Blumer, 1962

(For a detailed discussion of symbolic interactionism see Chapter 15.)

3 Phenomenology

The nature of social reality

Phenomenology represents the most radical departure from the 'scientific' quantitative methodology examined at the start of the chapter. Phenomenologists go further than interactionists in that they reject the possibility of producing causal explanations of human behaviour. They do not believe that it is possible objectively to measure and classify the world. To phenomenologists, human beings make sense of the world by imposing meanings and classifications upon it. These meanings and classifications make up social reality. There is no objective reality beyond these subjective meanings.

Thus, for example, in Cicourel's study of juvenile justice (Cicourel, 1976) (examined on pp. 379–80), police and juvenile officers had the problem of classifying the behaviour of juveniles into the categories: delinquent and non-delinquent. Cicourel did not find this process to be objective: it largely depended on the stereotypes of the 'typical delinquent' held by the officials. As such, the data on convictions for various delinquent acts were a social product based upon the commonsense assumptions of the authorities who created the statistics.

At first sight, Cicourel's study might simply suggest that the statistics were invalid and that further research might well reveal the true rate of delinquency. However, phenomenologists reject this view. All statistics are social products which reflect the meanings of those who created them. The meanings are the reality which sociologists must examine. Crime statistics have no existence outside the meanings and interpretive procedures that produced them. To assume that there is a true crime rate that has an objective reality is to misunderstand the nature of the social world. From a phenomenological perspective, the job of the sociologist is simply to understand the meanings from which social reality is constructed.

Phenomenologists believe that the problem of classification is universal, and not unique to particular types of data. All people, all of the time, make decisions about how to classify things, and these decisions are the product of social processes. For example, on a simple level, what one person might classify as a 'chair' might be classified by another person as a 'wooden object', and by a third person who was involved in a pub brawl as 'a missile'. From this point of view all data are the product of the classification systems used by those who produce them. If the classification system were different, the data would be different.

Furthermore, to phenomenologists there is no way of choosing between different systems of classification and

seeing one as superior to another. It is therefore pointless to use data which rest upon the interpretations of individuals in order to try to establish correlations and causal relationships. Thus, using official statistics to reach the conclusion that being working-class causes a person to commit crimes would not be justified. The figures would only show how crime was defined and classified, rather than what criminal actions had been carried out by particular groups within the population.

Phenomenologists believe that sociologists should limit themselves to understanding the meanings and classifications which people use to give order to and make sense of the world. With their exclusive emphasis upon meanings and the social construction of reality, phenomenologists concentrate almost entirely on the subjective aspects of social life which are internal to the individual's consciousness. They therefore tend to use rather different research methods from the more 'scientific' approaches.

The implications of the different approaches considered so far will now be discussed with reference to a particular area of social life: suicide.

The sociology of suicide

Arguably, the topic of suicide has received a disproportionate amount of attention from sociologists. A large number of books and articles have been written on the subject, whereas other areas of social life that could be seen as equally important – for instance, murder – have not been the subject of so much interest. The main reason for this is the fact that Durkheim used this topic to illustrate his own methodological approach.

Durkheim – *Suicide: A Study in Sociology*

In 1897 Durkheim published his book *Suicide: A Study in Sociology* (1970), and many studies of suicide have been, at least in part, a reaction to Durkheim's work. Some sociologists have tried to show how Durkheim's approach was successful in explaining suicide; others have tried to develop and improve his theory; others have rejected his whole approach. Suicide has become an area in which different methodological approaches have been tested and disputed.

Durkheim chose to study suicide for a number of reasons. In late nineteenth-century France, sociology was gradually becoming established as an academic discipline and Durkheim wanted to reinforce this process and show how his particular approach to the subject was superior to others. He wished to use his study to show how there was a sociological level of analysis which was distinct from other disciplines and which made an important contribution to the explanation of social phenomena.

Suicide was, and still is, widely regarded as a highly individual act. For example, it is often explained in terms of an individual's depression. It therefore appeared an unlikely candidate for sociological analysis with its emphasis on the social rather than the individual. There were established psychological theories of suicide. Durkheim attempted to show that suicide could not be fully explained by psychologists. Sociology could explain aspects of suicide which psychology could not.

Durkheim did not deny that particular circumstances would lead to a particular person taking his or her own life, but personal reasons could not account for the *suicide rate*. For example, he tried to show that there was no relationship between the incidence of insanity (which many psychologists associated with suicide) and the suicide rate. He found that Jews had higher rates of insanity than other religious groups, but they had lower rates of suicide.

Durkheim also chose to study suicide because of the availability of suicide statistics from a number of European countries. He regarded these statistics as social facts and so believed that they could be used to find the sociological causes of suicide rates. He could try to establish correlations, and, using the comparative method, could uncover the patterns that would reveal the causal relationships at work in the production of suicide rates. In this way he aimed to demonstrate that sociology was as rigorous a discipline as the natural sciences.

In order to achieve these objectives Durkheim first tried to show that suicide rates were relatively stable in a particular society over a period of time. As Table 14.1 shows, over the periods covered there was a remarkable consistency in the comparative suicide rates of the European societies in question. Durkheim felt able to claim that 'The suicide-rate is therefore a factual order, unified and definite, as is shown by both its permanence and its variability.' Furthermore, as will be discussed shortly, Durkheim found consistent variations in the suicide rate between different groups within the same society. He believed it was impossible to explain these patterns if suicide was seen solely as a personal and individual act.

Table 14.1 Rate of suicides per million inhabitants in different European countries

	Period			Numerical position in period		
	1866–70	1871–5	1874–8	1	2	3
Italy	30	35	38	1	1	1
Belgium	66	69	78	2	3	4
England	67	66	69	3	2	2
Norway	76	73	71	4	4	3
Austria	78	94	130	5	7	7
Sweden	85	81	91	6	5	5
Bavaria	90	91	100	7	6	6
France	135	150	160	8	9	9
Prussia	142	134	152	9	8	8
Denmark	277	258	255	10	10	10
Saxony	293	267	334	11	11	11

Source: Durkheim, E. (1897) *Le Suicide*, Alcan

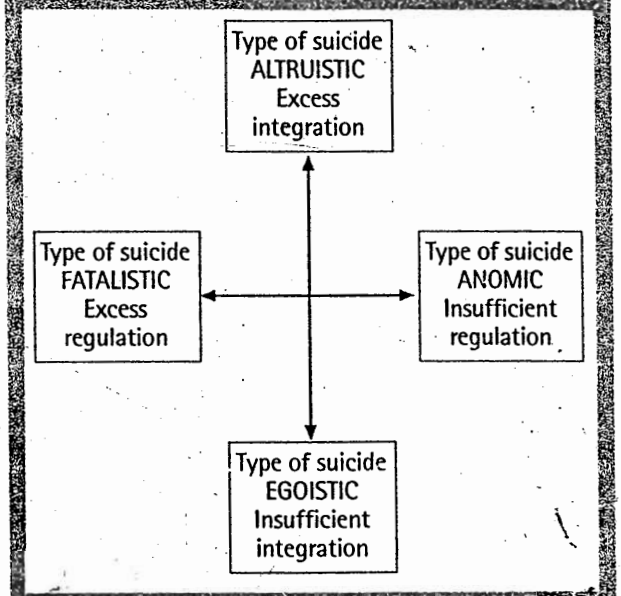
Durkheim then went on to establish correlations between suicides and other sets of social facts. He found that suicide rates were higher in predominantly Protestant countries than in Catholic ones. Jews had a low suicide rate, lower even than Roman Catholics. Generally, married people were less prone to suicide than those who were single, although married women who remained childless for a number of years ended up with a high suicide rate. Durkheim also found that a low suicide rate was associated with political upheaval. The suicide rate in France fell after the *coup d'état* of Louis Bonaparte, for example. War also reduced the suicide rate. After war broke out in 1866 between Austria and Italy, the suicide rate fell by 14 per cent in both countries.

Having established these correlations, Durkheim used multivariate analysis to isolate the most important variables and to determine whether there was a genuine causal relationship between these factors and suicide. For example, Durkheim recognized the possibility that it might be the national culture rather than the main religion of particular countries that accounted for their suicide rate. In order to test whether this was the case he checked on differences within the population of particular countries to see whether these differences supported his views on the importance of religion. The evidence supported Durkheim. For example, Bavaria, the area of Germany with the highest number of Roman Catholics, also had the lowest suicide rate. He also checked the relative importance of different factors: he found that high suicide rates were correlated with high levels of education. However, he established that religion was more important than level of education. Jews had a low suicide rate despite having a high level of education.

Types of suicide

From his analysis of the relationship between suicide rates and a range of social factors, Durkheim began to distinguish types of suicide. He believed that the suicide rate was determined by the relationships between individuals and society. In particular, suicide rates were dependent upon the degree to which individuals were integrated into social groups and the degree to which society regulated individual behaviour. On this basis he distinguished four types of suicide: egoistic, altruistic, anomic and fatalistic, as illustrated in Figure 14.1.

Figure 14.1 Suicide types and the balance of society



Source: D. Lee and R. Newby (1983) *The Problem of Sociology*, Hutchinson

Egoistic suicide resulted from the individual being insufficiently integrated into the social groups and society to which he or she belonged. This, according to Durkheim, accounted for the discrepancy between the suicide rates of Protestants and Roman Catholics. He argued that the Catholic religion integrated its members more strongly into a religious community. The long-established beliefs and traditional rituals of the Catholic Church provided a uniform system of religious belief and practice into which the lives of its members were closely intertwined. The Catholic faith was rarely questioned and the church had strong controls over the conscience and behaviour of its members. The result was a homogeneous religious

community, unified and integrated by uniform belief and standardized ritual.

By comparison, the Protestant Church encouraged its members to develop their own interpretation of religion. Protestantism advocated 'free inquiry' rather than the imposition of traditional religious dogma. In Durkheim's view, 'The Protestant is far more the author of his faith.' As a result, Protestants were less likely to belong to a community that was unified by a commitment to common religious beliefs and practices. Durkheim concluded that the higher rate of suicide associated with Protestantism 'results from its being a less strongly integrated church than the Catholic church'.

Durkheim also related egoistic suicide to 'domestic society' or family relationships. The unmarried and childless were less integrated into a family than the married and those with children. The former group had less responsibility for others and as a consequence were more prone to egoism and a high suicide rate.

Durkheim thought that anomic suicide was the other main type of suicide in industrial societies. Anomic suicides took place when society did not regulate the individual sufficiently. This occurred when traditional norms and values were disrupted by rapid social change which produced uncertainty in the minds of individuals as society's guidelines for behaviour became increasingly unclear. Not surprisingly, Durkheim found that suicide rates rose during periods of economic depression, such as the period following the crash of the Paris Bourse (stock exchange) in 1882. What was more surprising – and at first sight difficult to explain – was the rise in the suicide rate during a period of economic prosperity. The conquest of Rome by Victor-Emmanuel in 1870 formed the basis of Italian unity and led to an economic boom with rapidly rising salaries and living standards, but it also led to a rising suicide rate. Durkheim reasoned that both booms and slumps brought the uncertainty of anomie, and so more suicides.

Durkheim thought that egoism and anomie were problems that affected all industrial societies to a greater or lesser extent. Because of the highly specialized division of labour in such societies they were less integrated than simple or 'primitive' societies.

Pre-industrial societies could suffer from the opposite types of suicide to egoistic and anomic: altruistic and fatalistic.

Altruistic suicide took place when the individual was so well integrated into society that they sacrificed their own life out of a sense of duty to others. In the past, Hindu widows would kill themselves at their husband's funeral (suttee); and in traditional Ashanti society some of the king's followers were expected to commit suicide after the death of the monarch. Individuals were so strongly integrated into their society that they would make the ultimate sacrifice for the benefit of others.

The fourth and final type of suicide, distinguished by Durkheim as fatalistic suicide, occurred when society restricted the individual too much. It was the suicide 'of persons with futures pitilessly blocked and passions violently choked by oppressive discipline'. Durkheim thought that this type of suicide was of little importance in modern societies, but it was of some historical interest, being the cause of high suicide rates among slaves.

Durkheim, suicide and methodology

Durkheim's study of suicide illustrates his views both on society and on methodology. He believed it was essential to achieve the right amount of integration and regulation in society: 'primitive' societies tended to have too much of both; industrial societies too little of either. He used quantitative, 'scientific' methods, employing the comparative method in a highly systematic way. However, he did not simply follow the approach advocated by positivists. He used the supposedly objective statistics available on suicide to support the claim that unobservable forces shaped human behaviour. The total number of suicides was determined by such unobservable 'collective tendencies', which 'have an existence of their own' and are as 'real as cosmic forces'.

According to some of today's sociologists, such as Steve Taylor, Durkheim adopted a realist rather than a positivist view of science (realism is discussed on pp. 1026–7). However it is defined, it is nevertheless Durkheim's methodology in studying suicide that has attracted most attention from supporters and critics alike.

Positivist responses to Durkheim

Sociologists studying suicide who adopt positivist methods have generally praised most aspects of Durkheim's work. As early as 1930 Maurice Halbwachs carried out a review of his work. Halbwachs attempted to refine Durkheim's work and did not challenge the use of a 'scientific' approach in the study of suicide. Indeed he claimed that Durkheim had been able to provide 'a fully comprehensive treatment of the phenomenon of suicide, which could be modified and added to, but which in principle seems unassailable' (Halbwachs, 1930).

Halbwachs could add to and modify Durkheim's work by making use of both the more recent suicide statistics that had become available and new methods of statistical analysis such as the use of correlation coefficients. On the whole he confirmed what Durkheim had found. However, he did argue that

Durkheim had overestimated the importance of religion in determining the suicide rate. Halbwachs claimed to have found that differences between living in urban and rural areas had more impact than differences between Catholics and Protestants.

Jack P. Gibbs and Walter T. Martin (1964) agreed with Durkheim and Halbwachs that suicide should be studied using scientific methods and statistical data. However, they believed that Durkheim himself had failed to use sufficiently rigorous methods. As noted earlier, Durkheim sometimes used concepts that could not be directly observed or measured and thus he did not entirely follow positivist methods. Gibbs and Martin picked up on this and attempted to rectify what they saw as a flaw in Durkheim's otherwise exemplary method. In particular they suggested that Durkheim failed to define the concept of 'integration' in a sufficiently precise and measurable way. They point out that 'one does not see individuals tied to society in any physical sense'. Consequently it was impossible to test the theory that lack of integration led to a high suicide rate.

Gibbs and Martin did not believe that integration itself could be measured directly. The type of data necessary to measure the durability and stability of social relationships was not available. They therefore proposed that 'status integration' could be used as an indicator of social integration. Status integration concerns the extent to which individuals occupy sets of social roles that are commonly found together. People with a high degree of status integration have job, family and other statuses that are commonly grouped together. Those with a high degree of status incompatibility have unusual sets of statuses. Thus, in their theory, an occupation in which 75 per cent of its members are married is compatible with marriage, but if only 35 per cent are married it is not compatible. Individuals with compatible statuses are deemed to be highly integrated since it is assumed that they will have more and stronger social relationships than those with incompatible statuses. To Gibbs and Martin, the greater the degree of status integration in a population, the lower the suicide rate will be.

Gibbs and Martin's theory shows that some commentators criticized Durkheim for being insufficiently positivist and for making too little use of statistical data. The theory itself, though, does not bear close examination. Gibbs and Martin do not provide any evidence to show that status integration can be used to measure the strength of people's social relationships. Nor do they justify the use of statistics alone to identify compatible statuses. Hagedorn and Labowitz point out that male ballet dancers and male lion tamers are both uncommon but the former could be expected to have more incompatible statuses (quoted in S. Taylor, 1982).

Interpretive theories of suicide

Interpretive sociologists tend to make much stronger attacks on Durkheim's study of suicide than positivists. They tend to reject many of the basic principles of Durkheim's approach rather than quibbling about particular details. On the whole, however, they do acknowledge the possibility of explaining the causes of suicide.

J.D. Douglas – *The Social Meanings of Suicide*

One of the best-known interpretive critics of Durkheim is J.D. Douglas (1967). Douglas particularly criticizes the use of official statistics in the study of suicide, questioning their validity. He points out that the decision as to whether a sudden death is suicide is made by a coroner and is influenced by other people, such as the family and friends of the deceased. Douglas suggests that systematic bias may enter the process of reaching a decision, and that this bias could explain Durkheim's findings. For example, when a person is well integrated into a social group, his or her family and friends might be more likely to deny the possibility of suicide, both to themselves and to the coroner. They may feel a sense of personal responsibility which leads them to try to cover up the suicide. With less well-integrated members of society this is less likely to happen. So, while it might appear that the number of suicides is related to integration, in reality the degree of integration simply affects the chances of sudden death being recorded as suicide.

Douglas sees suicide statistics as the result of negotiations between the different parties involved. However, he does suggest that the distortions in the statistics are systematic. By implication, it might be possible to reduce or allow for these distortions to produce more reliable statistics that could be used to explain suicide.

Douglas's second main criticism of Durkheim is that it was ridiculous for Durkheim to treat all suicides as the same type of act without investigating the meaning attached to the act by those who took their own life. Douglas points out that in different cultures suicide can have very different meanings. For example, if a businessman in a modern industrial society kills himself because his business has collapsed, it is a quite different act from the suicide of an elderly Innuit (Eskimo) who kills himself for the benefit of his society at a time of food shortage. Each act has a different motive behind it and a social meaning that is related to the society and context in which it took place.

In order to categorize suicides according to their social meanings Douglas suggests that it is necessary to carry out case studies to discover the meanings of particular suicides. These case studies could be based

upon interviews with those who knew the person well, and upon the analysis of the suicide notes and diaries of the deceased. Although he did not carry out such research, Douglas nevertheless claims that the most common social meanings of suicide in Western industrial society are: transformation of the soul (for example, suicide as a way of getting to heaven); transformation of the self (suicide as a means of getting others to think of you differently); suicide as a means of achieving fellow-feeling (or sympathy); and suicide as a means of getting revenge by making others feel guilty.

In other societies other meanings might be more common.

Jean Baechler – suicide as problem solving

Douglas's approach has been developed further by the French sociologist Jean Baechler (1979). Baechler makes extensive use of case studies of suicide in existing literature, and he classifies suicides according to their meanings. He sees suicidal behaviour as a way of responding to and trying to solve a problem. Suicide is adopted when there seems to be no alternative solution. From this perspective it then becomes possible to classify suicides according to the type of solution they offer and the type of situation they are a response to: in other words, according to the end pursued by the suicidal individual. On this basis, Baechler divides suicides into four main types:

1 Escapist suicides take three forms. Some people take their own lives as a means of flight from an intolerable situation. For others, suicide is a response to grief about the loss of something in particular, perhaps a loved one or even a limb. Suicide may also be a means of self-punishment used by a person when they feel they have done wrong.

2 Aggressive suicides are a way of harming another person or people. There are four types of aggressive suicide. Vengeance suicides are intended to make another person feel guilty or to bring condemnation on them from society. For example, a wife might commit suicide to draw attention to her husband's cruelty. Crime suicides involve killing another person during the suicidal behaviour: for example, when someone shoots a spouse and then turns the gun on themselves. Blackmail suicides are used to persuade someone else to change their behaviour and treat the suicide victim better. Appeal suicides are used to show others that the person concerned is in need of help. Blackmail and appeal are often the ends pursued by those who make suicide attempts that either fail or are not entirely serious.

3 Oblative suicides are ways of achieving something that is particularly valued by the suicide victim. Sacrifice involves giving up your own life to save another person. Transfiguration suicides are used by a person so that they can obtain a more desirable state: for example, to join a loved one in the afterlife.

4 Ludic suicides involve taking deliberate risks that might lead to death. There are two types: the ordeal and the game. Ordeals are ways by which an individual tries to prove themselves to others by showing their bravery. Games involve taking risks 'for the hell of it': for example, playing Russian roulette with nobody else present.

Baechler is more explicit than Douglas in suggesting that causes of suicide can be found. However, unlike Durkheim, he does not believe that suicide can be explained wholly or even mainly in terms of external factors. As Baechler puts it, 'Whatever the external factor considered, it always happens that the number of those who do not commit suicide is infinitely greater than the number of those who do.' Not everyone whose business fails, or whose spouse dies, or who is a Protestant in an urban area, kills themselves. Thus, to Baechler, suicide must always be at least partially explained through 'personal factors' that are particular to an individual.

Baechler's work differs from the studies of suicide examined so far in that he includes attempted suicides under his general definition of 'suicidal behaviour'. Other sociologists have paid even more attention to the implications of attempted suicide (see pp. 980–1).

Criticisms of interpretive theories

Interpretive sociologists have been criticized in a number of ways. Steve Taylor (1989) criticizes both Douglas and Baechler for failing to recognize the value of Durkheim's work. He also questions the worth of schemes that are designed to categorize suicides according to their social meanings. Commenting on Baechler, he points out that individual cases often fit a number of categories, depending on the interpretation the researcher makes of the victim's motives. There is no reason to believe that these interpretations are any more reliable than suicide statistics. Taylor also criticizes Douglas for contradicting himself. At some points Douglas implies that suicide statistics can never be reliable since it is always a matter of judgement whether a death is a suicide. At other times he suggests that causes of suicide can be found. It is difficult to see how this can be if it is impossible to be certain whether an act is a suicide. Phenomenological sociologists have taken this type of criticism to its logical conclusion by denying there can be any objective data on which to base an explanation of suicide.

nologists can be turned against the sociological theories of phenomenologists themselves. If suicide statistics can be criticized as being no more than the interpretations of coroners, then studies such as that done by Atkinson can be criticized as being no more than the interpretation of a particular sociologist. Just as there is no way of checking on the validity of the verdicts reached by coroners, there is no way of checking on the validity of the accounts of how coroners reach their decisions advanced by phenomenological sociologists. Hindess therefore dismisses the work of such sociologists as being 'theoretically worthless', and he says of their work, 'A manuscript produced by a monkey at a typewriter would be no less valuable.' If phenomenological views were taken to their logical conclusion no sociology would be possible, and the attempt to understand and explain suicide would have to be abandoned.

Steve Taylor – beyond positivism and phenomenology

'Persons under trains'

Steve Taylor (1982, 1989, 1990) has tried to move beyond all the approaches that have been examined so far. However, his own study starts by confirming the view of many critics of Durkheim that suicide statistics are unreliable (Taylor, 1982).

Taylor conducted a study of 'persons under trains' – people who met their death when they were hit by tube trains on the London Underground. Over a 12-month period he found 32 cases where there were no strong clues as to the reason for the death. No suicide notes were left and no witnesses were able to state that the victim jumped deliberately. In effect, it was impossible to say with any certainty whether a suicide had taken place or not. Nevertheless, 17 cases resulted in suicide verdicts, 5 were classified as accidental deaths, and the remaining 10 produced open verdicts.

Taylor found that a number of factors made suicide verdicts more likely. People with a history of mental illness and those who had suffered some form of social failure or social disgrace were more likely to have their death recorded as suicide. When a person who had died had no good reason to be at the tube station, suicide verdicts were more likely. Taylor also found that the verdict was strongly influenced by the witnesses who testified to the dead person's state of mind. Where the witness was a close friend or family member they tended to deny that the person had reason to kill themselves and stress reasons why they might want to carry on living. Where the witnesses were less close to the person – for example, in one case their landlady – they were less likely to deny suicidal motives.

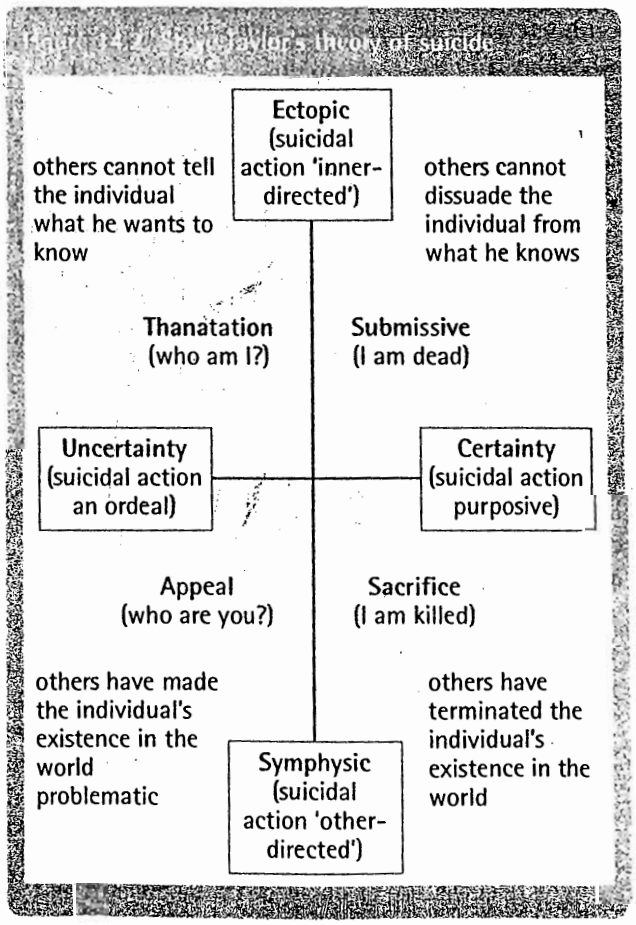
Taylor's methodology

Taylor, then, found strong evidence to support the view that suicide statistics cannot be taken at face value. Specific factors seemed to have influenced the verdicts reached and distorted suicide figures in particular ways. However, Taylor does not follow phenomenologists in arguing that such problems make it impossible to explain suicide. Taylor's own theory is not based upon statistical evidence but upon attempts to discover 'underlying, unobservable structures and causal processes'. This type of approach is based upon a realist conception of science, which is discussed later in this chapter. He develops his theory as an attempt to explain the key features of different types of suicide revealed in case studies.

Types of suicide

Taylor's theory is illustrated in Figure 14.2. He argues that suicides and suicide attempts are either 'ectopic' – they result from what a person thinks about themselves – or 'symphysic' – they result from a person's relationship with others. Suicides and suicide attempts are also related either to certainty or to uncertainty – people are sure or unsure about themselves or about others. Thus, like Durkheim, Taylor distinguishes four types of suicide connected to diametrically opposed situations. In Taylor's theory, however, they are situations faced by partic-

Figure 14.2 Steve Taylor's theory of suicide



J. Maxwell Atkinson – *Discovering Suicide*

Scientific and quantitative methods are completely rejected by some phenomenologists. This can be seen clearly from J. Maxwell Atkinson's study of suicide (Atkinson, 1978). Atkinson does not accept that a 'real' rate of suicide exists as an objective reality waiting to be discovered. Sociologists who proceed with this assumption will end up producing 'facts' on suicide that have nothing to do with the social reality they seek to understand. By constructing a set of criteria to categorize and measure suicide – in scientific language, by 'operationalizing' the concept of suicide – they will merely be imposing their reality on the social world. This will inevitably distort that world.

As Michael Phillipson observes, the positivist methodology employed by Durkheim and other researchers 'rides roughshod over the very social reality they are trying to comprehend' (Phillipson, 1972). Suicide is a construct of social actors, an aspect of social reality. Official statistics on suicide, therefore, are not 'wrong', 'mistaken', 'inaccurate' or 'in error'. They are part of the social world. They are the interpretations, made by officials, of what is seen to be unnatural death. Since the object of sociology is to comprehend the social world, that world can only be understood in terms of the categories, perceptions and interpretations of its members. Thus, with reference to suicide, the appropriate question for sociologists to ask is, in Atkinson's words, 'How do deaths get categorized as suicide?' (Atkinson, 1978).

Categorizing death

Atkinson's research focuses on the methods employed by coroners and their officers to categorize death. His data are drawn from discussions with coroners, attendance at inquests in three different towns, observation of a coroner's officer at work, and a part of the records of one particular coroner.

Atkinson argues that coroners have a 'commonsense theory' of suicide. If information about the deceased fits the theory, they are likely to categorize his or her death as suicide. In terms of this theory, coroners consider the following four types of evidence relevant for reaching a verdict:

1 They take into account whether or not suicide notes were left or threats of suicide preceded death.
2 Particular modes of dying are judged to be more or less likely to indicate suicide. Road deaths are rarely interpreted as an indicator for suicide, whereas drowning, hanging, gassing and drug overdose are more likely to be seen as such.
3 The location and circumstances of death are judged to be relevant. For example, death by gunshot is more likely to be defined as suicide if it occurred in a deserted lay-by than if it took place in the countryside during an organized shoot. In cases of gassing, a suicide verdict is more likely if windows, doors and ventilators have been blocked to prevent the escape of gas.
4 Coroners consider the biography of the deceased, with particular reference to his or her mental state and social situation. A history of mental illness, a disturbed childhood and evidence of acute depression are often seen as reason for suicide. A recent divorce, the death of a loved one or relative, a lack of friends, problems at work or serious financial difficulties are regarded as possible causes of suicide. This, as Atkinson points out, is remarkably similar to Durkheim's notion of social integration.

Referring to the case of an individual found gassed in his car, a coroner told Atkinson, 'There's a classic pattern for you – broken home, escape to the services, nervous breakdown, unsettled at work, no family ties – what could be clearer.' Thus coroners' views about why people commit suicide appear to influence their categorization of death.

Coroners' commonsense theories of suicide contain explanations of the causes of suicide. If information about the deceased's background fits these explanations, then a verdict of suicide is likely. Atkinson provides the following summary of the procedures used to categorize unnatural death. Coroners 'are engaged in analysing features of the deaths and of the biographies of the deceased according to a variety of taken-for-granted assumptions about what constitutes a "typical suicide", a "typical suicide biography"', and so on. Suicide can therefore be seen as an interpretation placed on an event – an interpretation which stems from a set of taken-for-granted assumptions.

This view has serious implications for research that treats official statistics on suicide as 'facts' and seeks to explain their cause. Researchers who look for explanations of suicide in the social background or mental state of the deceased may simply be uncovering and making explicit the taken-for-granted assumptions of coroners. Atkinson found that coroners' theories of suicide were remarkably similar to those of sociologists and psychologists. Since coroners use their theories of the cause of suicide as a means for categorizing suicide, this similarity might be expected. Thus social scientists who look for the causes of suicide in the social situation or mental condition of those officially classified as suicides may simply be revealing the commonsense theories of coroners.

Criticisms of phenomenology

Phenomenological views have themselves been subject to criticism. Barry Hindess (1973) points out that the criticisms of suicide statistics advanced by phenome-

ular individuals and are not related so closely to the wider functioning of society. We will now look at the four types of suicide that Taylor identified.

The first two types are ectopic or inner-directed suicides:

1 Submissive suicide occurs when a person is certain about themselves and their life; they believe that their life is effectively over and see themselves as already dead. Taylor says, 'The world of the submissive is one of constricting horizons; of closing doors, blind alleys and cul-de-sacs.' The terminally ill may commit submissive suicide. In other cases a person may have decided that their life is valueless without a loved one who has died. In this type of suicide the suicide attempt is usually deadly serious – the person is sure they wish to die.
2 Thanatation is a type of suicide, or suicide attempt, which occurs when a person is uncertain about themselves. The suicide attempt is a gamble which may or may not be survived, according to fate or chance. If the attempt does not result in death, the person learns that they are capable of facing death. In some cases the person may be exhilarated by the thrill of the risk taking and they may make several suicide attempts. Taylor gives as examples the novelist Graham Greene, who periodically played Russian roulette with a revolver, and the poet Sylvia Plath, who deliberately risked death by driving her car off the road.

The other two types are symphysic or other-directed suicides:

1 Sacrifice suicides occur when a person is certain that others have made their life unbearable. The person who takes their own life often attributes the blame for their death to others so that they will feel guilty or will suffer criticism from other members of society. For example, Taylor refers to a case in which a 22-year-old man killed himself because his wife was in love with his elder brother and she wanted a divorce. The man left letters making it clear that he felt that his wife and brother were responsible for his death.
2 Appeal suicides and suicide attempts result from the suicidal person feeling uncertainty over the attitudes of others towards them. The suicide attempts are a form of communication in which the victim tries to show how desperate they are, in order to find out how others will respond. Suicide attempts may involve trying to persuade others to change their behaviour, or they may offer them chances to save the victim. Those who make the attempts 'combine the wish to die and the wish for change in others and improvement in the situation; they are acts both of despair and of hope'.

   For example, a woman slashed herself with a bread knife in front of her husband after he had discovered her having sex with a neighbour. Her husband took her to hospital and she survived. She later said that she was unsure whether or not she would bleed to death but wanted to show her husband how much she loved him and to appeal for forgiveness through her actions.

   In another case a man took an overdose of barbiturates in a car parked in front of his estranged wife's house. He left a note for his wife saying what he had done. However, a dense fog obscured the car so his wife did not see him when she returned to the house and therefore could not save him.

Taylor also refers to Marilyn Monroe's death. She had rung her doctor before taking her fatal overdose, and on previous occasions when she had rung him in an agitated state he had come round to calm her down. His failure to do so on this occasion removed any chance of discovery and rescue.

Evaluation of Taylor

Taylor's theory has some advantages over the other sociological theories examined so far. For example, it helps to explain why some suicide victims leave notes and others do not, why some suicide attempts seem more serious than others, and why some take place in isolation and others in more public places. However, his theory is hard to test. It rests upon the meanings given to suicidal actions by those who take part in them and these meanings can be interpreted in different ways.

For those whose suicide attempts result in death the meanings can only be inferred from circumstantial evidence, since they are no longer able to explain their motives. Individual suicides may result from a combination of motives, with the result that they do not fit neatly into any one category.

Quantitative and qualitative methodology

The preceding sections of this chapter have outlined and illustrated the differences between these two broad approaches to methodology. Ray Pawson has described the impression that such descriptions tend to give to many students. He says that many students 'have their minds firmly fixed upon an image of a methodological brawl in which the beleaguered minority (the phenomenologists) have been for years trying to survive the onslaught of the wicked majority (the positivists)' (Pawson,

1989). He claims that such a view is highly misleading.

Pawson is correct to point out that the distinction between positivism and phenomenology has sometimes been exaggerated, and some of his points will be examined shortly. However, the disputes are real. When Hindess says that 'A manuscript produced by a monkey at a typewriter would be no less valuable' than the work of phenomenologists, he illustrates the strength of some of the methodological battles that have taken place. Nevertheless, a number of points should be made to put these disputes into perspective:

1 Even those who have strongly advocated and are closely associated with either a quantitative or qualitative approach have not necessarily stuck rigidly to their own supposed methodological principles. Douglas (1967) points out how Durkheim in his study of suicide strayed away from basing his analysis entirely on 'social facts', and dealt with the subjective states of individuals. For example, he gave mental sketches of what it felt like to be a Roman Catholic or a Protestant, in order to explain why their suicide rates should be so different.

   At the other extreme, even one of the most ardent critics of quantitative methods, Cicourel (1976), has made extensive use of statistical data. In his study of juvenile justice in two Californian cities he collected statistics on law enforcement in the two cities, and he used a systematic comparison of the cities in order to explain their differing crime rates.

2 It can be argued that the 'methodological brawl' mentioned above has come to an end. Pawson says that the idea that 'positivists and phenomenologists are always at logger heads is a sixties' hangover; nowadays it is much more accurate to describe the relationship between those who do qualitative and those who do quantitative research as one of truce' (Pawson, 1989). Many sociologists get on with actually doing research without worrying too much about the philosophical basis of that research. As the later sections on primary sources will show, practical difficulties have at least as much influence on the choice of research methods as theoretical considerations. Furthermore, many sociologists now advocate methodological pluralism (see pp. 1022–3), where a mixture of quantitative and qualitative methods is used.

3 Finally, new philosophies of science and new approaches to methodology have now made the disagreements of positivists and phenomenologists look somewhat outdated. The realist conception of science, which will be discussed in a later section (see pp. 1026–7), does not imply that science should be concerned only with that which can be observed directly. In this respect it does not exclude the use of qualitative methods in a 'social science' such as sociology. Critical social science, particularly feminism, and postmodern sociology offer distinctive perspectives on methodology which do not fit neatly into either camp in the disputes between positivist and interpretive sociologists.

We will now examine critical social science and postmodern approaches to methodology before looking at specific research methods.

Critical social science methodology

Lee Harvey – critical social research

The nature of critical social research

Critical social science embraces all those approaches in sociology which aim to be critical of society in order to facilitate social change. Criticism of some sort is present in most social science but, according to its advocates, critical social science goes beyond simply criticizing. According to Lee Harvey, the key characteristic of critical social science is that 'critique is an integral part of the process ... A critical research process involves more than appending critique to an accumulation of "fact" or "theory" gathered via some mechanical process, rather it denies the (literally) objective status of knowledge' (Harvey, 1990).

This approach does not believe that you can simply discover the truth by using the appropriate quantitative or qualitative methods. Instead it believes that 'knowledge is a process' in which you move towards understanding the social world. Knowledge is never completed, it is never finished, because the social world is constantly changing. Furthermore, knowledge can never be separated from values. As members of the social world, researchers are bound to be influenced by their values and those of society. However, their aim should be to try to get beyond the dominant values of society, to try to see what is going on underneath the surface.

Thus, critical social scientists tend to believe that the way society appears to its members can be misleading. Things that are taken for granted need to be seen in a different light so that the true values underlying them can be revealed. Once this has been done, it may be possible to use the new knowledge to transform society.

Examples of critical social research

Harvey uses the example of feminist studies on housework to illustrate the approach. According to him, feminists have been able to show that housework should be seen as real work, just like paid work. Like paid work it creates things of value and it has a crucial role in the economy. Male-dominated commonsense views of housework have devalued it and seen it as unimportant. By revealing the true nature of housework, feminists have been able to encourage social changes in which women have demanded that the value of their unpaid work is recognized (see pp. 552–63 for a discussion of housework).

Critical research is particularly concerned with revealing oppressive structures so that such structures might be changed. Harvey says that 'It is important that the account be located in a wider context which links the specific activities with a broader social structural and historical analysis.' Thus, an analysis of housework can be linked to changes in the role of women in society with the rise of industrial capitalism (see pp. 144–5) and the development of patriarchy (see pp. 151–6).

There are numerous examples of critical social science. Harvey sees the work of Karl Marx (see, for example, pp. 33–6), C. Wright Mills's work on power elites (see pp. 603–4), and Paul Willis's study of working-class lads in the education system (see pp. 791–4) as examples. He divides critical social science studies into three main types, which concentrate on class, on gender and on ethnicity and racism. Of course, some of the best critical research examines all three simultaneously. However, these categories are by no means exhaustive, and critical social scientists also examine issues such as sexuality and disability – indeed any area where some social groups can be seen as systematically disadvantaged or oppressed.

The main features of critical research

Harvey sees critical research as having the following main features:

1 Abstract concepts and ideology
It uses abstract concepts such as housework but goes beyond simply carrying out empirical studies based on such concepts. Thus, instead of just measuring who does housework tasks, critical research tries to examine how such concepts relate to wider social relationships. Housework is seen as a work relationship rather than as simply a set of tasks to be performed. In this way it tries to get beneath the surface of social reality. This involves trying to overcome the dominant ideology or ideologies. Distorted ideological beliefs may be related to dominant classes or to patriarchal or racist beliefs. They mask the material reality that lies behind these beliefs. In Marxist theory, for example, the ideology of wage labour as a free and fair exchange between employer and employee disguises the material advantages enjoyed by the employer as the owner of the means of production.

2 Totality, structure and history
Each abstract concept and particular belief cannot be examined in isolation. According to Harvey it is necessary to relate each bit of a society to a totality. Harvey says, 'Totality refers to the view that social phenomena are interrelated and form a total whole.' For example, in *The New Criminology* (1973), Taylor, Walton and Young advocate trying to understand the actions of criminals in the context of society as a whole (see pp. 386–8).

Critical social scientists see societies as possessing structures. Structures constrain or limit what people can do, but also make social actions possible. For example, the structures of capitalist societies make it difficult for members of the working class to set up their own businesses to compete with big capitalist companies. On the other hand, they make it possible for some capitalists to make substantial profits.

Structures, though, are not static; they change. Studies of society therefore need to be related to particular historical contexts. You need to examine how particular societies have changed over time in order to understand them at any particular point in time. Thus studies of the working class need to take account of how the economy and the labour market have changed since the advent of capitalism (see pp. 75–88 for examples).

3 Deconstruction, essence and reconstruction
Critical social researchers proceed through a process of deconstruction and reconstruction. In the process of deconstruction the different elements of particular areas of social life are taken apart in order to try to discover an essence. The essence is the 'fundamental concept that can be used as the key to unlocking the deconstructive process'. Thus, for example, the essence of capitalism, according to Marx, is 'the commodity form', while the essence of housework, according to Christine Delphy, is a set of work relationships in the context of family life.

Reconceptualization – thinking of familiar aspects of social life in unfamiliar ways – is the key to discovering essences through deconstruction. This process is never finished. Harvey says that critical research:

> *involves a constant questioning of the perspective and analysis the researcher is building up. It is a process of gradually, and critically, coming to know through constant reconceptualization. This means that the selection of a core concept for analysis is not a once-and-for-all affair.*
>
> Harvey, 1990, p. 30

The process of deconstruction does not follow a pre-set path, as laid down by, for example, positivists. The development and testing of hypotheses and the collection of empirical data can all proceed 'in parallel'. The process involves 'a constant shuttling back and forwards between abstract concept and concrete data; between social totalities and particular phenomena; between current structures and historical development; between surface appearance and essence; between reflection and practice'. Some of the process does involve '"armchair" speculation', but empirical studies can also be carried out by whatever methods are most suitable.

Deconstruction leads to reconstruction. The researcher aims in the end to 'lay bare the essential relationships that are embedded in the structure'. They develop theoretical insights which allow the phenomena under investigation to be seen in a new way. A good example is Paul Willis's study of the transition from school to work among working-class 'lads'. Willis reveals how the 'lads'' rebellion at school serves as a preparation for the alienating shop-floor jobs they end up doing. According to Willis the 'lads' thereby actively contribute to maintaining their own oppression (see pp. 791–4 for details).

4 Praxis

Critical social research is not just a theoretical activity, it is also a form of praxis. Harvey defines praxis as 'practical reflective activity. Praxis does not include "instinctive" or "mindless" activity like sleeping, breathing, walking, and so on, or undertaking repetitive work tasks. Praxis is what changes the world.' The point of research is to improve the world. Researchers are interested in whether there is any potential for the oppressed groups being studied to come together to change their situation. If these groups come to understand their situation better, they are more likely to resist or challenge the structures that oppress them. To Harvey, far from being a neutral, uninvolved observer of society, the researcher should be an involved and committed participant in the social world. The involvement should be directed towards developing a radical praxis within oppressed social groups.

Research methods

Critical social science is not tied to any single research method. Critical social scientists have used a full range of methods including questionnaires, interviews, case studies, ethnography and semiology (see pp. 999–1003, 1003–8, 1008–14, 996–7 and Chapter 13 for discussions of these methods). However, this approach does tend to be sympathetic towards methods which allow the social world to be seen from the viewpoint of those who are oppressed.

Some feminists have advocated the use of interviews (see pp. 988–9); Goldthorpe and Lockwood (whom Harvey describes as critical social researchers) used questionnaires (see pp. 79–81); while critical ethnography is perhaps the most popular of all the methods used by such researchers (see pp. 1013–14). Unlike positivist and interpretive approaches to methodology, the emphasis is not so much upon the preferred technique, but upon the purpose of the research. Any method is permissible so long as it allows you to get beneath the surface of social life and has the potential for helping to change society. Harvey concludes that 'Although not susceptible to simple methodic prescriptions critical social research lies at the very heart of emancipatory sociological enquiry.'

Criticisms of critical social research

Martin Hammersley has identified a number of problems with critical social research:

1 First, he believes that there are problems in identifying sources of oppression in order to orientate research. Although critical social researchers identify a range of sources of oppression (principally class, gender and ethnicity) there may be others which they have not identified. Furthermore, it is not clear how they can clearly distinguish oppressor from non-oppressor. Hammersley says, 'many people may be simultaneously oppressor and oppressed' (Hammersley, 1992). If critical research is focused on understanding the viewpoint of the oppressed, it becomes difficult to carry out if oppressors might in some ways be oppressed themselves. It becomes hard to know who to interview or who to observe.

2 Hammersley believes that there are problems with the whole concept of oppression and differing ideas of needs and interests. There might be very different viewpoints on what a group needs and what their interests are. There may also be many different views on, and dimensions of, oppression. Hammersley believes that, in the end, needs, interests and what constitutes oppression are subjective judgements. As it is unlikely that all human needs and preferences can be met in society, some judgement has to be made about which needs and interests are legitimate and which are not.

3 Hammersley believes that critical researchers tend to argue that 'there is a single set of values that everyone would agree on if it were not for the effects of ideology on our thinking'. If this were the case, it might get around the problem of deciding who was oppressed. However, Hammersley argues that this could never be achieved. Individuals, never mind social groups, can be in two (or more) minds about what is just, fair or in their interests. Furthermore, the interests of different oppressed

groups might clash. For example, a religious minority might be oppressed in a society because of their beliefs. However, the religion might be highly patriarchal and oppress women within the religion. In such a case it becomes unclear whether the critical researcher should focus upon revealing the oppression of the religious minority, or of the women within that minority. If they try to do both they risk the contradictory position of arguing both that the religion should be tolerated and that its oppression of women should not be tolerated.

4 According to Hammersley, critical researchers try to establish the truth of their arguments either by getting oppressed groups to agree with their findings, or by showing that the findings have been successful in combating oppression. There are problems with both of these methods.

First, oppressed groups may not be able to evaluate the truth of social science theories because they may be suffering from some sort of false consciousness. How do you know that they have cast off false consciousness and can now see the truth?

Second, you cannot assume that even a correct theory will automatically produce social changes which overcome oppression. Many other factors apart from the production of theories will determine whether oppressed people are emancipated. As Hammersley says:

> *Theories are not simply applied but used in association with practical knowledge. And, if this is the case, the achievement of emancipation depends on much more than the truth of the theory, and so failure to achieve emancipation does not tell us that the theory is false.*
>
> Hammersley, 1992, p. 115

Because of the above points Hammersley denies that critical researchers have succeeded in producing an acceptable alternative to conventional methodology for establishing the truth. If this is the case, then critical research 'becomes simply research directed towards serving the interests of some particular group, whose interests may conflict with others, including those of other oppressed groups'.

Phil Carspecken – a defence of critical research

Despite the sorts of criticism advanced by writers such as Hammersley, some researchers argue that it is possible to produce an acceptable critical social science methodology. Writing in 1996, Phil Carspecken argues that critical researchers had failed to develop a detailed methodology. He attempts to put this right.

Carspecken believes that critical research need not be biased because the researchers engaging in it have value commitments. Critical researchers should not just look for the facts which fit their theories. Like researchers from other traditions they should be open to finding evidence which contradicts their theories and challenges their values. They should always be open to changing their standpoints in the light of what they find during the course of research. Furthermore, research needs to be systematic and careful. It should go through a number of stages to reach conclusions which can be widely accepted as being close to the truth. Carspecken suggests the following stages.

The process of research

1 Compiling the primary record. In the first stage the researcher immerses themselves in the social life of the group or site being studied. They take notes and may use video- or audio-tape. The researcher tries to develop a preliminary understanding of the social world from the viewpoint of those being studied.

2 Preliminary reconstructive analysis. In this stage the researcher starts to analyse what they found in the first stage. They look particularly for 'interaction patterns, their meanings, power relationships, roles, interactive sequences' and so on.

3 Dialogical data generation. At this stage the researcher starts talking to those being studied and discusses his or her preliminary findings with them. The subjects of research have an opportunity to influence the way the researcher is thinking and help him or her decide how convincing the initial ideas are. Carspecken says that this 'democratizes the research process'. Interviews and discussion groups will be used at this stage.

4 Discovering system relations. Once stage 3 is well under way the researcher now begins to broaden the study to try to link his or her specific findings to other parts of social life. For example, the relationships found in a school might be linked to the content of the mass media, the local labour market or changing conceptions of masculinity and femininity.

5 Using system relations to explain findings. Only in the final stage does the researcher being to produce causal explanations of what they have found. Links are made to social structures and particular attention may be made to 'class, race, gender and political structures of society'.

Establishing truth claims

Why, though, should people believe the results of such research? Will it not simply reflect the biases and values that the researcher started with?

Carspecken believes not. First, the features of social life uncovered by researchers are the basis on which the theories are developed. They are not simply based on the researcher's abstract ideas. Second, the subjects of the research have a chance to confirm or contradict the initial understandings developed by the researcher. Third, Carspecken develops a sophisticated analysis of how conclusions may be reached about whether the findings of research are true or not.

Like Popper (see pp. 968–9), Carspecken does not believe that social scientists can produce statements that will necessarily be regarded as true for all time. Even if everyone agreed that something was true, this view might be rejected in some future society. However, in essence, whether something is regarded as true or not ultimately depends upon whether people can agree that it is true. A truth claim – a claim that something is true – is always an act of communication. It is an attempt by one person or group to assert to other people that something is true. Establishing the truth is therefore a communicative process.

The way to check whether a truth claim stands up to scrutiny is to see whether other people agree with it. The only way to do that is to allow others a chance to accept or refute the truth claim. Traditional science considers truth claims by limiting those who are allowed to express an opinion on them to the scientists. Only experts have their views taken seriously. In critical research, those who are being studied have a say as well as other social scientists. In studying social life, the participants – the children in a classroom, the workers in an office, the members of families or whatever – are the experts. Checking whether they can be convinced by the social researchers' theory is a key part of testing whether it is true.

However, there are some problems involved in checking the findings of research by seeing whether people will agree with them or not. People often agree with things not because they believe them, but because of power relationships. Following the work of Habermas (1984), Carspecken believes that communications can be distorted where some of those communicating have power over others involved. To use a simple example, if someone holds a gun to your head and threatens to kill you, you are likely to agree with whatever they say regardless of whether you believe it.

Critical researchers should therefore be aware of these sources of distortion. They should try to ensure that they eliminate, as far as possible, power relationships between themselves and those being studied. Thus Carspecken believes that researchers should:

> *Establish supportive, nonauthoritarian relationships with the participants in your study. Actively encourage them to question your own perceptions. Be sure that participants are protected from any harm that your study could produce, and be sure that they know they are protected.*
>
> Carspecken, 1996, p. 90

However, researchers should also challenge beliefs that may result from power relationships. Thus, for example, women who believe that their husbands or male partners should be able to tell them what to do, could have their beliefs challenged by a researcher. The researcher would have to find out whether the women in question could be persuaded that the relationship was patriarchal.

The subjects of the research are not the only ones who need to be persuaded of the researcher's truth claims. Other social scientists and readers of the research need to be persuaded too. Of course, the research will be evaluated by people whose views are influenced by the power relationships in which the researcher is involved. He or she will therefore be unlikely to persuade everybody of the truthfulness of their work. Nevertheless, their aim should be to make the findings as convincing as possible.

While checks on the validity of truth claims do in the end come down to a matter of opinion, Carspecken does not believe that what people believe is just random. To him, what people will accept is affected by what is real. He argues that 'a single, real, world exists independently from any cultural categories used to describe it and act in relation to it'. This real world 'resists' human actions. People find that it allows them to behave in certain ways, and that in other ways it limits their behaviour. For example, if people believed that broken glass was not sharp, and acted towards it accordingly, they would soon find themselves cut and bleeding. It would be hard to sustain the belief that broken glass was not sharp, and cultural beliefs would be likely to change.

Beliefs tend to fall into line with reality because of people's experiences. Of course this does not always happen. People can believe things in spite of experiences which suggest that the beliefs are mistaken. Furthermore, many beliefs are far more complicated than the above example, and cannot easily be tested against experience. Nevertheless, the idea that a real world exists and that it can resist human actions allows Carspecken to claim that ultimately there can be a sound foundation for people trying to agree on what is true and what is not.

Feminist methodology

Approaches to feminist methodology

Perhaps feminist approaches to critical research are the most developed ones. There have been numerous attempts to develop feminist ways of doing or approaching research, but three approaches have been particularly influential:

1 The attack on 'malestream' research. This involves a criticism of previous, male-dominated, mainstream research. Often referred to by feminists as 'malestream' research, it is criticized for being based upon sexist or patriarchal principles.
2 The claim that there can be distinctive feminist research methods. This approach argues that the more conventional 'scientific' methods used by men are not particularly good at helping the researcher to understand social reality – particularly, though not exclusively, the reality of women.
3 The claim that feminism can reveal a distinctive epistemology, or theory of knowledge, which is superior to other epistemologies.

The attack on 'malestream' research

This is perhaps the least controversial of feminist approaches to methodology. Rather than trying to construct a completely new feminist approach, it tries to rectify the mistakes of previous, dominant and male-orientated research methodologies. From this point of view, research has generally been carried out about men, by men and for men. Pamela Abbott and Claire Wallace provide a comprehensive list of feminist criticisms of 'malestream' sociology. They say:

> *Feminists have made a number of criticisms of sociology.*
> 1 *that sociology has mainly been concerned with research on men and by implication with theories for men;*
> 2 *that research findings based on all-male samples are generalised to the whole population;*
> 3 *that areas and issues of concern to women are frequently overlooked or seen as unimportant;*
> 4 *that when they are included in research they are included in a distorted and sexist way;*
> 5 *that sex and gender are seldom important explanatory variables;*
> 6 *that when sex and gender are included as variables they are just added on, ignoring the fact that the explanatory theories used are ones which have justified the subordination and exploitation of women.*
>
> Abbot and Wallace, 1997, p. 6

A number of examples included in this book can illustrate these points:

- According to Carol Smart (1977), the sociology of crime and deviance was, until the late 1970s, almost exclusively the sociology of male crime and delinquency (see p. 408).
- Studies such as those by Merton, Cohen, Miller and Cloward and Ohlin (see pp. 354–60) almost completely ignored women, yet assumed that they applied to criminals in general and not just male criminals.
- As Ann Oakley (1974) points out, housework was seen as too unimportant to be studied by social scientists until her own pioneering work.
- Michelle Stanworth (1984) criticizes John Goldthorpe's class scheme for, generally, allocating wives to classes based upon their husband's occupation (see p. 111).
- Male social scientists such as Talcott Parsons, sociobiologists and Lombroso and Ferrero have been accused as having sexist, biologically-based explanations of female behaviour (see pp. 132–3, 129–31 and 413).
- Class classification schemes have been accused by Arber, Dale and Gilbert (1986) of being based on male jobs and of being unable to usefully differentiate different types of female employment (see p. 116).

There have also been frequent criticisms of the use of sexist language in social research. For example, Margaret Eichler (1991) points out that terms such as 'men' and 'mankind' have often been used to refer to people in general.

Evaluation

These sorts of criticism of 'malestream' sociology have been very influential and widely accepted. The numbers of sociological studies of women, studies of issues important to women, and studies which examine female perspectives on social life, have proliferated. It has become much less common for sociologists to try to generalize about people of both sexes on the basis of male samples. The sociological study of women, by women and for women has become much more commonplace.

Sexist language in sociology has also become much less common. For example, the British Sociological Association's 'Ethical Guidelines' state that sexist language is unacceptable, and it is banned from the organization's journal *Sociology* (see the 'Notes for contributors' in any edition of this journal).

Although the problems of 'malestream' sociology have certainly not been eliminated, they have been greatly reduced and the arguments advanced for non-sexist sociology have become relatively uncontentious. Other feminist approaches to research methods, though, are much more contentious.

Feminist research methods

Ann Oakley – the masculine model of interviewing

Perhaps the best-known and most influential argument that there should be distinctive feminist research methods is advanced by Ann Oakley (1981). In particular she argues that there is a feminist way of conducting interviews which is superior to a more dominant, masculine model of such research.

By studying the instructions of various methodology books which describe the techniques of interviewing, Oakley is able to discover the main features of the masculine approach to interviewing. She says, 'the paradigm of the "proper" interview appeals to such values as objectivity, detachment, hierarchy and "science" as an important cultural activity which takes precedence over people's more individualised concerns'.

Although they can be friendly in order to establish some minimum rapport, interviewers must maintain their distance to avoid becoming too involved with respondents. Certainly any emotional involvement between interviewer and respondent must be avoided at all costs. The interviewees must be manipulated as 'objects of study/sources of data'. They must always have a passive role, and must never become active in shaping the interview. If the interviewee asks the interviewer questions, the interviewer should not answer and should make it clear that he or she is there to ask questions and not to answer them.

Interviewing of this type emphasizes the importance of producing reliable data that can be repeated and checked. Interviewers have to avoid expressing any opinion of their own. To do so will influence the answers of the respondents and lead to bias in the research.

The feminist approach to interviewing

Having outlined the masculine approach to interviewing, Oakley proceeds to suggest a feminist alternative. She draws upon her own experience of interviewing women about becoming mothers. She conducted 178 interviews, with most women being interviewed twice before the birth of their child and twice afterwards. In some cases Oakley was actually present at the birth. On average each of the women was interviewed for more than nine hours.

Oakley found that the women often wanted to ask her questions. Instead of avoiding answering them, Oakley decided to answer their questions as openly and honestly as she could. Some of the questions were about her and her research, others were requests for information about childbirth or childcare. In some cases the women were anxious about some aspect of childcare or childbirth, and often they had failed to get satisfactory answers from medical staff. In these circumstances Oakley found it impossible to refuse to answer their questions. She was asking a great deal of the interviewees at a difficult time in their lives, and it was only reasonable that she should give something back in return.

Oakley decided to make the research more collaborative. Instead of looking at the women as passive respondents, she wanted them to become her collaborators and friends. Indeed, it was often the interviewees who took the initiative in developing the relationship further. Many expressed an interest in the research and wanted to become more involved. Some rang her up with key pieces of information. Oakley claims that 'the women were reacting to my own evident wish for a relatively intimate and non-hierarchical relationship'.

She tried to make sure that she did not exploit the interviewees. She asked permission to record interviews and use the information. While she was at the mothers' houses she gave them help with childcare or housework if they needed it. She discussed her own experiences of childbirth with the women who were interested, and tried to offer advice on where they could get help with particular problems.

Oakley's objectives in adopting such an approach were not just to give some help to the women and to avoid exploiting them, in return for their participation. She also believed that it improved the quality of the research. It allowed her to get closer to the subjective viewpoints of the women being studied. It also played some role in trying to change and improve the experience of becoming a mother for the women involved. Oakley says:

> *Nearly three-quarters of the women said that being interviewed had affected them and the three most common forms this influence took were in leading them to reflect on their experiences more than they would otherwise have done; in reducing the level of their anxiety and/or in reassuring them of their normality; and in giving a valuable outlet for the verbalization of feelings.*
>
> Oakley, 1981, p. 50

Oakley concludes that interviewing that breaks down the barriers between researchers and their subjects is preferable to masculine, 'scientific' interviewing. She says that a feminist methodology:

requires, further, that the mythology of 'hygienic' research with its accompanying mystification of the researcher and the researched as objective instruments of data production be replaced by the recognition that personal involvement is more than dangerous bias – it is the condition under which people come to know each other and to admit others into their lives.

Oakley, 1981, p. 58

Evaluation of Oakley

Oakley's approach to interviewing has been quite influential amongst feminists and her ideas are widely quoted in books about methodology. Although generally sympathetic to her approach, some critics have argued that it is not original or distinctively feminist.

Ray Pawson argues that Oakley simply elaborated on conventional ways of conducting unstructured interviews. He says:

This vision of interviewing-as-fieldwork is precisely that urged from the traditional doctrines of interpretative, phenomenological or humanistic sociology. There is a time-honoured tradition of positivism-bashing in general and structured-interviewing bashing in particular, and this feminist approach is essentially a repetition of this literature.

Pawson, 1992, p. 119

The differences between structured and unstructured interviewing will be discussed later in the chapter (see pp. 1003–4). However, it can be argued that there are some features of Oakley's approach which go beyond conventional approaches to unstructured interviewing. For example, even unstructured interviewing is not normally supposed to involve advising and helping the interviewees, since it is thought that such interventions might affect the findings. Oakley's approach to feminist interviewing incorporates elements of critical research which are not typical of other types of interpretative research.

Feminist standpoint epistemology

Perhaps the most influential of feminist epistemologies is what has been called standpoint epistemology. From this point of view, the way in which women experience social life gives them unique insights into how society works. Sandra Harding says, 'The feminist standpoint epistemologies ground a distinctive feminist science in a theory of gendered activity and social experience' (Harding, 1986). That is, they believe that feminist knowledge can only come from examining the unique experiences of women in societies in which men and women experience social life in different ways.

Standpoint epistemology generally does not deny that it is possible to discover the truth about society. However, instead of believing that the truth can be established through the observation of facts and the discovery of statistical relationships, it seeks to find the truth through understanding women's experiences. Furthermore, it tends to believe that no one version of the truth can explain everything. Although women have certain experiences in common, there are also big differences between groups of women, and their different experiences need to be explored before a full picture of the social world can be produced.

Liz Stanley and Sue Wise are amongst the advocates of standpoint epistemology. They argue in favour of 'theory derived from experience' which is 'constantly subject to revision in the light of that experience' (Stanley and Wise, 1990). They say that feminist research should be 'not only located in, but proceeding from, the grounded analysis of women's experiences'. By examining their experiences the feminist researcher can understand the world.

According to Stanley and Wise, 'all knowledge, necessarily, results from the conditions of its production, is contextually located, and irrevocably bears the marks of its origins'. Generally speaking, sociology has usually expressed 'the practices and knowledge of highly particular white, middle-class, heterosexual men'. Feminist standpoint epistemology replaces this with the view of the world developed through the experiences of oppressed women. Oppressed women are in a special position, able through their experiences to see through the ideology of their male oppressors.

However, Stanley and Wise do not believe that all women experience the world in the same way. For example, black, lesbian and working-class women have different experiences to those of their white, heterosexual and middle-class counterparts. Stanley and Wise therefore support the view that feminist epistemology needs to look at different standpoints and should not try to pretend that one set of knowledge can deal with the experiences of very different groups of women. They are in favour of a plurality of feminist theories deriving from the study of different oppressed groups. No one theory should be allowed to be dominant.

Although Stanley and Wise accept the need for a plurality of theories, they do not go as far as some postmodernists who deny that any methodology can deliver a true picture of social life (see pp. 990–1). To Stanley and Wise the viewpoints of different women need to be examined simply because women do have real, different experiences. Feminist methodology needs to uncover these different and often previously neglected experiences in order to develop a fuller understanding of the social world.

Criticisms of feminist standpoint epistemology

Ray Pawson (1992) argues that such epistemologies run into major problems when those being studied continue to see the world in terms that the researcher finds unconvincing. Thus, for example, feminist researchers are unlikely to give much credence to women's views that it is 'natural' for women to do the housework and for men to be dominant. Sometimes, however much they try to persuade the women being studied to see things differently, the women may stick to beliefs which feminists see as reflecting patriarchal ideology. In such cases researchers may find themselves going against what their respondents believe, or, alternatively, having to accept views which they believe to be untrue.

According to Pawson a further problem with standpoint epistemology is that it puts all the emphasis upon studying the experiences of the oppressed. This effectively rules out studying the oppressors (in this case men), even though studying oppressors might reveal at least as much about the nature of oppression as studying the oppressed.

Pawson is also unpersuaded by the view that you can simply describe a plurality of different viewpoints. Sometimes the viewpoints of groups of women, grounded in different experiences, may contradict one another. Unless the researcher decides to say that one viewpoint is better than another, they end up having to accept contradictory beliefs. This leads them down the path of relativism. They are no longer trying to explain society as it really is; they are reduced to accepting all viewpoints as equally valid. Different feminist views of the world are only true for particular groups of women; none can claim to describe society as it really is for everybody. In these circumstances sociology loses any claim to be able to produce knowledge which is superior to the commonsense knowledge of ordinary members of society.

Pawson's criticisms tend to generalize about feminist methodologies and epistemologies and are not particularly sensitive to variations between them. Not all feminist standpoint epistemologies are relativistic; some do not see the viewpoints of all groups of women as equally valid. Indeed the accusation of relativism could be more justly directed against postmodern methodology (see pp. 990–1) than feminist methodology. Furthermore, as we have seen above, critical social scientists such as Phil Carspecken have tried to deal with some of the apparent problems with methodologies that take the viewpoint of the oppressed seriously (see pp. 985–6).

Critical and feminist approaches to methodology will be discussed further as the chapter develops.

Postmodern methodology

Varieties of postmodern methodology

There is no single type of methodology accepted by all postmodernists. However, it is possible to distinguish three broad positions adopted by the variety of writers who discuss postmodernism:

1 Some postmodernists, such as David Harvey (1990), see postmodernity largely in terms of changes in society. They do not believe that the nature of knowledge has changed or that radical new methodologies are needed to replace old ones. They therefore tend to use conventional methods and conventional sources of data. Thus Harvey analyses statistical economic data and tries to interpret cultural trends from a number of secondary sources. From the viewpoint of such writers, existing methodologies, whether quantitative or qualitative, are quite adequate for the analysis of society.

2 On the other hand, some writers make a sharp distinction between modern and postmodern epistemology. Modern epistemology (or theory of knowledge) tends to claim that the truth can be discovered by the use of the correct techniques. Those who advocate both deductive and inductive methods (see p. 968), and even critical social scientists (see pp. 982–6), believe that procedures can be used to evaluate what is true and what is not. While Popper and critical sociologists may not believe that the final truth can be established, they do at least believe that it is possible to rule out some knowledge as being untrue.

Epistemological postmodernists argue that there is no basis even for ruling out some knowledge as being untrue. Nevertheless, Lyotard (1984), for example, dismisses all knowledge based upon modern epistemologies as deriving from 'metanarratives' (see Chapter 15). Metanarratives are big stories about the world and are essentially opinions rather than objective knowledge.

Lyotard rejects the claims of all 'scientific' subjects and believes that all knowledge is essentially a form of story-telling. He sees all stories as equally valid and offers no way of distinguishing between true and untrue stories. The implication of this view is that postmodern methodology should simply

consist of allowing different people to tell their stories. No attempt should be made to try to establish that any particular stories are better than any others.

Some postmodernists have tried to develop postmodern ethnography as a way of allowing the voices of diverse social groups to be heard (see pp. 1014–15 for a discussion of postmodern ethnography).

3 Postmodern ethnography allows epistemological postmodernists to collect some of their own data. However, much postmodern sociology is not so concerned with creating new knowledge as with attacking existing knowledge. Many such approaches have drawn on the work of Jacques Derrida as a basis for criticizing other sociologists' work (see Kamuf, 1991, for extracts from Derrida).

Derrida believes that language can never truly represent an external, objective reality. Language is simply a self-contained system in which words are defined in terms of other words. Because of this, scientists, sociologists and indeed anyone else should not be believed if they claim to have established the absolute truth. Therefore the work of such writers should be deconstructed.

Deconstruction involves examining texts (anything containing written language) and taking them apart. In this process Derrida believes that the inherent contradictions built into existing knowledge can be revealed (see pp. 159–60 for further details). The technique of deconstruction is often used by postmodernists to attack and try to undermine texts such as existing sociological theories. This strand of postmodern methodology is therefore based around the critique of secondary sources (see pp. 1016–22) rather than the creation of new knowledge.

Postmodern methodology – evaluation

Postmodern methodology has been widely accused of adopting a position of complete relativism. That is, it argues that knowledge simply depends upon your point of view, and that one person's view is as good as any other person's view. Modernist sociologists of various types continue to reject this view. For example, critical social scientists such as Phil Carspecken believe that there are ways of evaluating different truth claims (see above, pp. 985–6). Carspecken does believe that postmodern methodology offers some insights but rejects its claim that there is no basis for producing objective knowledge. He believes that there are ways of convincing others of the validity of knowledge. Carspecken says, 'Few would want to say that their descriptions of society are nothing but interpretations, capable of persuading others only through the exertion of power (persuasion) rather than argument' (Carspecken, 1996).

Ultimately argument is grounded in an external reality and the way that this reality prevents people from doing whatever they choose. Like realist theorists of science (see pp. 1026–7), critical social scientists like Carspecken continue to reject the extreme relativism of some postmodernists.

A number of writers have turned postmodern arguments on postmodernists. They have pointed out that, if there is no way of distinguishing fact from fiction, then there is absolutely no way of showing that postmodernists' stories about the social world are any better (or worse) than other stories (see Chapter 15). Similarly there is no way of showing that postmodern methodologies are any better (or worse) than more conventional methodologies.

Postmodern methodology will be discussed further as the chapter develops.

The research process

This part of the chapter will deal with the major issues involved in actually carrying out research. It begins with a consideration of how researchers go about selecting topics for research, and goes on to examine the practical and theoretical issues involved in collecting and analysing data.

Choosing a topic for research

Before embarking upon research, sociologists have to decide what they are going to study. This choice may be affected by a number of factors.

The values and beliefs of the researcher will obviously play some part. Sociologists are unlikely to devote considerable time and energy to issues that they think are unimportant or trivial. For example, Peter Townsend's values have led him to regard poverty as an important problem in contemporary industrial societies (see pp. 296–300), while Paul Heelas believed that the New Age movement was worthy of attention (see pp. 466–9).

What a researcher believes is important may be influenced by developments within the discipline of sociology, or developments in the wider society. Sociology is a profession as well as a discipline, and many sociologists wish to advance their careers by criticizing or developing the work of fellow sociologists, or by trying to resolve some key

sociological issue. This might explain why so many sociologists have followed Durkheim in studying suicide, while other areas of social life have been comparatively neglected.

Similarly, routine clerical workers have been studied more than some other sections of the stratification system. This group is often seen as a crucial test of Marxist and Weberian theories of stratification. Groups of less theoretical interest to sociologists, such as agricultural labourers, have been studied less often.

In the sociology of religion, apparent examples of religious revival, such as the revival of Islam and the New Christian Right in the USA, have been studied partly in order to evaluate the theory of secularization.

When there are major changes in society, sociologists are likely to study them. Sociology was born in the nineteenth century, largely out of a concern about the changes wrought by the Industrial Revolution. More recently, sociologists have studied apparent social changes in terms of theories and concepts such as postmodernism (see Chapter 15), post-Fordism and high modernity (see pp. 713–17).

Sociologists have also devoted more time in recent decades to studying unemployment than they did in the 1950s and 1960s when rates of unemployment were very much lower. In the sociology of work the impact of information technology has been a focus of attention (see pp. 700–6).

Specific government policies can also stimulate research. Hence, for example, the concern with the 'new vocationalism' in the contemporary sociology of education (see pp. 801–13), and the concern with 'social exclusion' in studies of social policy since the British Labour government established a Social Exclusion Unit (see p. 346).

A very important factor affecting the choice of research topic is the availability or otherwise of grants to finance it. Research funds may come from charitable foundations – such as the Nuffield and Rowntree foundations – from industry, or from government – in Britain usually via the Economic and Social Research Council (or ESRC). The European Union sometimes provides funds for sociological research.

Some small-scale research requires little funding, but major research projects can be very expensive, and the sort of research that gets done can be very strongly influenced by those who hold the purse strings. Payne *et al.* have suggested that the SSRC (the predecessor of the ESRC) 'had no pretensions to being anything other than a government organisation' (Payne *et al.*, 1977). As an important source of funding for British sociology it tended to restrict the amount of sociological research that was critical of the government of the day.

Industrial providers of research grants tend to want some practical benefits from the money they spend, so research into organizations and industrial sociology is most likely to receive funding from this source.

Other practical difficulties apart from money can affect the topics chosen by sociologists for their research. The availability of existing data on a topic or the practicality of collecting data will both have an influence. Durkheim chose to study suicide partly because statistics were available from many European countries (see pp. 974–7). Some important groups in the population – for example, senior politicians and the directors of top companies – rarely form the basis of detailed studies. This is partly due to their unwillingness to reveal their activities to sociological scrutiny. Other relatively powerless groups, such as delinquent gangs, have been subject to detailed and frequent study.

Primary sources

Primary sources of information consist of data collected by researchers themselves during the course of their work. Secondary sources consist of data that already exist. Primary sources would include data collected by researchers using questionnaires, conducting interviews or carrying out participant observation. Secondary sources include official statistics, mass media products, diaries, letters, government reports, other sociologists' work and historical and contemporary records. Secondary sources will be discussed later.

Choosing a primary research method

Some of the factors that influence the choice of research topic can also influence the choice of research method used to study that topic. For example, the source of funding for a proposed project might well specify the type of method to be employed. Many funding bodies support the use of more quantitative methods. Janet Finch, for example, describes the 'dominance achieved by quantitative

methods, and the (at best) secondary place which qualitative methods were accorded' (Finch, 1986) in the development of British social policy research. However, the most important factors influencing the choice of research method are the topic to be studied and the theoretical and practical considerations.

Some topics lend themselves more readily to the use of quantitative techniques such as questionnaires: for example, research into voting in Great Britain tends to involve large-scale studies using quantitative statistical techniques because of the sheer numbers necessarily involved in the research if the data are to be of any use. Other topics, such as behaviour in classrooms, lend themselves more readily to qualitative methods.

As the earlier sections of this chapter have shown, those who support a particular theoretical approach tend to use either quantitative or qualitative methods. This commitment may well be the major influence on their choice of research method.

Reliability

Many of the debates about the merits of particular research methods focus on questions of reliability and validity. In the natural sciences, data are seen to be 'reliable' if other researchers using the same methods of investigation on the same material produce the same results. By replicating an experiment it is possible to check for errors in observation and measurement. Once reliable data have been obtained, generalizations can then be made about the behaviour observed. No sociologist would claim that the social sciences can attain the standards of reliability employed in the natural sciences. Many would argue, however, that sociological data can attain a certain standard of reliability.

Generally speaking, quantitative methods are seen to provide greater reliability. They usually produce standardized data in a statistical form: the research can be repeated and the results checked. Questionnaires can be used to test precise hypotheses which the researcher has devised.

Qualitative methods are often criticized for failing to meet the same standards of reliability. Such methods may be seen as unreliable because the procedures used to collect data can be unsystematic, the results are rarely quantified, and there is no way of replicating a qualitative study and checking the reliability of its findings.

Validity

Data are 'valid' if they provide a true picture of what is being studied. A valid statement gives a true measurement or description of what it claims to measure or describe. It is an accurate reflection of social reality. Data can be reliable without being valid. Studies can be replicated and produce the same results but those results may not be a valid measure of what the researcher intends to measure. For instance, statistics on church attendance may be reliable but they do not necessarily give a true picture of religious commitment.

Supporters of qualitative methods often argue that quantitative methods lack validity. Statistical research methods may be easy to replicate but they may not provide a true picture of social reality. They are seen to lack the depth to describe accurately the meanings and motives that form the basis of social action. They use categories imposed on the social world by sociologists – categories that may have little meaning or relevance to other members of society. To many interpretive sociologists, only qualitative methods can overcome these problems and provide a valid picture of social reality.

Practicality

Researchers are sometimes attracted to quantitative methods because of their practicality. Quantitative methods are generally less time-consuming and require less personal commitment. It is usually possible to study larger and more representative samples which can provide an overall picture of society. Qualitative research often has to be confined to the study of small numbers because of practical limitations. It is more suited to providing an in-depth insight into a smaller sample of people.

These points will be developed in the following sections.

Choosing a sample

Once a sociologist has chosen a topic for research and a method to carry out that research, she or he needs to decide upon a 'sample': that is, the actual individuals to be studied. All research involves some sort of sampling, some selection of who or what to study. Those researchers who advocate 'scientific' quantitative methods tend to support the use of sophisticated sampling techniques and often claim to be able to generalize on the basis of their findings. Those who support interpretive qualitative methods tend to study smaller numbers of people, so their studies are less likely to require complex sampling techniques.

A sample is a part of a larger population. It is usually selected to be representative of that population: those included in the sample are chosen as a cross-section of the larger group. The use of samples saves the researcher time and money since it reduces the number of individuals to be studied. If the sample is chosen carefully, it is possible to generalize from it: that is, to make statements about the whole relevant population on the basis of the sample.

The first stage in sampling involves identifying the relevant population. A population in this sense includes all the relevant sampling units. The sampling unit is the individual person or social group in that population. In a study of voting in Britain the relevant population would be all those entitled to vote, and the sampling unit would be the individual voter.

Having determined the sampling unit and the population, the researcher might then try to obtain or to produce a sampling frame. In a study of voting there is a ready-made sampling frame – the electoral register – since a sampling frame is simply a list of all the relevant sampling units in the population. It is important that the sampling frame is as comprehensive as possible: if it is not, the sample might be seriously distorted. Researchers have sometimes used telephone directories as a sampling frame for the population of a particular area, but the directory would not include those who have ex-directory numbers and those without a telephone. Since the latter would probably be people on low incomes, the results of a study on (for example) voting intentions based upon this sampling frame might be seriously misleading.

Often, even apparently comprehensive sampling frames contain omissions. For example, the electoral register does not include all adults living in Britain. Foreign nationals (except for some citizens of Eire), those who have failed to register as voters, and members of the House of Lords are among those who would be excluded. The introduction of the Poll Tax in the early 1990s led to large numbers of people avoiding enrolment on the electoral register in an attempt to get out of paying the tax.

Studies use imperfect sampling frames. The early *British Crime Surveys* used the electoral register (see pp. 366–8 for details of these surveys). Pat Mayhew (quoted in McNeill, 1988), the Principal Research Officer responsible for the Surveys, admits that the most comprehensive sampling frame now available is not the electoral register, but the Postcode Address File. Mayhew notes that the electoral register does not include many people in institutions (such as mental hospitals and prisons) who may be particularly prone to being the victims of crime.

Later *British Crime Surveys* did start using the Postcode Address File. However, even that is not perfect. A sample using this as a sampling frame would be likely to under-represent the homeless. Furthermore, researchers usually rely upon the 'Small User File' of the Postcode Address File and this excludes addresses which normally receive 25 or more items of mail per day. As Sara Arber (1993) points out, a few households which receive unusually large volumes of mail will not be included on samples using this sampling frame.

One government study, the census, avoids the problems of sampling by studying all, or very nearly all, members of a large population. By law every household in Britain has to complete a census form, although some individuals (including many of the homeless) may slip through the net.

Sociologists lack the resources to carry out such comprehensive studies as the census, and so they usually try to select a sample that contains the same proportions of people with relevant characteristics as are present in the population under consideration. If that population contains 60 per cent women and 40 per cent men, then the sample should contain 60 per cent women and 40 per cent men. Other important characteristics such as age, occupation, ethnic origin and religion are often taken into account by researchers as they select their sample.

Other, more specialized factors may be taken into account, depending upon the nature of the research. Opinion polls on voting intentions usually use a sample from a variety of constituencies chosen according to the share of the vote won by the major parties in those constituencies at the previous election. Thus a number of 'safe' Labour, 'safe' Conservative and more marginal seats would be included. Clearly the results would be distorted if the sample was chosen entirely from safe Labour seats.

In a study of education the researcher might wish to select the sample so as to ensure that the types of schools attended by those in the sample reflect the proportions in the population as a whole.

If sampling has been carried out satisfactorily, researchers should be able to generalize on the basis of the results. This means that they should be able to make statements about the whole population without having conducted research into every member of that population. For example, opinion pollsters often claim to be able to predict the results of an election in Britain to within a couple of percentage points on the basis of a sample of perhaps one or two thousand people.

Different methods of producing a sample will now be examined.

Types of sampling

Random and systematic sampling

This is the simplest way to select a large sample. Using random sampling the researcher ensures that each sample unit has an equal chance of being chosen to take part in the research. This is often achieved by assigning numbers to each sample unit and selecting members of the sample by using a random number table. The nearest everyday equivalent to this is picking numbers out of a hat.

A less time-consuming, though slightly less random, method is to select, say, every tenth or twentieth number on a list. Since this method is not truly random it is known as systematic sampling.

Random sampling is not ideal. It relies on statistical probability to ensure the representativeness of the sample. In simple terms, it is based upon the so-called 'law of averages', and a relatively large sample is needed for the researcher to be confident that the sample will be genuinely representative. Researchers therefore generally prefer to use the method we will discuss next: stratified random sampling.

Stratified random sampling

Stratified random sampling involves the division of the sampling frame into groups in order to ensure that the sample is representative. The researcher identifies the important variables that need to be controlled and allocates the sampling units to different groups according to these variables.

For example, the researcher might identify gender and class as important variables. In this case the population would be divided into working-class males, working-class females, middle-class males, middle-class females, upper-class males and upper-class females. The sample would then be selected at random from each of these groups ensuring that the proportions of the sample in each category were the same as the proportions in the population as a whole. If 20 per cent of the population were found to be working-class females, 20 per cent of the sample would be working-class females.

This is an effective method of choosing a representative sample because it allows the researcher to control the variables that are seen as important. It requires a smaller sample size to ensure representativeness than random sampling. However, stratified random sampling is often not practicable. Even if a sampling frame is available, it often does not contain the information necessary to divide the population into groups. Opinion pollsters can use the electoral register as a sampling frame but it does not provide information such as the occupations of the electorate. For this reason it cannot be used to produce a stratified random sample.

Quota sampling

Quota sampling allows researchers to control variables without having a sampling frame. When quota sampling is used, the interviewers are told how many respondents with particular characteristics to question, so that the overall sample reflects the characteristics of the population as a whole. For example, an interviewer might be required to administer a questionnaire to ten married females and ten married males aged between 20 and 35, five unmarried men and women of the same age group and so on. Once the quota for a particular category has been filled, responses will not be collected from those in that category.

This is a particularly useful method of sampling when the overall proportions of different groups within a population are known. Government population statistics could be used to set the quota for a representative sample of different age groups in the British population. As Sara Arber (1993) points out, it is also generally quicker and cheaper than using probability sampling. There is no need to revisit those chosen in your sample if they are not available on the first visit. If someone refuses to cooperate, you can simply find someone else with the same characteristics. When speed is of the essence – for example, if you want to conduct an opinion poll on voting on the day of an election – then quota sampling may be the only practical option.

Despite the simplicity of quota sampling, it does have both theoretical and practical drawbacks in some circumstances. Quota sampling is not truly random because each person within the population does not have an equal chance of being chosen. For example, a researcher stopping people on a particular street at a particular time can only question people who happen to be in that place at that time. The lack of genuine randomness may distort the results. For example, a researcher for a political opinion poll who questions people at 11 o'clock on Tuesday morning in a city centre would be unlikely to gain much response from those who work in the surrounding rural area.

Stopping people in the street may lead to a low response rate. Many people could refuse to cooperate, and those who do cooperate might be untypical of the population as a whole in a way that was not anticipated when the original quotas were set up.

Quota sampling usually requires the researcher to ask a number of personal questions to determine whether the respondent has the characteristics of a quota group on which information is required. Asking such questions at the start of an interview might put some interviewees off, and put others on their guard so that their responses are not as open and honest as they might otherwise have been.

Furthermore, practical problems can arise in filling quotas. In some circumstances people who have full-time jobs might prove more difficult to interview than people without jobs.

Despite these limitations quota sampling continues to be used because there are circumstances when random or stratified random sampling is not possible.

Multi-stage sampling

Multi-stage sampling can save the researcher time and money, although it reduces the extent to which the sample is genuinely random. It simply involves

selecting a sample from another sample. It is often used in opinion polls on voting intentions. In the first stage a few constituencies, which, on the basis of previous research, appear to represent a cross-section of all constituencies, are selected. Some rural and some urban constituencies would be included and previous election results used to check that the constituencies selected are a reasonable mixture in terms of party support. In the second stage individual respondents are chosen from within these constituencies.

If multi-stage sampling was not used in this sort of research, opinion poll organizations would incur the prohibitive expense of sending researchers to every constituency in the country, to interview a mere three or four people in each to get an overall sample of 2,000. However, in multi-stage sampling the loss of randomness may be accompanied by an increase in sampling error.

Snowballing

Snowballing is a very specialized type of sampling and is usually only used when other methods are not practical. It involves using personal contacts to build up a sample of the group to be studied. For example, it was used by Laurie Taylor (1984) when he persuaded John McVicar, a former criminal, to obtain introductions to members of the London underworld of professional crime. Taylor then used these contacts to obtain introductions to more criminals. Clearly, such samples cannot be representative since, to have any chance of being included, those studied must be part of a network of personal contacts. But for groups such as professional criminals it is not easy to use other ways of obtaining a sample.

Non-representative sampling

Sociologists do not always try to obtain representative cross-sections of the population they wish to study. In terms of Popper's views of science (see pp. 968–9), researchers should try to disprove or falsify their theories. This means looking for untypical examples of a phenomenon which does not fit a particular theory. For example, in examining the view that differences in the behaviour of men and women are primarily shaped by biological rather than cultural differences, sociologists such as Ann Oakley have tried to find untypical examples of human behaviour (see p. 133). Feminist sociologists claim to have falsified the biological arguments about the behaviour of men and women by finding examples of societies in which women behave in ways more usually associated with men and vice versa. (For examples, see p. 133.)

Goldthorpe *et al.*'s rejection of the embourgeoisement hypothesis (see pp. 79–81) provides an interesting example of the use of a non-representative sample (Goldthorpe *et al.*, 1968a, 1968b, 1969). The embourgeoisement hypothesis stated that large numbers of affluent workers were becoming middle-class as a result of their rising living standards. On the basis of available evidence, Goldthorpe *et al.* doubted this claim. To test the embourgeoisement hypothesis they selected a sample from the most affluent manual workers. If any manual workers were becoming middle-class, it would be members of this 'untypical' group. The research results showed little or no evidence of embourgeoisement. Having chosen the group most likely to confirm the hypothesis, Goldthorpe *et al.* felt confident in rejecting the theory of embourgeoisement.

Fiona Devine (1992, 1994) used a sample of similar workers in a later study of Luton workers which examined how far the working class had changed in the intervening period (see pp. 81–3).

Some sociologists have argued that it is important to study the best-informed members of social groups rather than a cross-section of a group. Thus, the interactionist Herbert Blumer thought that you should seek and question the most acute observers of a group or aspect of social life since 'A small number of such individuals, brought together as a discussion group, is more valuable many times over than any representative sample' (Blumer, 1969).

Case studies and life histories

Case studies

In general, case studies make no claims to be representative. A case study involves the detailed examination of a single example of something. Thus a case study could involve the study of a single institution, community or social group, an individual person, a particular historical event, or a single social action.

Howard Becker has described one aim of case studies as the attempt 'to arrive at a comprehensive understanding of the group under study' (Becker, 1970). Ken Pryce's participant observation study of a single West Indian community in the St Paul's area of Bristol attempted, at one level, simply to understand that particular community (Pryce, 1979). Shane Blackman (1997) conducted a detailed ethnographic study of the homeless in Brighton in order to understand how that group experienced and saw the social world (see pp. 332–3).

However, case studies can be used, as Becker claims, 'to develop more general theoretical statements about regularities in social structure and process'. As mentioned above, a case study of a particular society can be used to falsify a general theory about social life. Thus Gough's study of Nayar

society showed that family structures based upon a marital bond are not universal (Gough, 1959) (see pp. 504–5). Steve Craine's study of school leavers in Manchester was able to falsify the belief of some theorists that an underclass culture was passed down from generation to generation (Craine, 1997) (see pp. 330–2).

Case studies can also be used to produce typologies, or a set of categories defining types of a social phenomenon. Douglas (1967) suggests that case studies can be used to discover the different types of suicide by uncovering the different social meanings of suicide.

Case studies may be useful for generating new hypotheses which can then be tested against other data or in later studies. Paul Willis's study of a single school has produced a number of hypotheses about the relationship between education and capitalist societies, which have proved to be a useful focus for research and the development of theories by other sociologists of education (Willis, 1977) (see pp. 791–4). Dick Hobbs and Colin Dunninghan (1998) used their case studies of individuals involved in organized crime to develop hypotheses about the changes in the nature of local and global relationships in criminal networks (see pp. 406–7).

A major drawback of case study research is that it is not possible to generalize on the basis of its findings. It is impossible to determine how far the findings of a study into one example of a social phenomenon can be applied to other examples. Alan Bryman (1988) suggests that one way to overcome this problem is to carry out or use a number of case studies of the same type of phenomenon. An example is the work of P.K. Edwards and Hugh Scullion (1982) who conducted case studies of seven British factories in order to develop a more general theory about factors affecting industrial conflict (see pp. 736–7). Similarly Shoshana Zuboff (1988) carried out case study research in eight organizations in order to try to make generalizations about the impact of information technology (see pp. 700–3).

However, as Bryman points out, it may be difficult to make direct comparisons of the results of studies carried out either by different people, or by the same person at different times. The data are likely to be more systematic if a single researcher, or group, collects data on a number of social groups at the same time. However, if this is done, the research ceases to be a case study as such.

Life histories

Life histories are a particular type of case study – the whole study concerns one individual's life. They can be carried out using a variety of methods but most frequently use extended, unstructured interviews. Some life histories make considerable use of personal documents. The following are some examples: a study of the life of a Polish peasant conducted by Thomas and Znaniecki; Gordon Allport's 'Letters from Jenny', a study of an ageing woman; and Robert Bogdan's study of Jane Fry, a transsexual. (All of these examples are discussed in Plummer, 1982.)

Like case studies, life histories, by their very nature, use an untypical sample. However, Ken Plummer argues that they have a number of uses and can be of considerable value in developing sociological theory.

Plummer suggests that life histories can be used as a 'sensitizing tool'. They can help the researcher develop an understanding of the meaning of concepts used by those she or he is studying. The 'rich detail' of life-history data can help cut through the 'dense jargon' that makes so much theoretical sociology difficult to comprehend. The life history allows the researcher to see the world from the social actor's point of view. This viewpoint is one that may challenge the assumptions and preconceptions of outsiders. For example, Plummer claims that Bogdan's study shows how transsexualism can seem a rational and reasonable choice from the actor's point of view, rather than a sickness, as it appears to be to some psychiatrists.

Like case studies in general, life histories can be used to falsify existing theories or to inspire new ones. A number of life histories can be used together to develop a theory, test it and refine it, and then test it again. Plummer refers to this theoretical approach as 'analytic induction'. The first life history allows the researcher to make preliminary hypotheses. These can be tested in subsequent life-history research. Where the hypotheses are found wanting, they can be modified to fit the extra cases. As research proceeds, the sociologist develops increasingly useful theories and generalizations. (This approach is similar to the 'grounded theory' advocated by Glaser and Strauss (1967) (see p. 1012 for further details).

Some feminist researchers argue that life-history research is useful for helping women to understand their situation, and, once they have understood, helping them to change it. Thus Maria Mies found that discussing life histories with female victims of violence helped the women to understand 'that their own experience of violence was not just their individual bad luck, or even their fault, but there is an objective social basis for this private violence by men against women and children' (Mies, 1993).

For critical researchers generally, life-history research can help to raise people's consciousness and awareness of their own exploitation by encouraging them to reflect upon the factors that have shaped their life experiences.

Pilot studies

Having selected a research method and chosen a method of selecting a sample, some sociologists carry out a pilot study before embarking upon the main research project. A pilot study is a small-scale preliminary study conducted before the main research in order to check the feasibility or to improve the design of the research. Pilot studies are not usually appropriate for case studies, but they are frequently carried out before large-scale quantitative research in an attempt to avoid time and money being wasted on an inadequately designed project. A pilot study is usually carried out on members of the relevant population, but not on those who will form part of the final sample. This is because it might influence the later behaviour of research subjects if they had already been involved in the research.

Pilot studies can be useful for a number of reasons:

1 If interviews or questionnaires are to be used, the questions may be tested to make sure that they make sense to respondents – that is, they produce the sort of information required and are unambiguous. Michael Young and Peter Willmott (1961) used a pilot study involving over a hundred interviews before carrying out their research into family life in Bethnal Green. They found the pilot interviews useful for developing questions that returned to particular themes so that they could try to check the consistency of answers to reveal if any respondents were being untruthful.

   Pilot studies were carried out in the Economic and Social Research Council's *Social Change and Economic Life Initiative* study (which studied social change in six British local labour markets). They were used for 'testing questionnaire items, the placing of the work history schedule, interview length, and the contact procedure' (Gallie, 1994). The researchers believed that this helped them to improve the reliability and response rate of their research.

2 Pilot studies may help researchers develop ways of getting the full cooperation of those they are studying. In a pilot study for her research into housebound mothers, Hannah Gavron (1966) found that it was necessary to establish a rapport with the respondent if she was to get full, open and honest answers. She therefore spent some time chatting to the respondent informally before starting the interview.

3 Pilot studies may be used to develop the research skills of those taking part. When Rex and Moore (1979) studied immigrants in Birmingham they used their pilot study to train the amateur interviewers they were using.

4 The pilot study may determine whether or not the research goes ahead. The researchers might discover insurmountable practical problems which lead to them dropping the project. In some cases a pilot study might be used to convince a funding organization of the usefulness of a particular project. If the pilot study is unsuccessful, the full study may be abandoned.

Social surveys

Social surveys can be defined as research projects which collect standardized data about large numbers of people. The data are usually in a statistical form, and the most practical way of collecting such data is through the use of questionnaires. Other types of research method, such as unstructured interviewing or observation, would be less suitable for collecting standardized information about large groups because they would be both time-consuming and difficult to translate into a statistical form.

Stephen Ackroyd and John A. Hughes (1981) have distinguished three main types of survey:

1 The first type, the factual survey, is used to collect descriptive information. The government census can be seen as a type of factual survey. The pioneering research done by Rowntree in his studies of poverty in York (see pp. 293–4) is a more sociological example. Rowntree's research was designed primarily to document the extent of poverty rather than to explain it, and this also applies to the more recent research on poverty by Mack and Lansley (1985, 1992) (see pp. 300–3 for further details of this study).

2 The second type, the attitude survey, is often carried out by opinion poll organizations. Instead of producing descriptive information about the social world, this type of survey attempts to discover the subjective states of individuals. Many polling organizations collect information about attitudes to political policies and personalities. Information on attitudes is often collected by sociologists interested in voting, for example Heath, Jowell and Curtice (1985, 1994) (see pp. 658–61). Sociologists who study stratification, such as Marshall, Newby, Rose and Vogler (1988), sometimes collect data on attitudes in order to examine the issue of class consciousness (see pp. 88–9 for further details).

3 The third type of survey, the explanatory survey, is more ambitious than the other types, since it goes beyond description and tries to test theories and hypotheses or to produce new theories. Most sociological surveys contain some explanatory element. Marshall *et al.* (1988), for example, tested the theory that routine white-collar workers had become proletarianized (see p. 69).

   Surveys such as that carried out by Townsend into poverty are designed to be both descriptive and explanatory. Townsend used survey data both to measure the extent of poverty and to develop theories to explain it (Townsend, 1979, 1993; Townsend, Corrigan and Kowarzik, 1985).

Researchers usually want to be able to generalize from social surveys, and so surveys are usually based on carefully selected samples. The success of any survey depends ultimately on the quality of the data it produces. Most social surveys use questionnaires as a means of data collection. The advantages and disadvantages of this method and the reliability and validity of the data it produces will now be examined.

Questionnaires

A questionnaire consists simply of a list of pre-set questions. In questionnaire research the same questions are usually given to respondents in the same order so that the same information can be collected from every member of the sample.

Administering questionnaires

Questionnaires may be administered in a number of ways. Often they are given to individuals by interviewers, in which case they take the form of structured interviews. This method was used by Goldthorpe *et al.* (1968a, 1968b, 1969) in their affluent worker study, and by Young and Willmott in their survey of family life in London, conducted in 1970 (Young and Willmott, 1973). (See Chapter 8, pp. 529–31.) It was also used by Gordon Marshall and colleagues in their study of class (Marshall *et al.*, 1988), and in the ESRC *Social Change and Economic Life Initiative* (Scott, 1994) (see p. 729).

Structured interviews have the advantage of having a trained interviewer on hand to make sure that the questionnaire is completed according to the instructions and to clarify any ambiguous questions. But questionnaires administered by interviewers involve the problem of interviewer bias. This means that the responses given are influenced by the presence of the researcher. (See pp. 1006–7 for a discussion of interviewer bias.) In addition, this method is expensive compared to the following alternatives.

The postal questionnaire, as its name suggests, is mailed to respondents with a stamped addressed envelope for return to the researcher. It provides an inexpensive way of gathering data, especially if respondents are dispersed over a wide geographical area. The return rate, though, does not often exceed 50 per cent of the sample population and is sometimes below 25 per cent. This may seriously bias the results since there may be systematic differences between those who return questionnaires and those who do not. For example, the main response to a postal questionnaire on marital relationships might come from those experiencing marital problems and wishing to air their grievances. If most non-respondents were happily married, the researcher would be unjustified in making generalizations about married life on the basis of the returns.

A second way, and one that obtains a far higher return rate, is when questionnaires are administered to a group, such as a class of students or workers at a union meeting. This method is less expensive than dealing with individual respondents while maintaining the advantages of the presence of an interviewer. However, the interviewer must ensure that respondents do not discuss questions within the group since this might affect their answers.

A third way of administering a questionnaire is to ask the questions over the telephone. This is often done by market research firms or marketing departments of companies, but it is not usually regarded as satisfactory by sociologists. Unless the researcher specifically wants a sample of people who have a telephone, the sample is unlikely to be representative of the population being studied.

Producing questionnaires and analysing the data

Questionnaires tend to be used to produce quantitative data. Sometimes researchers may not have very clear hypotheses and will ask a wide range of questions on a topic. However, they must have some idea of what factors are important or interesting before they can start to construct a questionnaire.

In the process of choosing questions, researchers have to operationalize concepts. In other words abstract concepts have to be translated into concrete questions which make it possible to take measurements relating to those concepts. Sociologists classify the social world in terms of a variety of concepts. For instance, social class, power, family, religion, alienation and anomie are concepts used to identify and categorize social relationships, beliefs, attitudes and experiences which are seen to have certain characteristics in common. In order to transpose these rather vague concepts into measuring instruments, a number of steps are taken.

First, an operational definition is established. This involves breaking the concept down into various components or dimensions in order to specify exactly what is to be measured. Thus, when Robert Blauner (1964) attempted to operationalize the concept of alienation, he divided it into four components – powerlessness, meaninglessness, isolation and self-estrangement (see pp. 694–7). Similarly, when Gordon Marshall and colleagues (1988) operationalized the concept of class, they adopted the definitions of class categories used by E.O. Wright and John Goldthorpe (see pp. 111–17).

Once the concept has been operationally defined in terms of a number of components, the second step involves the selection of indicators for each

component. Thus an indicator of Blauner's component of powerlessness might be an absence of opportunities for workers to make decisions about the organization of work tasks. Marshall *et al.* selected indicators of class consciousness such as attitudes towards social inequality and towards industrial conflict.

Third, indicators of each dimension are put into the form of a series of questions that will provide quantifiable data for measuring each dimension. Thus indicators of class consciousness became questions such as 'Do you think the distribution of income and wealth is a fair one?' and 'Do you think there are any important issues which cause conflicts between those who run industry and those who work for them' (Marshall *et al.*, 1988).

Researchers have a number of choices to make during the process of operationalizing concepts in questionnaires. First they have to decide what form of question to ask.

Questions may be open-ended, such as: 'Under what circumstances do you think a person could move from one class to another?' Open-ended questions allow the respondents to compose their own answers rather than choosing between a number of given answers. This may be more likely to provide valid data since respondents can say what they mean in their own words. However, this kind of response might be difficult to classify and quantify. Answers must be interpreted carefully before the researcher is able to say, for example, that a certain percentage of respondents attribute good industrial relations to effective management, an efficient union, high pay or whatever.

A second type of question, sometimes known as a closed or fixed-choice question, requires a choice between a number of given answers. For example, the following question was asked to white people in Britain:

If a close relative were to marry an ethnic minority person would most white people -
Would not mind
Would mind a little
Would mind very much
Can't say

Modood *et al.*, 1997, p. 316

Sometimes the respondent is asked to choose between two stated alternatives. For example:

In the past there was a dominant class which largely controlled the economic and political system, and a lower class which had no control over economic or political affairs. Some people say that things are still like this, others say it has now changed. What do you think? Has it changed, or stayed the same?

Marshall *et al.*, 1988, pp. 294–5

A similar type of question requires the respondent to agree or disagree with a particular statement. For example:

A number of ideas have been put forward in order to overcome Britain's economic problems. (For each one indicate whether you agree or disagree.)
a. Leaving it to market forces to revive the economy.
b. Income policies which increase the wages of the low paid rather than the high paid.
c. Increasing income tax in order to increase welfare benefits.
d. Import controls to protect Britain from competition from abroad.
e. Increased taxes on the profits of successful companies in order to maintain jobs in declining industries.
f. Increased government spending to revive the economy.

Marshall *et al.*,, 1988, p. 293

Compared to the open-ended type, fixed-choice questions provide responses that can be more easily classified and quantified. It requires relatively little time, effort and ingenuity to arrive at statements describing the percentages of respondents who gave different answers. However, fixed-choice questions do not allow the respondent to qualify and develop their answers. It is therefore difficult for researchers to know exactly what they are measuring. For example, when respondents agree that there are issues which divide management and workers, it is not clear what the respondents think those issues are. They might be quite different to the sorts of issues the researchers think might be divisive. Other questions can be added to clarify what respondents mean, but some sociologists would argue that in-depth, unstructured interviews would be better than structured ones for determining the extent and strength of class consciousness.

If open-ended questions are used, and the researcher wants the data to be in a statistical form, it becomes necessary to code the answers. Coding involves identifying a number of categories into which answers can be placed. The researcher usually examines the answers given and establishes the principal types of answer that have been provided. Thus, in the *British Crime Survey* of 1998, the answers to an open-ended question on the reasons why people had not reported crimes were put into classifications such as: 'Too trivial', 'Police couldn't do anything', 'Dealt with ourselves', Dislike/fear of police', 'Inconvenient to report', 'Police would not be interested', 'Fear of reprisal', 'Reported to other authorities' and 'Other answers' (Mirrlees-Black *et al.*, 1998).

Once the data have been collected and classified, it is necessary to analyse them. In an explanatory

survey this often involves using multivariate analysis to determine the relationships between the variables. For example, in their study of educational achievement, A.H. Halsey and colleagues tried to measure the relative importance of cultural and material factors in producing educational success or failure (Halsey *et al.*, 1980) (see pp. 842–3 for further details).

Questionnaires are often designed to test a particular hypothesis. Goldthorpe *et al.* (1968a, 1968b, 1969) used questionnaires to test the embourgeoisement thesis; while Marshall *et al.* (1988) used them to test various theories of stratification. In such cases the data are analysed in relation to the hypotheses that are being tested. The analysis of data from descriptive or attitude surveys is often more straightforward. Sometimes it involves little more than statements about the percentages of respondents who gave particular replies.

The advantages of questionnaires

Questionnaire research is certainly a practical way to collect data. Although designing the questionnaire and carrying out pilot studies may take some time, once in use questionnaires can be used to collect large quantities of data from considerable numbers of people over a relatively short period of time. Thus Mack and Lansley (1985) in their initial study of poverty used a sample of 1,174 people (see pp. 300–3 for further details), while the *British Crime Survey* of 1998 (discussed on pp. 366–8) used a sample of 14,947 households (Mirrlees-Black *et al.*, 1998). Such large samples cannot be studied using more in-depth research methods without incurring prohibitive costs.

Even when questionnaires are administered by interviewers this involves relatively little personal involvement, or danger or sacrifice on the part of the researcher, when compared with some participant observation studies. The results of questionnaire research can be relatively easily quantified, and with the assistance of computers the data can be analysed quickly and efficiently. Using computers, the relationships between many different variables can be examined. Many sociological and other social science researchers use the *Statistical Package for Social Sciences* computer programme, which can rapidly produce complex statistical analyses.

To some quantitative researchers, however, the theoretical advantages are more important than the practical ones. Although relatively few sociologists today claim to be positivists, a considerable number support the use of quantitative data on the grounds that it can be analysed more 'scientifically' and objectively than qualitative data. Quantitative data can be considered more reliable than qualitative data. Since each individual respondent answers precisely the same questions in the same order, they are all responding to the same stimuli. Any differences in response should, in theory, reflect real differences between respondents. Furthermore the figures produced can be checked by other researchers, and their reliability should therefore be high.

Only when the data are quantified by means of reliable measuring instruments can the results of different studies be directly compared. Thus studies of British elections over several decades have produced data that can be used to determine changing patterns of voting and changing social attitudes within the British electorate. Heath, Jowell and Curtice (1985, 1994) in their two studies of British elections were able to use data from their own and other election studies to reveal ideological shifts in the electorate, and to check the claim that class was becoming less important in determining voting behaviour (see pp. 655–7 and 667–70 for details).

From a positivist point of view, statistical data from questionnaires can be analysed so that new theories can be produced. More typically, however, such data are used to test existing hypotheses, since the researcher must have a reasonably clear idea of the sort of information that is important before they set the questions. Whether questionnaires are used inductively (as in the former case) or deductively (as in the latter), they can be used to try to establish causal relationships through multivariate analysis. Ivor Crewe (1987a) used statistical data to check his theory that housing tenure, among other factors, had an influence on voting behaviour independent of social class (see p. 658). Many sociologists regard questionnaires as a suitable method for testing precise hypotheses in a rigorous manner: for example, Marshall *et al.* (1988) used questionnaire data to back up their claim that they had falsified the proletarianization thesis (see p. 69).

As has already been mentioned, questionnaire research can generally use larger samples than qualitative methods. For this reason, sociologists who have carried out a social survey tend to feel more justified in generalizing about a wider population than those who have carried out an in-depth study of a smaller number of people. This is particularly likely where a questionnaire is used in conjunction with sophisticated sampling techniques so that the researcher can be confident that the sample is representative. Researchers into such areas of social life as poverty, voting, crime and stratification, who have carried out social surveys using questionnaires, have not hesitated to make claims about the British population as a whole, not just those questioned during the research.

Despite the importance of the theoretical points discussed above, questionnaires are not just used by

positivists or those who strongly believe in the advantages of quantitative data. In many circumstances they are used when resources are limited and data are needed on large numbers of people. They are particularly useful when straightforward descriptive data are required. However, the validity of the statistical data, particularly when produced for explanatory surveys, has been questioned by some sociologists who advocate a more interpretive, qualitative approach. These criticisms will now be examined.

The disadvantages of questionnaires

Interpretive sociologists vary in their views on survey research and the data it produces. Weber's methodological position implies that such data can be one – but only one – of the types of data required in sociological research. Interactionists often see statistical data as inadequate for producing sociological explanations of human behaviour. Phenomenologists go further, for they see the data produced as an artificial creation of the researcher. Above all, critics argue that, despite the reliability of questionnaire data, it lacks validity. To phenomenologists in particular, the methodological assumptions on which questionnaires are based are entirely false. They put forward six main objections:

1 It cannot be assumed that different answers to the same question reflect real differences between respondents. However much care is taken with the wording of questions, respondents may interpret them differently. People who choose the same response may not mean the same thing. People who choose different responses may not mean different things. This may result from the wording of questions. For example, the word 'uptight' in low-income black American areas usually refers to a close relationship between friends, but when it entered the vocabulary of mainstream America it changed its meaning to anxious and tense. Even common words and phrases carry different associations for different groups. As Irwin Deutscher observes, 'Within a society, as well as between societies, the sociologist seeks information from and about people who operate verbally with different vocabularies, different grammars and different kinds of sounds' (Deutscher, 1977). Thus a questionnaire, which provides little opportunity to qualify meaning, might not provide comparable data when administered to members of different social groups.

2 In designing the questionnaire researchers assume that they know what is important. Respondents cannot provide information that is not requested, they cannot answer questions that are not asked. For this reason, it is difficult to develop hypotheses during the course of the research and researchers are limited to testing those theories that they have already thought of.

3 Questionnaire research involves the operationalization of concepts, and some interpretive sociologists argue that such procedures produce a distorted picture of the social world. The process of breaking down a concept so that it can be quantified imposes sociological constructs, categories and logic on the social world. Thus, when Blauner sought to measure alienation (see pp. 694–7) he employed a concept which might have had no reality in the social world he sought to understand. Indeed Blauner admits that: 'It is difficult to interpret a finding that 70 per cent of factory workers report satisfaction with their jobs because we do not know how valid or reliable our measuring instrument is' (Blauner, 1964). The workers were not allowed to reveal their attitudes to their work in their own way. As the phenomenologist Michael Phillipson observes, 'the instruments of the observer create the very order they are supposedly designed to reveal' (Phillipson, 1972).

4 The validity of the data may be reduced by the unwillingness or inability of respondents to give full and accurate replies to questions. Quite simply, respondents may lie. Attempts to check the accuracy of self-report studies on crime (see pp. 368–9) have found that some 20 per cent of respondents do not tell the truth. Even if respondents want to tell the truth they may be unable to do so because of faulty memory or because they lack the relevant information. Thus the *British Crime Surveys* may have underestimated the amount of unreported crime because victims may have been unaware or may have forgotten that they had been the victims of crime.

   Furthermore, even when respondents are honest, and not hampered by ignorance or forgetfulness, there are some types of questions where the validity of the answers can still be queried. This is particularly true of questions about attitudes. It cannot be assumed that stated attitudes will be translated into actual behaviour.

   For instance, in the 1930s La Pierre (1934) travelled to 251 establishments – such as restaurants, hotels and campsites – in the USA with two Chinese people. They were refused service or accommodation at only one of these places, yet when the same establishments were sent a questionnaire a few months later, only one said that they would accept Chinese customers.

   When observation or participant observation is used, the researcher relies less on respondents' accounts and may therefore have more chance of producing valid data.

5 A fifth reason for doubting the validity of questionnaire data is the distance maintained between the researcher and the subject of the research, particularly in the case of postal questionnaires. As Alan Bryman puts it:

> *The quantitative researcher adopts the posture of an outsider looking in on the social world. He or she applies a preordained framework on the subjects being investigated and is involved as little as possible in that world. This posture is the analogue of a detached scientific observer.*
>
> Bryman, 1988

To a positivist this approach encourages objectivity, but to an interpretive sociologist it precludes the possibility of understanding the meanings and motives of the subjects of the research. Unlike participant observation, the researcher does not undergo similar experiences to the subjects of the research, and so cannot draw so easily on experience to understand the behaviour of those being studied. Using questionnaires it is not possible to see how people act and react towards each other, nor is it possible to examine the way in which self-concepts change during the course of interaction. Interactionists in particular do not believe that the researcher can gain genuine insights into the subjective states underlying the behaviour of those being studied unless the researcher gets close to those they are studying.

Some feminists and critical social scientists also object to questionnaire research on similar grounds. They believe that it is important to involve the subjects of research in the research process. This has a number of advantages. It allows the subjects to contribute to evaluating the research; it allows the researcher to avoid exploiting them; and it enables the consciousness of exploitation to develop.

For example, Victor Jupp and Clive Norris comment that critical researchers in criminology have a 'theoretical and political aversion to the highly formal quantitative and positivist approaches of conventional criminology' (Jupp and Norris, 1993). They associate such methods with using data to control criminals and deviants, whereas their aims are more directed at liberating people from the controls which restrict them. They see this as better achieved through methods which are 'qualitative, naturalistic and non-positivist and include life-history and other informal interviews, observational methods, especially participant observation, case studies and social history research'.

6 Finally, when open-ended questions are used, and the researcher requires quantitative data, the coding of answers will take place. As in the operationalization of concepts this involves researchers imposing their own order on the data. The differences in the precise answers given to questions are glossed over as answers which are not identical are placed together in a single category. This process obscures the differences that do exist between the answers.

Questionnaire research – conclusions

Despite the strength of these criticisms it is increasingly accepted by most sociologists that there is a place for survey research in sociology. After all, there would be little point in carrying out participant observation or in-depth interviewing to discover the percentages of males and females who watched television every evening.

Furthermore, even some feminists believe that quantitative questionnaire research has its uses. For example, Toby Epstein Jayaratne (1993) points out that quantitative research, such as that which uses questionnaires, has been useful in documenting the extent of sexism in certain institutions. The critical social scientist Lee Harvey (1990) sees some questionnaire research (such as that undertaken by Goldthorpe *et al.*) as falling within the tradition of critical research.

It is usually when statistical data from questionnaires is used to try to establish causal relationships that opponents of quantitative research become most concerned about the validity of the data being used. However, such research does often provide useful data on social structures which may shape behaviour without individuals being aware of it. Thus studies of social class and social mobility produce findings about people's life chances which could not be produced using other methods (see pp. 97–105 for examples). When used alongside qualitative methods, questionnaire research can certainly make a crucial contribution towards developing as full a picture as possible of social life.

Interviews

Types of interview

Interviews take a number of forms depending upon how structured they are. A completely structured interview is simply a questionnaire administered by an interviewer who is not allowed to deviate in any way from the questions provided. The interviewer simply reads out the questions to the respondent. At the other extreme, a totally unstructured interview takes the form of a conversation where the interviewer has no predetermined questions. Most interviews fall somewhere between these two extremes.

Interviews of a more structured variety may allow the interviewer to probe the respondents' answers so that they can, if necessary, be clarified. The interviewer may also be allowed to prompt the interviewee, that is, give them extra guidance to help them answer the question. For example, Goldthorpe *et al.*'s team of researchers were able to prompt interviewees who could not decide how to answer a question about whether they had actively done anything to find a different job, by suggesting that they might have read job adverts in local newspapers (Goldthorpe *et al.*, 1968a).

In more unstructured interviews the conversation develops naturally, unless the respondent fails to cover an area in which the researcher is interested. Eventually the interviewer will direct the conversation back to the areas he or she wishes to cover. Marjorie DeVault, for example, in her study *Feeding the Family*, had some questions which she made sure every interviewee answered, but she also allowed them to talk freely around one general question. She

told them that she wanted to talk about 'all the housework that has to do with food: cooking, planning, shopping, cleaning up' (DeVault, 1991).

Some interviewers have a schedule of topics they wish to cover and they make sure that at some point the conversation comes back to these topics.

Some feminist researchers, such as Ann Oakley, are advocates of very unstructured interviews in which the researcher and person being interviewed become collaborators in the research and sometimes friends (see pp. 988–9). Critical social researchers also usually prefer unstructured interviewing.

As highly-structured interviews are very similar to questionnaires, the rest of our discussion of interviews will concentrate on interviews of a less structured variety.

Interviewing styles

Having a conversation with somebody is extremely common in human interaction, and it might be thought that interviewing requires no special preparation. However, the sociological researcher needs to overcome the problems of making contact with – and gaining the cooperation of – respondents. Having made contact, and persuaded a person to take part in the interview, the researcher then needs to try to ensure that the respondent gives full, honest and open answers.

Interviewers have used a variety of methods to make contact with respondents. They have telephoned in advance, written letters and turned up at interviewees' houses. At the initial point of contact it is important that the interviewers establish why they wish to carry out the interview and what the information is to be used for. They may also need to explain how the interviewee was selected and why they are suitable for research. Gavron (1966) used letters of introduction from the interviewee's doctor in order to establish contact. When she met them she explained the nature and purpose of her research.

The most common way of conducting interviews is to be non-directive: to refrain from offering opinions, to avoid expressions of approval and disapproval. Often an interviewer will spend some time trying to establish rapport or understanding between themselves and the interviewee. They may do this simply by talking informally before the interview proper starts. Once the interviewee feels that he or she is not going to be criticized or judged, that they can talk freely and can rely upon a sympathetic audience, it is hoped that they will talk with honesty and openness. Since the respondent does not have to answer the questions (and since they may be asked about private or personal aspects of their lives which they would not usually discuss with a stranger), it is often argued that non-directive interviewing is the most effective type of interviewing.

In contrast, Howard Becker suggests that interviewers may be inhibited by adopting this relatively passive approach and a 'bland, polite style of conversation' (Becker, 1970). He suggests that on certain occasions a more active and aggressive approach can provide much fuller data. This involves the interviewer taking 'positions on some issues' and using 'more aggressive conversational tactics'.

Becker adopted these tactics in his interviews with Chicago schoolteachers (discussed on p. 845). He claims that American schoolteachers believe they have a lot to hide from what they regard as a 'prying, misunderstanding, and potentially dangerous public'. They are therefore unlikely to volunteer certain information. By adopting an aggressive stance, being sceptical, and at times even pretending to be stupid, Becker managed to prise out much of this information. In particular, he claimed to have uncovered the ways that teachers categorized and evaluated students in terms of their class and ethnic backgrounds – information they would have preferred to have kept hidden for fear of being accused of prejudice and discrimination. Becker states: 'I coerced many interviewees into being considerably more frank than they had originally intended.'

Becker suggests that this approach is particularly useful for one-off interviews. Similar information can be picked up more subtly over a series of interviews without running the risk of antagonizing respondents. The apparent success of Becker's rather unorthodox tactics suggests that there is no one best way of interviewing.

Some sociologists who, like Becker, reject non-directive interviewing believe that interviewers should be empathetic towards interviewees rather than aggressive. Thus the feminist researcher Ann Oakley (1981), in her study of childbirth and childcare, became closely involved with the women she was studying. She advised them and sometimes even gave them help, and she encouraged them to become actively involved in the research process (see pp. 988–9 for details).

Individual and group interviews

It is normal for a single interviewer to interview a single respondent. This has a number of advantages. It may be easier to establish rapport, confidentiality can be ensured, and the respondent is not distracted or influenced by the presence of other interviewees. In some circumstances, though, sociologists have carried out group interviews.

For example, Paul Willis (1977), in his study of education, interviewed several of the 'lads' together

(see pp. 791–4 for further details). It can be argued that this might be more likely to produce valid data than a one-to-one interview. The lads' activities usually took place in a group context, and a group interview would reflect this. In group interviews Willis was able to observe interaction between the 'lads', and they felt more at ease than when talking alone to an older and middle-class interviewer.

James Holstein and Jaber Gubrium argue that group interviews are valuable because they 'allow diverse categorizations and sentiments to emerge, showing how participants flesh out, alter, or reconstruct viewpoints in response to challenges' (Holstein and Gubrium, 1995). They believe that having many voices present (which they call multivocality) broadens interviews and can make the participants more reflexive. They think more deeply about their answers and reflect critically upon them in their responses to others.

This view of interviewing is rather different to the view that sees interviews as simply uncovering the facts – as untainted by the interview process as possible. Instead it sees the interview as an active process in which knowledge is created through interaction. This type of group interview tends, therefore, to be favoured by interactionist, interpretive and critical sociologists.

A similar style of interview – the focus group – is also used by political parties who want more in-depth data on public opinion than that provided by opinion polls.

Interviews are not natural social situations. Some sociologists have sought ways to minimize the extent to which respondents may see them as artificial or unnatural, in the belief that this is essential for valid data to be obtained. Others believe that more valid data can be obtained by emphasizing and using the process of interaction that takes place within the interview.

The advantages of interviews

Interviews are seen as a useful research method by many different types of sociologist. Although they represent something of a compromise between more structured research methods like questionnaires and the more in-depth methods such as participant observation, they can be adapted to suit both the practical needs and theoretical preferences of different sociologists.

Those who support the use of more quantitative methods tend to prefer interviews to participant observation. Compared to participant observation, interviews can utilize larger samples, so generalizations are more justified. With some coding of responses it is possible to produce statistical data from interviews, and it is easier to replicate the research and check results. Because there is usually some degree of structure in an interview it is easier to make direct comparisons than it is by using data from participant observation.

To sociologists who prefer more qualitative methods, interviews have clear advantages over questionnaires. The concepts and words used by interviewer and interviewee alike can be clarified; the researchers' concepts are less likely to be imposed on the social world; issues can be explored in greater depth; and the researcher does not limit the responses to fixed choices. For these reasons interviews can be useful for generating new hypotheses and theories which the researcher would not otherwise have thought of.

For example, when Elizabeth Bott (1971) started her interviews with 20 families in her investigation into conjugal roles, she had not considered the possibility that friendship networks might affect the type of conjugal relationship that developed. Had she been using questionnaires she would not have included the questions that would have been necessary to discover the information which she needed to formulate her theory.

The above arguments, though, do not explain why sociologists should sometimes choose to use interviews in preference to all other research methods. They are not as reliable as questionnaires and they are not as likely to produce valid data as participant observation. A major reason for the widespread use of interviews is their sheer practicality. There is no other method which allows access to so many different groups of people and different types of information. As Ackroyd and Hughes put it:

> *Using as data what the respondent says about himself or herself potentially offers the social researcher access to vast storehouses of information. The social researcher is not limited to what he or she can immediately perceive or experience, but is able to cover as many dimensions and as many people as resources permit.*
>
> Ackroyd and Hughes, 1981

In short, interviews are more flexible than any other research method. They can be used to extract simple factual information from people. They can be used to ask people about their attitudes, their past, present or future behaviour, their motives, feelings and other emotions that cannot be observed directly. Interviewers can explore each question or issue in as much depth or superficiality as they wish. The range of information available from interviews can be demonstrated from the following examples.

In their study of schizophrenia R.D. Laing and A. Esterson (1970) used in-depth interviews to study the past behaviour and emotional states of people with schizophrenia and their families (see pp. 510–12). The family is such a small and closed social grouping that participant observation is almost impossible without changing the family's behaviour.

Howard Becker (1963) used interviews to study 50 marijuana smokers. Via interviews he was able to try to explore the whole of the 'deviant career' of the drug users, from the time they first tried the drug to when they became regular users involved with a subculture of marijuana smokers. Interviewing allowed Becker to discuss the motives and circumstances that led to them trying the drug and continuing to use it.

Interviews are often used to carry out research into groups who might not otherwise consent to being the subject of research. Laurie Taylor (1984) could only produce data about professional crime in Britain because he was able to gain the trust of the criminals he interviewed. Clearly, participant observation would have been out of the question, and he would have been unlikely to have obtained a satisfactory response rate using postal questionnaires. Furthermore, because of Taylor's lack of familiarity with professional criminals he might have had difficulty deciding what questions to ask them. Once again, the flexibility and practicality of interviews are evident. Similar comments are applicable to the studies of criminal networks by Dick Hobbs and Colin Dunninghan (1998) (see pp. 406–7), which used life-history interviews with professional criminals connected with one particular locality.

Apart from their practicality, there are some theoretical advantages to interviews compared with other methods. From the viewpoint of some feminist and critical researchers, interviews allow close collaboration between interviewer and interviewee so that they can become partners in the research. Interviews allow the opportunity for critical reflection by all those involved, so that they can examine and sometimes change the perspectives through which they see the world. This is important for critical researchers, whose objective is to change the social world. Such opportunities may not always be possible in participant observation studies where the flow of social life limits time for reflection. Some sociologists have gone as far as arguing that the interviewing process itself creates new knowledge rather than just revealing data that was previously present in the interviewees' heads (Holstein and Gubrium, 1995).

The disadvantages of interviews

Stephen Ackroyd and John A. Hughes have observed that:

> *The foundations of interviewing are to be found in the mundane observation that people can report on what they feel, tell others about aspects of their lives, disclose what their hopes and fears are, offer their opinions, state their beliefs, answer questions about who they see regularly, what they did last week, how much they spend on food, and so on, to put it simply they can impart masses of information about themselves.*
>
> Ackroyd and Hughes, 1981

The problem is that these masses of information may be neither valid nor reliable. Interviews have many of the same drawbacks as questionnaires: the responses given may not be accurate and may not reflect real behaviour. Respondents may lie, may forget, or may lack the information required.

To give a simple example, some of the criminals interviewed by Laurie Taylor (1984) later claimed that they had made up fanciful stories about their escapades in order to see how gullible Taylor was.

However, even if respondents are not handicapped by forgetfulness or ignorance, and have no wish to deceive, they may still not give valid answers. As critics of questionnaire data have pointed out, interviewees may not act in accordance with their stated beliefs. When reflecting on past events they may alter their interpretation in the light of subsequent experience. Because interviews are artificial, Cicourel has asked whether they 'capture the daily life, conditions, opinions, values, attitudes, and knowledge base of those we study as expressed in their natural habitat' (quoted in Bryman, 1988).

David Matza's work on delinquents in the USA can illustrate the sort of problem that arises with interview data (Matza, 1964) (see pp. 361–3 for further details). Matza interviewed 100 delinquents in training school and found that a surprisingly large number of them disapproved of most crimes. Matza concluded that delinquents did not, on the whole, strongly reject society's values. Critics, however, have pointed out that, apart from the question of how truthful the delinquents were, Matza failed to take account of the possibility that they had modified their views as a result of their punishment. At the time of their offences they may have regarded the laws they were breaking contemptuously and only later did they change their minds.

Interviewees may also be influenced by the presence of the researcher. The answers given may be influenced by the way the interviewees define the situation. William Labov (1973), for instance, found

that young black American children responded differently when interviewed in different contexts.

Interviewed by a white interviewer in a formal setting, the children said little when asked to describe a toy jet plane. This type of evidence had led some psychologists to conclude that these children were linguistically deprived and that this deprivation contributed to their failure in education. However, Labov produced evidence to show that the apparent linguistic deprivation was the result of interviewing techniques and not a genuine reflection of the children's linguistic ability. When the children were interviewed by a black interviewer in a formal setting they were more forthcoming. When the children sat on the floor with the interviewer, and they were able to bring their best friend with them, they opened up and became fluent and articulate.

Labov argued that when children defined the situation as hostile they were unable to demonstrate their real abilities. When they defined the situation as friendly they were able to give a much better account of themselves. Clearly such factors as the age, skin colour, sex, clothing and accent of the interviewer may affect the interviewees' definition of the interview, and so affect their behaviour.

A further problem with unstructured interviews is that there is more opportunity for the interviewer (usually without realizing it) to direct the interviewee towards giving certain types of response. Consciously or unconsciously, respondents might give the sort of answers that they believe the interviewer wants to hear, rather than saying what they truly believe. This problem is known as interviewer bias. It can never be totally eliminated from interview research simply because interviews are interaction situations.

Interviewer bias is demonstrated in a study conducted by Stuart A. Rice in 1914 (discussed in Deming, 1971). Two thousand destitute men were asked, among other things, to explain their situation. There was a strong tendency for those interviewed by a supporter of Prohibition to blame their decline on alcohol; but those interviewed by a committed socialist were much more likely to explain their plight in terms of the industrial situation. The interviewers apparently had their own views on the reasons for destitution, which they communicated to the respondents.

In order to conduct an interview successfully and interpret the responses correctly the interviewer must also be aware of the social conventions of those being interviewed. For example, certain activities may be regarded as more 'socially desirable' by members of one group than by members of another. As a result there may be differences between social groups in terms of their members' willingness to admit to particular activities.

The importance of this can be seen from a study conducted by Bruce Dohrenwend in New York to investigate the relationship between mental health and ethnicity (discussed in Phillips, 1971). Respondents were asked whether or not they had experienced a list of symptoms associated with mental illness. Compared with Jews, Irish and blacks, Puerto Ricans reported experiencing more of the symptoms and therefore appeared to have a higher rate of mental illness. Yet Dohrenwend found that the symptoms were regarded as less undesirable by Puerto Ricans than by members of the other ethnic groups. As a result they were more ready to admit to them. Such findings cast serious doubt on the validity of interview data and therefore on the use to which those data are put.

Interviews – conclusion

In all research methods the procedures used by the researcher influence the sort of data produced. Interviews are no exception. Nigel Fielding (1993b) argues that there are three main perspectives on the merits of interview data:

1 Positivists believe that interviews can produce valid and fairly reliable data so long as standardized interviews are used and care is taken to avoid interviewers letting their own views become known to interviewees. The greater the detachment and impartiality of the researcher, the more valid and reliable the data will be.

2 Symbolic interactionists, on the other hand, recognize 'No clear-cut distinction between research interviews and other forms of social action ... For interactionists, the data are valid when a deep mutual understanding has been achieved between interviewer and respondent.' From this viewpoint, the interactive nature of interviews helps the production of valid knowledge, rather than gets in the way.

3 From the viewpoint of ethnomethodologists, interviews 'do not report on an external reality displayed in respondents' utterances but on the internal reality constructed as both parties contrive to produce the appearance of a recognisable interview'. Interviews then become the objects of study rather than sources of data.
Ethnomethodologists can study them to reveal the informal tacit understandings which shape the way interviews are conducted.

A fourth perspective – that of critical researchers and feminists – is not mentioned by Fielding. It can be argued that this perspective comes close to that of interactionists. However, in addition, critical and feminist researchers also see interviews as an opportunity for interviewers and interviewees to see through the ideologies of social life, to reflect together on the social world being studied, and,

ultimately, to begin to change that reality so that it becomes less exploitative.

Despite the problems associated with interviews, they are unlikely to be abandoned as sources of data by sociological researchers. As the above perspectives suggest, they can be adapted to fit the theoretical preferences of different sociologists. Furthermore, as David Silverman points out, conversations are an integral part of social life, and as one of the main ways in which people communicate they are invaluable as a way of trying to understand society. Silverman says:

> *They offer a rich source of data which provides access to how people account for their troubles and good fortunes. Human beings can never fully see the world through the eyes of another person, but talking to other people can certainly provide insights into their perspectives on social life. Perhaps only through participant observation can researchers develop greater insights.*
>
> Silverman, 1985

Observation and participant observation

Observation

All sociological research involves observation of some sort. The use of observation is not confined to researchers advocating any particular methodological approach. Thus positivists believe that the social world can be objectively observed, classified and measured. Observation has also been frequently used by qualitative social researchers: numerous interactionist sociologists have observed interaction in the classroom when studying education. Similarly, in studying suicide, the ethnomethodologist J. Maxwell Atkinson (1978) observed the process of decision making in coroners' courts. However, there are limits to the situations in which social life can be observed in 'natural' settings without affecting the validity of the data produced.

There are a considerable number of social situations in which the presence of an observer is prohibited, or is unlikely to be allowed. Sociologists who study politics are not allowed to observe the deliberations of the British Cabinet, nor can they observe private conversations between members of the government and their senior officials. Sociologists interested in family life are unlikely to be allowed to observe interaction between married couples in the bedroom, nor is it likely that sociologists who study work will be able to observe the board meetings of large companies.

Even when observation is allowed, the researcher's presence might alter the behaviour of those being observed to such an extent that the data is of little use. In small, closely-knit social units such as families the observed can hardly be expected to act naturally with an observer present.

Despite this, in certain situations sociologists might judge that some useful and valid data can still be produced. For example, in his study of secondary schooling, David Hargreaves (1967) found that some teachers he observed altered their behaviour considerably. Some refused to talk to the class as a whole when he was present. But others appeared to carry on as normal, and Hargreaves believed that some of his data were therefore valid (see p. 848 for further details of Hargreaves's study). In such situations the longer the researcher observes, the more likely those being studied are to forget about his or her presence, and the more likely they are to act naturally.

Given the danger that the researcher will influence those being studied, valid data can most reasonably be expected to result when the presence of passive outsiders is quite normal. Thus, in courtrooms, in the Visitors' Gallery of the House of Commons, or on the terraces at a football match, a sociological researcher is able to blend into the background without any great difficulty. In other circumstances it may be necessary for the observer to get involved in the activities of those being studied. To be accepted, she or he will have to become a participant observer.

Ethnography and participant observation

Ethnography is the study of a way of life. It was first introduced into the social sciences by anthropologists who studied small-scale, pre-industrial societies. Bronislaw Malinowski's study of the Trobriand Islands (Malinowski, 1954) (pp. 433–4) is an example of an ethnographic study. Anthropologists increasingly recognized the need to get as close as possible to the societies they were investigating. More recently, the same approach has been applied to the study of groups within industrial society.

Ethnography can take various forms and is used by sociologists of different types. It is widely used by symbolic interactionists, and critical ethnography is a common type of study amongst critical social scientists (see pp. 1013–14). Ethnography can use different qualitative research methods, but the most common are in-depth interviews, participant observation, and the use of qualitative documents. It may also involve collecting some quantitative data. However, participant observation is often the most important single method used in ethnographic studies.

As a means for gathering data, participant observation has a long history in sociology. It has been used by researchers with widely differing theoretical perspectives. As such it is a research technique that has been adapted to meet the require-

ments of sociologists with various views on the nature of social reality. However, it has been particularly associated with the work of symbolic interactionists such as Herbert Blumer, Howard Becker and Erving Goffman. This method became widely employed in the USA in the 1960s and since then has been regarded by many sociologists as the most appropriate way of obtaining qualitative data.

Joining the group, collecting and recording the data

One of the most important decisions that participant observers have to make is how to approach the social group they wish to join. Researchers may decide to be an overt participant observer, where they declare their true identity and purpose, or a covert participant observer, where the fact that they are a researcher is not revealed. Sometimes researchers choose to be partially open but do not provide those being studied with the full story.

Some researchers strongly advocate being open from the start, arguing that it is both morally and practically the best way to carry out participant observation. The American sociologist Ned Polsky, in his study of *Hustlers, Beats and Others* (1967), suggests that it is morally correct to be truthful, and that the research can easily be ruined if the covert participant observer is uncovered. Another advantage is that the open researcher may be able to avoid participation in distasteful, immoral, or illegal behaviour. (For example, Howard Parker (1974), when studying Liverpool delinquents, could refuse to take part in the theft of car radios without damaging his relationship with the people he was studying.)

Furthermore, the researcher is free to ask questions without arousing suspicion. In a study of female sexuality and its relationship to masculinity among a group of students at a further education college, Beverley Skeggs was open about her research and argued that her 'age, clothing, attitude and marginal status as a part-time teacher enabled the students not to see me as part of the establishment' (Skeggs, 1991).

Sometimes researchers are less open without actually lying to those they are studying. William Foote Whyte (1955), in a classic study of an Italian American slum, simply described himself as a writer without elaborating further. Ken Pryce (1979), in his study of the West Indian community in Bristol, found that he could be quite open with some of the groups, but with others (such as those engaged in illegal activities) he had to be more guarded.

The main disadvantage of being open is that it may affect the behaviour of those being studied. 'Doc', one of the key members of the street-corner gang studied by Whyte, said to him, 'You've slowed me up plenty since you've been down here. Now, when I do something, I would have to think that Bill Whyte would want to know about it and how to explain it. Before I used to do things by instinct' (Whyte, 1955). The knowledge that they are being observed can influence people's behaviour as they become more self-conscious and think about their actions.

An obvious advantage of covert participant observation is that the members of the group being studied are not likely to change their behaviour as a result of being studied, since they are kept in ignorance of the fact that they are being observed for research purposes. Some studies may not be possible without participant observation being covert, either because the group would change its behaviour too much, or because the researcher would not be allowed to join in the first place.

For example, Jason Ditton (1977) wanted to study thefts by bread van salesmen during the course of their work. Clearly the salesmen might have become much more cautious if they knew that they were being observed; indeed they might have stopped stealing altogether. Nigel Fielding (1993a) argues that he would not have been able to conduct his study of the National Front (a very right-wing and racist political party in Britain) without conducting covert research, because of the members' hostility to sociology. Another researcher, who called himself 'James Patrick', had to keep even his name secret as he feared for his personal safety when studying violent Glasgow gangs (Patrick, 1973). Similarly, William Chambliss (1978) needed to maintain secrecy when conducting a study of organized crime in Seattle (see pp. 383–4). Researchers have also had to keep their work secret when studying such groups as the Masons and certain religious sects.

If secrecy is maintained, then the researcher has little choice but to become a full participant in the group. However, if the researcher is open, there is an element of choice in the degree of involvement. Some researchers remain fairly detached. Others become much more involved. Ken Pryce found himself going to clubs and blues dances, drinking with and talking to local residents well past midnight during his study of West Indian life in Bristol (Pryce, 1979).

Becoming too much of a participant can cause difficulties. In particular the researcher may have the problem of 'going native'. They may become so much a part of the group that they are unable to stand back and analyse the situation objectively. Nigel Fielding argues that, in collecting data, 'One must maintain a certain detachment in order to take that data and interpret it.' On the other hand, those who experience this problem have at least achieved complete acceptance by the group and they may well have a true insider's view. Perhaps the most complete insider's view can be provided by those who become

sociological researchers, and use their own experiences as a source of data. Simon Holdaway (1983) was a police officer for a number of years before becoming a sociologist, and could genuinely claim to provide a view from *Inside the British Police.*

The more detached participant observer can perhaps be more objective, but may not understand the behaviour of those being studied quite as well. Fielding comments that there can be a problem in some overt research of '"not getting close enough", of adopting an approach which is too superficial and which merely provides a veneer of plausibility for an analysis to which the researcher is already committed'. In other words the researcher avoids risking challenging their own preconceived ideas by not digging too deeply into the social world of those being studied. However, very often the researcher cannot predict how involved they will become. It depends to some extent upon how much rapport they build up with the subjects of their research.

To be successful, the participant observer must gain the trust of those observed. In his study of black 'street-corner' men in Washington DC (see pp. 321–2), Elliot Liebow (1967) had to win over Tally, the leader of the group. Only when Liebow had gained Tally's trust did Tally admit that he had lied to him at the start of their acquaintance.

The close and relatively long-lasting relationships established through participant observation provide greater opportunities for developing trust than are provided by other research techniques. Interviews and questionnaire surveys usually involve one-off, short-lived encounters. Particularly with groups such as low-income blacks and teenage gangs, a relationship of trust is necessary to secure cooperation. As Lewis Yablonsky notes from his research on teenage gangs, 'Their characteristic response to questionnaires investigating the gang's organization or personal activities is one of suspicion and distrust. To the gang boy every researcher could be a "cop"' (Yablonsky, 1973). In this type of situation participant observation is more likely to provide valid data than other research techniques.

Once the researcher has entered the group and gained its trust, he or she must then go about collecting the data and recording it. Much of this involves watching and waiting, and taking part where necessary, but some participant observers have supplemented the data gained in this way with some interviewing. This has the advantage of allowing the researcher to request the precise information required, without waiting for it to crop up in normal conversation. It is obviously only possible where the research is overt. Whyte (1955) used interviews with a 'key informant', 'Doc', to gain most of the background information required. Pryce (1979) made extensive use of formal and informal interviews.

Recording the data from interviews can be relatively straightforward: Pryce used a tape recorder. Recording data from participant observation is more difficult. Tape recorders would probably inhibit the natural behaviour of those being studied. Taking notes could have a similar effect, and may in any case be impracticable. Most researchers have to opt for the best means available: committing what has taken place to memory, and writing it down as soon as possible. Ditton (1977) used to retire to the lavatory to take notes in private. Pryce had to wait until he got home. He said:

> *I had to rely heavily on memory, my method was to write down these observations as soon as possible after hearing or observing them. The rule of thumb I constantly exercised was to record them while they were still fresh in my mind, generally the same day ... I believe most of the information I recorded in this way was fairly accurate, if not accurate word for word, accurate in tone, flavour and in the emotions expressed.*
>
> Pryce, 1979

Not all sociologists, though, would accept Pryce's claim.

The advantages of participant observation

Supporters of participant observation have argued that, compared to other research techniques, it is least likely to lead to sociologists imposing their reality on the social world they seek to understand. It therefore provides the best means of obtaining a valid picture of social reality.

With a structured interview (a predetermined set of questions which the interviewee is requested to answer) or a questionnaire (a set of printed questions to which the respondent is asked to provide written answers) sociologists have already decided what is important. With preset questions they impose their framework and priorities on those they wish to study. By assuming that the questions are relevant to the respondents they have already made many assumptions about their social world.

Although participant observers begin the work with some preconceived ideas (for example, they will usually have studied the existing literature on the topic to be investigated), at least they have the opportunity to directly observe the social world.

The value of this opportunity is clear from Whyte's observations: 'As I sat and listened, I learned the answers to questions I would not have had the sense to ask if I had been getting my information solely on an interviewing basis' (Whyte, 1955). Intensive observation over a period of years provided Whyte with a picture of what was important in the lives of the Italian Americans he

studied. Without this exposure to their daily routine he would have remained ignorant of many of their priorities. Had he relied solely on interviews, this ignorance would have prevented him from asking important and relevant questions.

Liebow was particularly concerned about the danger of distorting the reality he wished to observe. He states that, from the outset of his research, 'there were by design, no firm presumptions of what was or was not relevant' (Liebow, 1967). He did his best simply to look and listen and to avoid any preconceptions of what was or was not important. Liebow chose participant observation because he believed that the method would provide a 'clear, firsthand picture' of the 'life of ordinary people, on their grounds and on their terms'. By observing what was said and done, where, when and by whom, he hoped to discover how a group of black street-corner men saw and organized their lives. Liebow claims that 'Taking this inside view makes it easier to avoid structuring the material in ways that might be alien to the material itself.'

In participant observation, it is also more difficult for the people being studied to lie or mislead the researcher than it is in other research methods. The researcher is on the spot and witnesses actual behaviour rather than relying upon people's accounts of their lives.

Where the researcher gains data from talking to those being studied, the validity of the data may be greater than in informal interviews. For example, the feminist researcher Beverley Skeggs argues that she was able to obtain valid data on the sexuality of young women because of the closeness of the relationship she developed with them. She says:

> *Their comments on their own sexual responses came from small soirées in my flat or their bedrooms. The discussions often became so intimate and animated that I think the idea that they were speaking for research purposes became lost in the desire to discuss contentious issues in a safe situation.*
>
> Skeggs, 1991, p. 128

Participant observation is a particularly appropriate method for symbolic interactionists because it allows an understanding of the world from the subjective point of view of the subjects of the research. Because researchers experience many of the same events as the observed, they are better able to put themselves in their position and to understand why they interact with others in particular ways.

Pryce felt that participant observation allowed him to understand and explain the subjective views of some West Indians in Bristol. He said, 'There is a tendency to either ignore or disregard the subjective feelings of members of the West Indian minority.' One of those subjective feelings was the belief of some that there was no point in trying to earn a living through ordinary employment, which was dismissed as 'slave labour' and 'shit work' (Pryce, 1979).

Howard Parker (1974) also believed that he could see the world through the eyes of those he studied – he felt justified in calling his book *View from the Boys.*

Interactionists believe that behaviour is largely governed by the self-concept held by an individual. Self-concepts are not fixed and static, but change during the course of interaction. Similarly, the meanings people attach to their own behaviour change as the context in which that behaviour takes place alters. Participant observation studies are often carried out over an extended period of time and it is therefore possible to study the process through which such changes happen.

This can be illustrated by Jock Young's study of marijuana smokers in Notting Hill (Young, 1971). He found that the behaviour, the meaning attached to that behaviour, and the self-concepts of those involved altered in response to police attempts to discourage marijuana smoking. The drug users in the area became more secretive, attached more importance to taking the drug, and in response to what they saw as persecution they saw themselves as being in opposition to some of society's values. (For further details, see p. 374.) Such changes and the way they came about would have been difficult to identify and explain on the basis of interview or questionnaire data.

Many interactionists see observation or participant observation as the best means of studying interaction. Much interaction takes place almost instinctively, and those involved cannot be expected to recall precise details if asked in an interview. Furthermore, it is difficult for complete participants to be detached and objective when discussing their relationships with others. It is easier, for example, for an outsider to comment on group relationships. Parker (1974) was able to describe in detail the relationships between members of delinquent gangs he studied. In St Paul's, Pryce (1979) was able to distinguish a number of different subcultures which a resident of the area might not have been fully aware of.

Critics of participant observation argue (as will be discussed later) that the findings of such studies lack objectivity, that they are unreliable and depend too much upon the interpretations of the observer. Defenders of this research method generally believe that these objections can be overcome, and that participant observation can be made sufficiently systematic to be regarded as being a reliable as well as valid research method.

Finally, participant observation provides in-depth studies that can serve a number of useful purposes. In particular, participant observation is useful for generating new hypotheses. Rather like unstructured interviews, participant observation can go in unexpected directions and so can provide sociologists with novel insights and ideas. Although less useful for testing hypotheses, because the type of data produced is not entirely under the control of the researcher, it may be useful for falsifying theories. Thus Parker's study of British delinquents (Parker, 1974) could be used to test how far Albert Cohen's explanation of American delinquency (see pp. 357–8) is applicable to Britain.

The limitations and disadvantages of participant observation

Participant observation has many practical disadvantages. It is often very time-consuming. Cicourel (1976) spent four years studying juvenile justice in California. Beverley Skeggs (1997) spent a total of 12 years conducting ethnographic research following the lives of women who had been on a 'caring' course at a further education college in England.

The researcher can usually only study a very small group of people and has to be physically present for the research to proceed. In personal terms such research may be highly inconvenient and demanding. The researcher may be required to move house, to live in an area they would not otherwise choose, and to mix with people they would rather avoid. They may find it necessary to engage in activities they dislike in order to fit in with the group, and they may even face personal danger. 'James Patrick' left Glasgow in a hurry when the gang violence began to sicken him and he felt concerned for his own safety (Patrick, 1973).

There are also limits on who can be studied using this method. Higher-class and more powerful groups in society, in particular, may exclude participant observers. Individual researchers may lack the skills, knowledge or personality to be accepted by a particular group.

More serious, though, are the theoretical objections that have been raised.

First, to quantitative researchers, the samples used in participant observation are too small and untypical for generalizations to be made on the basis of the findings. Any conclusions can only apply to the specific group studied. Thus Pryce (1979) would not have been justified in making generalizations about all West Indians in Britain on the basis of a study of Bristol.

Second, such studies cannot be replicated, so the results cannot be checked. It is therefore difficult to compare the results with the findings of other studies. The data from participant observation rely upon the particular interpretations of a single individual, and are specific to a particular place and time.

Cicourel (1976) admits that his participant observation study relied heavily upon his own observational and interpretive skills. If the reader has little faith in Cicourel's skills, then he or she will have little reason to accept his findings. It is quite possible that a different researcher would have reached quite different conclusions. As Whyte admits, 'To some extent my approach must be unique to myself, to the particular situation, and to the state of knowledge existing when I began research' (Whyte, 1955).

Moreover the account of social life produced by participant observation is the result of a highly selective method of data collection. The participant observer usually records only a small fraction of all possible data that he or she could have used. The observer selects what to record and what to omit and imposes a framework upon the data in the process of interpreting it. Martyn Hammersley points out that an ethnographer could have produced many different descriptions of the same setting. He says, 'there are multiple, non-contradictory, true descriptions of any phenomenon' (Hammersley, 1992). In this situation it may be difficult to accept a particular researcher's description as reflecting anything more than a personal perspective.

A third theoretical objection is that the validity of the data is bound to be affected by the presence of the researcher, since the group being studied will not act naturally. This point is rejected by many participant observers. Whyte, for example, felt that eventually he was able to blend into the background so that social life carried on as normal around him.

To critics – particularly those who support the use of positivist methods – participant observation is simply 'unscientific'. It is not systematic or rigorous, its findings cannot be checked, the research cannot be replicated, it is a subjective rather than objective research method. However, some interactionist sociologists have suggested that this sort of qualitative research need not lack rigour.

Glaser and Strauss (1967) claim that qualitative research can be used to generate and refine what they called grounded theory. The whole process of collecting and analysing qualitative data can be systematic. Theories can be produced which are grounded in the data and in the real social world. In the early stages the researcher starts to develop categories and then further data are collected to see if they fit with these categories. Hypotheses begin to emerge as the initial hunches of the researcher are backed up or refuted by the data that is being produced. Causal explanations can be produced, and may be tested in follow-up studies.

Becker (1970) showed how this sort of approach can be used when he was studying the behaviour of medical students. From observing the behaviour and listening to the comments of medical students he began to distinguish between 'cynical' and 'idealistic' attitudes to medicine. In the former case, patients tended to be regarded as little more than animated visual teaching aids; in the latter, as human beings whose pain and suffering the students felt a duty to relieve. Having found that these categories seemed to work, Becker went on to observe how often and in what circumstances the students were cynical or idealistic. Noting that students tended to be idealistic when talking to other students, Becker advanced the hypothesis that 'Students have "idealist" sentiments' but 'group norms may not sanction their expression'. Becker says that it is perfectly possible to check the hypotheses produced by participant observation, and that this research method need not be unsystematic. He says of participant observation that 'the technique consists of something more than merely immersing oneself in data and having "insights"'.

In a book edited by Anslem Strauss and Juliet Corbin (1997) a range of individual studies apply grounded theory to research on topics as diverse as understanding chronic pain, cancer research, the activities of headhunting companies, abusive relationships and contemporary Japanese society.

However, writers such as Hammersley still question the ability of ethnographic research to develop theoretical understanding. Hammersley says, 'Grounded theorising seeks both to represent concrete situations in their complexity and to produce abstract theory. It thus operates under conflicting requirements' (Hammersley, 1992).

Descriptive accounts can concentrate on the unique features of a particular social situation, but developing theory does require making some generalization beyond the setting being studied. According to Hammersley this is only possible if a number of cases are studied to see whether they conform to a theory. Yet very few ethnographers have even attempted to compare a range of case studies using ethnographic methods, and those who have done so generally rely upon interviews rather than participant observation.

Furthermore, Hammersley believes that the claim of some ethnographers that they are developing theories 'presupposes that there are scientific laws of human social life ... Yet few ethnographers today believe there are such laws.' To Hammersley, then, there is little basis for arguing that ethnography can be used to develop theory. However, this position is totally rejected by advocates of critical ethnography.

Critical ethnography

Critical ethnography is the sort of ethnography advocated by supporters of critical social science (see pp. 982–6). Unlike Hammersley, critical ethnographers believe that ethnography can be used both to develop and to test theories, including theories that examine the structure of society as a whole.

Paul Willis's study of the transition from school to work among a group of working class 'lads' is sometimes seen as the first example of a critical ethnography (Willis, 1977) (see pp. 791–4). Willis relied largely upon data from interviews, but often other critical ethnographers have made use of participant observation and other methodologies.

Since Willis's study there have been numerous examples of critical ethnographies. These include Sallie Westwood's study of female factory workers (Westwood, 1984), Beverley Skeggs's study of working-class women who had been to a further education college (Skeggs, 1997), and Mairtan Mac an Ghaill's study of the development of masculinity in an English state secondary school (Mac an Ghaill, 1994).

As discussed earlier in the chapter, critical social scientists believe that research should involve close collaboration between researchers and their subjects; that studying oppressed groups can help to reveal the hidden and oppressive structures of unequal societies; and that research can be instrumental in changing society. Steven Jordan and David Yeomans (1995) see critical ethnography as providing a way for researchers to understand the way oppression is experienced by the oppressed by sharing some of the same experiences. Carspecken argues that critical ethnographers are 'concerned about social inequalities, and we direct our work towards positive social change'. He goes on: 'We use our research, in fact, to refine social theory rather than merely to describe social life' (Carspecken, 1996).

Mairtan Mac an Ghaill's study *The Making of Men* (1994) illustrates the main features of critical ethnography. Mac an Ghaill tries to develop theories of masculinity (particularly those of R.W. Connell, discussed on pp. 191–6) by studying 11 heterosexual young men in a British state secondary school in the Midlands, and a second group of homosexual young men from a range of educational institutions in the same area. He tries to use elements of feminist methodology and argues for an approach to research based on 'collaboration, reciprocity and reflexivity'.

Mac an Ghaill tries to use the research process to challenge the assumption that heterosexuality is preferable to homosexuality, and he also encourages the young men to question dominant ideas on what makes you a true man. For example, he discusses with the homosexual students the way in which

conventional ideas of masculinity largely prevent emotional closeness between men. In the course of his research he seems to have some success in encouraging the gay students to positively value their conceptions of masculinity, rather than being defensive in the face of hostility from heterosexuals. The study tries to relate changes in conceptions of masculinity to changes in the British education system and in the wider society.

An evaluation of critical ethnography

As with grounded theory and critical social research in general, Martyn Hammersley (1992) is hostile to critical ethnography. As discussed above, he sees problems in basing research around the concept of oppression and he questions the belief that the validity of theories can be checked by the subjects of research. However, some critical ethnographers have tried to develop rigorous approaches that overcome the sorts of objections commonly directed at this research method. One such approach has been developed by Patti Lather (1986).

Lather accepts that critical ethnography can sometimes be criticized for using circular arguments. The ethnographic description is used both for developing theory and for testing it. Experience comes to be interpreted in terms of the theory, yet the experience is also used to confirm the theory. To break out of the circle Lather recommends four procedures:

1 Triangulation involves the use of different research methods to cross-check the validity of the data. Thus, for example, participant observation can be used to check the validity of data gained from interviews (see pp. 1022–3 for a discussion of triangulation).
2 Construct validity involves a 'ceaseless confrontation with and respect for the experiences of people in their daily lives to avoid theoretical imposition' (Lather, 1986). From Lather's point of view this is only possible in ethnographic research; questionnaire-type research tends to be guilty of imposing theoretical constructs on the explanation of behaviour without examining whether they have real relevance in understanding people's lives (see criticisms of questionnaire research, pp. 1002–3).
3 Face validity is achieved through recycling your findings through at least some of those being studied, while being aware that they may be suffering from false consciousness. Although Hammersley is critical of doing this, Lather believes that it is useful as *one* check on the validity of findings. It helps ensure that the researcher has not fundamentally misunderstood the viewpoint of those being studied and therefore completely failed to grasp the framework within which they choose how to act.
4 Catalytic validity refers to 'the degree to which the research process reorients, focuses, and energizes participants towards knowing reality in order to transform it'. Again, this objective is rejected by critics of this type of research, but it does perhaps provide one indication of whether the research has gone beyond the commonsense understandings of the people being studied.

Critical ethnography certainly retains problems despite attempts by some sociologists to develop it and overcome objections. As Irlam Siraj-Blatchford (1995) points out, critical ethnography does tend to assume that you should study the oppressed. It therefore neglects the study of oppressors, who might be able to offer even more insight than the oppressed into the way oppression works.

Furthermore, critical ethnography has by no means overcome all the problems in testing the validity and reliability of data. However, the same is true of other research methods. Critical ethnographers such as Patti Lather and Phil Carspecken use the subjects of research as an additional check on data rather than as an alternative to conventional checks on the data.

Postmodern ethnography

While critical ethnography hopes to penetrate beyond common sense to reveal hidden structures of oppression, postmodern ethnography has no such aims. Some postmodernists do see themselves as opposing oppression, but they do so by undermining all claims to discover the truth, rather than by trying to replace commonsense truths with an analysis of oppressive structures.

Postmodern ethnography rejects any claim to trying to produce objective descriptions of social life, never mind explanations. However, it does follow critical ethnography in emphasizing cooperation with those being studied. Stephen A. Tyler describes postmodern ethnography as:

> *a cooperatively evolved text consisting of fragments of discourse intended to evoke in the minds of both reader and writer an emergent fantasy of a possible work of common-sense reality, and thus to provoke an aesthetic integration that will have a therapeutic effect.*
>
> Tyler, 1997, first published 1986, p. 254

Tyler seems to be arguing that postmodern ethnography should act very much like a work of literature. It is designed to stimulate the imagination, to make people think about the lives of other people, not to describe reality in any objective way. Indeed he argues that it is 'in a word, poetry – not in its textual

form but in its return to the original context and function of poetry ... [which] evoked memories of the ethos of community'.

To Tyler this type of ethnography should acknowledge that there can be many different viewpoints within a social group. It is not the ethnographer's job to decide between these different viewpoints and produce a single account, but to record the variety of perspectives. A postmodern ethnography may take a form in which different versions are published together (as in the different gospels in the Bible), but the precise form it will take cannot be decided in advance. Instead, the researcher and those who are being studied must work together and find a format that will preserve the diversity of views in the social group.

The author is much less important than in traditional sociological studies. The author is not seen as being in a privileged, superior position to those being studied. She or he is not seen as having any special ability to make an analysis of social reality which can rise above the subjective views of those being studied. Tyler says, 'The whole ideology of representational significance is an ideology of power. To break its spell we would have to attack writing, totalistic representational signification, and authorial authority.' Like Jean-François Lyotard (see Chapter 15), Tyler seems concerned that any claims to have discovered the truth will be used to produce metanarratives – big stories about truth and fiction, right and wrong. These in turn may be used to dominate and oppress groups of humans.

Tyler admits that postmodern ethnography will not produce a coherent account of social life. It will be 'fragmentary' and will not be 'organized around familiar ethnological categories such as kinship, economy and religion'. However, he does not see this as a particular problem. For Tyler, the fragmentary nature of postmodern ethnography is desirable because 'We confirm in our consciousness the fragmentary nature of the post-modern, for nothing so defines our world as the absence of a synthesizing allegory.' In other words, people experience the social world as fragmented and cannot find any single way of understanding it. An individual's social life is experienced as many different stories which are not closely linked to one another. Tyler concludes that 'Post-modern ethnography captures the mood of the post-modern world, for it, too, does not move toward abstraction, away from life, but back to experience. It aims not to foster the growth of knowledge but to restructure experience.'

Postmodern ethnography – an evaluation

For an approach which advocates a move away from abstraction and back to experience, Tyler's description of postmodern ethnography is highly abstract. He provides no concrete example of postmodern ethnography and no detailed suggestions as to how to conduct it. Furthermore his approach seems somewhat contradictory. He argues that postmodern ethnography should be more than 'an edited collection of authored papers' written by participants in social life, yet he wishes to give no special privileges to the ethnographer. Indeed it is unclear why an ethnographer is needed at all, since the opinions of the author are seen to be no better than those of the people being studied.

Furthermore, if ethnography should act like a poem, stimulating the imagination, it is again unclear why it is needed. Fiction can perform the task of stimulating the imagination at least as well as writing that claims to have some basis in real experience. Tyler's arguments could, therefore, be seen as self-defeating. By arguing that ethnography is really no different to fiction he makes a case for abandoning ethnography altogether.

Postmodern ethnography suffers from the same problem of extreme relativism (in which no view is better than any other) which afflicts a number of other versions of postmodernism (see Chapter 15).

Longitudinal research

In most sociological studies, researchers study a group of people for a relatively short period of time. They analyse their data, produce a report on their research and move on to new endeavours. However, some researchers study a group over an extended period, collecting data on them at intervals. Such studies are known as longitudinal or panel studies.

Longitudinal studies were first used by researchers in the USA in the 1940s to measure changes in public attitudes. It was seen as more reliable to follow a particular sample over a period of time when measuring changing attitudes, than to select a new sample from time to time. By using a 'panel' the researcher could be sure that changes in the attitudes measured would not result from changes in the composition of the sample.

Longitudinal studies originated as extended attitude surveys. Since then, they have usually been used to collect quantitative data in social surveys, though not necessarily about attitudes. Sometimes a particular age group or cohort is followed over a number of years. The *Child Health and Education Survey* has tried to follow the development of every child born in Britain between the 3rd and 9th of March 1958. Another longitudinal study was carried out by J.W.B. Douglas. In *The Home and the School* (1964) he followed the educational progress of a sample of children through their school careers (see pp. 830–1).

Another example is provided by D.J. West and D.P. Farrington's *Who Becomes Delinquent?* (1973). This study was concerned with 411 London schoolboys. It followed their development from age 8 to 18 in order to determine what factors were associated with delinquency.

Longitudinal studies are usually large-scale quantitative studies, but some qualitative studies also extend over considerable periods of time. Alan Bryman commented, 'There is an implicit longitudinal element built into much qualitative research, which is both a symptom and a cause of an undertaking to view social life in processual, rather than static terms' (Bryman, 1988). In other words, methods such as participant observation are based upon the assumption that social life should be explained in terms of an unfolding story. Parker's study of Liverpool delinquents provides a good example of this (Parker, 1974). Parker showed how the type of delinquency engaged in by 'the boys' changed as the research developed and the boys grew older.

A major advantage of any longitudinal study is its ability to pick up such changes; a study extending over a shorter time span cannot, and so the results can be misleading. Beverley Skeggs's study of a group of young women during and after studying at a further education college followed the women for a total of 12 years (Skeggs, 1991, 1997).

Supporters of longitudinal studies also see them as more likely to provide valid data than other types of research. As W.D. Wall and H.L. Williams (1970) point out, retrospective studies which ask people to report on past events in their lives rely upon fallible human memories. Wall and Williams also say, 'Human beings naturally seek for causes and may unconsciously fabricate or exaggerate something to account for the present state of affairs.' Longitudinal studies help to overcome this problem because recent events are less likely to have been reinterpreted in the light of subsequent consequences.

Quantitative longitudinal studies often examine a large number of variables because the researchers are unsure what data may prove to be important or required later in the research. For example, West and Farrington (1973) collected information relating to no less than 151 variables in their study of delinquency. Although the researcher still has to decide what variables to study, examination of so many limits the extent to which they impose their own theories upon the research.

Longitudinal studies do, of course, have disadvantages. It may be necessary to select people who are accessible and willing to cooperate over an extended period. Furthermore, the size of the sample is liable to fall as some individuals become unwilling to continue to take part, or prove impossible to trace. Douglas's original sample of 5,362 children in 1957 was reduced to 4,720 by 1962 (Douglas, 1964). Since those who were lost may not have been representative of the sample as a whole, the results may have been distorted.

More serious criticisms question the overall validity of the data. Quantitative longitudinal studies collect data using such research methods as questionnaires and interviews. As earlier sections have shown, some sociologists question the validity of data collected in this way. A particular problem with longitudinal studies is that the subjects of the research are conscious of the fact that their behaviour is being studied. This may influence them and change their behaviour because they think more carefully about their actions.

Secondary sources

Secondary sources consist of data that have already been produced, often by people other than sociologists. Secondary data produced by the government are often used by sociologists. Organizations such as trade unions, companies and charities are a useful source of data, as are documents such as letters, diaries and autobiographies produced by individuals. The secondary sources used by sociologists may be contemporary or historical, and the data available from them may be primarily qualitative or quantitative. When sociologists refer to existing sociological studies by other writers in their own research, these become secondary sources.

Sociologists often use secondary sources for practical reasons. They can save time and money and they may provide access to historical data that cannot be produced using primary research because the events concerned took place before current members of society were born.

Secondary sources are invaluable to sociologists but have to be used with great caution. Their reliability and validity are open to question, and often they do not provide the exact information required by a sociologist.

Specific types of secondary sources will now be examined. At the end of the section there will be a general discussion on how to evaluate all types of secondary sources.

Official statistics

A vast range of statistics are produced by the government. In recent years the Government Statistical Service (which was set up in 1941) has coordinated the production of government statistics, but the production of large-scale statistical data goes back at least to 1801, when the first census was conducted.

Sociologists interested in demography have used statistical data from the census and elsewhere to examine a wide range of topics, which include birth and death rates, marriage and fertility patterns, and divorce. Sociologists who study deviance have used official crime and suicide statistics. The many official economic statistics are of interest to sociologists concerned with work. Figures on inflation, unemployment and employment, strikes and productivity have also been used. Indeed, almost every area of sociological research has found some use for official statistics.

Some statistics, such as unemployment figures, are published monthly; others, such as crime statistics, annually. Information from the census is produced once every decade. Other statistical surveys are carried out on an irregular basis: for example, the *British Crime Surveys*. One of the reference books that is most frequently consulted by sociologists in Britain is *Social Trends*, which has been produced annually since 1970 and summarizes statistical data on society.

Much of the statistical information made available by the government would not exist if it were left to sociologists. They lack the resources and power to carry out the work that goes into producing these data. For example, each household is compelled by law to return a census form, and has a legal duty to provide accurate information; it would be impossible for sociologists to obtain this information independently.

Official statistics are easily accessible and cost sociologists nothing to produce. Sociologists generally acknowledge that such statistics are useful, but they do not necessarily agree about what use can be made of them. Some sociologists do not accept the reliability and validity of official statistical data, while others are prepared to place more trust in them.

In the past, some positivists tended to accept official statistics uncritically. Durkheim (1970) believed that suicide statistics were sufficiently reliable and valid to measure the extent and social distribution of suicide (see pp. 974–7). Using official statistics, he tried to establish correlations between suicide and other 'social facts', and ultimately to discover causal relationships and laws of human behaviour.

Similarly, many of the early structural and subcultural theories of crime were based upon the assumption that the official crime statistics accurately identified the working class as the group most prone to criminal activity (see pp. 354–61).

Today sociologists are more cautious about the use of official statistics in areas of social life such as suicide and crime, but most would accept the reliability and validity of statistics from the census. (Earlier parts of this book have shown how inaccurate some official statistics can be – for instance, many crimes remain unreported and as such cannot be recorded in official data (see pp. 363–72).)

Victimization and self-report studies

Despite this, many researchers believe that problems like these can be overcome. For example, victimization or self-report studies use questionnaires administered to members of the population in order to determine the extent of reported and unreported crime. The British Crime Surveys provide examples of victimization studies (for example, Mirrlees-Black *et al.*, 1998) (see pp. 366–8 for further details). D.J. West and D.P. Farrington's longitudinal study of delinquency in London (West and Farrington, 1973) included a self-report study in which members of the sample were asked 38 questions about delinquent acts they might have carried out.

It is sometimes argued that on the basis of such studies it is possible to estimate the real amount of crime in society as a whole, and to calculate the extent of criminality in social groups. The figures can be used to determine the accuracy of official figures, and appropriate adjustments can then be made to them. Even so, as Peter Eglin points out, 'The question remains, however, whether an error estimate calculated for some set of, say, national statistics in some given year will be generalizable to other times or other places' (Eglin, 1987).

An even more serious problem concerns the question of the validity of the answers given by respondents in surveys. Stephen Box (1981) has noted that in self-report studies respondents may exaggerate their criminality, or alternatively they might be unwilling to admit to their crimes. In effect, self-report studies measure how many crimes people say they have committed, rather than the actual number.

Furthermore, in measuring the criminality or delinquency of an individual, the researcher has to decide what offences or actions to include in the list of questions. Among West and Farrington's 38 questions, for instance, respondents were asked about stealing school property worth more than 5p, and about annoying, insulting or fighting other people (strangers) in the street. The precise wording and number of questions included in the questionnaire ultimately determine the amount of crime or delinquency uncovered – and in any case respondents may interpret the questions in different ways.

Whether or not an offence is included in the statistics depends upon the choices made by the researcher. In the *British Crime Surveys* the researchers discounted certain events because they did not believe that they constituted crimes. The statistics produced by such studies are therefore of dubious validity.

However, several sociologists believe that self-report and victimization studies provide some indication of the real extent of crime, and that they help to correct the misleading impression (provided by the official figures) that crime is an overwhelmingly working-class phenomenon.

A phenomenological view

Ethnomethodologists and phenomenologists reject the use of statistics for measuring or determining the causes of the social facts to which they claim to refer. As earlier parts of this book show, sociologists such as Cicourel (1976) and Atkinson (1978) believe that statistics are the product of the meanings and taken-for-granted assumptions of those who construct them. Thus Cicourel claims that the stereotypes held by the police and juvenile officers lead to youths from lower social classes being more likely to be seen as delinquent. Justice is negotiable and statistics produced by official agencies are socially created (see pp. 379–80). Similarly, Atkinson has described how the commonsense theories held by coroners influence the way they categorize sudden deaths (see pp. 979–80). Both Cicourel and Atkinson regard official statistics as social creations.

This does not mean that official statistics are of no sociological interest. Indeed phenomenological sociologists believe they are important: they can be studied in order to discover how they are produced. This helps the sociologist to understand the commonsense theories, taken-for-granted assumptions, stereotypes and categorization procedures of officials involved in the production of the statistics. To writers such as Cicourel, this is the only use that can be made of official statistics, including those such as census statistics, which appear to be based upon far more objective categories. To Cicourel, all statistics involve classifying things as 'this' or 'that', and such decisions are subjective.

Cicourel's views may become less convincing, though, when applied to such data as the age and sex distribution of a population. There may be considerable room for interpretation when considering whether an act is criminal or a sudden death is a suicide. There is less room for interpretation when deciding whether somebody is male or female.

A conflict view

In response to both positivist and phenomenological views, a number of conflict sociologists have developed alternative perspectives on official statistics. They argue that official statistics are neither hard facts, nor subjective meanings. Instead they consist of information which is systematically distorted by power structures in society. Ian Miles and John Irvine argue that official statistics are 'developed in support of the system of power and domination that is modern capitalism – a system in which the state plays a particularly important role' (Miles and Irvine, 1979).

Miles and Irvine do not believe that statistics produced by the government are complete fabrications, because, as they point out, such a viewpoint would be unable to explain why the state frequently publishes figures that are embarrassing to the government. For instance, figures on inflation, crime and unemployment often seem to suggest that government policies are not working. The statistics are not complete distortions, but they are manipulated through the definitions and collection procedures used so that they tend to favour the interests of the powerful. Miles and Irvine say that official statistics are produced according to the needs of the various state agencies for information to coordinate their activities and justify their programmes. They are related to a single ideological framework underpinning the concepts and categories employed.

This view appeared to be supported when the Thatcher government appointed Derek Rayner in 1980 to review the British government's statistical services. Rayner proposed considerable cut-backs in the statistics produced and wanted them confined strictly to information directly needed by the government. Most of his recommendations were implemented. In the wake of the changes introduced following the report, 'The government was repeatedly accused of delaying, suppressing, abolishing and manipulating data for its own ends' (Levitas, 1996). Ruth Levitas mentions a number of examples.

The basis for calculating unemployment figures was frequently changed, almost always with the effect of reducing recorded levels of unemployment (see pp. 737–9 for a discussion of unemployment statistics). Figures on public expenditure were also manipulated. Income from the sale of public assets was artificially used to reduce recorded levels of expenditure, rather than being treated as income. Waiting lists for NHS patients were reduced by removing from the lists those who were unable to keep appointments for operations. Certain figures which might be damning to the government were not produced or published. For example, census statistics no longer included deaths by social class, which might have revealed a growing gap between the life expectancies of different classes. The government changed the data it produced on poverty, making it difficult to compare poverty rates with previous years (see pp. 305–9).

Levitas comments that 'By the end of the 1980s, public confidence in official statistics was at an all-time low.' Although some attempts have been made in the 1990s to make British official statistics less politically biased, critics continue to believe that they still reflect the ideology of the government. In the 1995 edition of the Central Statistical Office's annual publication *Social Trends*, an editorial by Muriel Nissel (the first editor of the publication), which was critical of government manipulation of statistical services, was withdrawn by the Office's director, Bill McLennan.

Conflict sociologists often question the categories used in official statistics. Thus, Theo Nichols (1996) argues from a Marxist point of view that the categories used in the census and other official statistics disguise the true nature of class in capitalism. Most have been based on the Registrar General's scale, which uses status as an indicator of social class. To Nichols (as a Marxist) class is based upon the relationship to the means of production. Thus the official statistics give the impression of a status hierarchy and disguise the existence of classes that are in opposition to each other as exploiters and exploited. (New classifications will be used for the census of 2001. These will be based on a largely Weberian view of class and, like the previous scheme, will include no separate category for a ruling class.)

Like phenomenologists, conflict sociologists tend to believe that official statistics are invalid for measuring the things they refer to, but that they do reveal something about those who produce them. However, rather than seeing them as based merely upon subjective meanings, conflict sociologists see them as reflecting the ideological frameworks that are produced by dominant social groups. Official statistics can therefore be analysed to uncover those frameworks and the power structures that produce them.

Historical sources

Historical documents are of vital importance to sociologists who wish to study social change which takes place over an extended period of time. There are limits to the period over which a sociological study using primary sources can extend, and past events may be important in understanding how contemporary patterns of social life came about.

One area in which historical statistical sources have been of considerable importance is the study of family life. Chapter 8 showed how the development of family life since before the Industrial Revolution has been a major topic of sociological inquiry. Peter Laslett (1972, 1977) made extensive use of parish records in order to discover how common nuclear and extended families were in pre-industrial England. Such data have been most useful in correcting the assumption that extended family households were the norm in pre-industrial Britain (see p. 527). However, findings based upon such secondary sources need to be used with caution. Many parish records have not survived, and the documents that Laslett used relate only to particular villages which happened to have complete records. It may therefore be dangerous to accept generalizations based upon such findings.

Michael Anderson's research on the family (see pp. 527–8) is based upon early census statistics which are more readily available (Anderson, 1971). Nevertheless, Anderson chose to concentrate on one town, Preston, so the patterns of family life described are again not necessarily representative. Anderson also points out that census statistics do not provide an in-depth picture of family relationships. He lists the sort of descriptive, qualitative data that can be used to supplement statistical data in the historical study of the family as:

> *tracts, reports of missionary and charitable societies, descriptions of crimes, newspaper investigations into the condition of the people, parliamentary investigations and the evidence of some witnesses to them, speeches in parliamentary debates and some aspects of novels.*
>
> Anderson, 1980

Like qualitative data from primary research, qualitative secondary sources may be unreliable and are open to a number of interpretations. Many of the secondary sources mentioned above are highly subjective and are likely to reflect the ideologies of those who produced them. Nevertheless, they do reveal something of the perspectives of their producers.

Whatever the problems of historical research, without using historical documents sociologists would be confined to producing a rather static view of social life. Without such documents, Max Weber (1958) would have been unable to consider the influence of religion on the development of capitalism (see pp. 447–51), and Michael Mann (1986) would not have had the opportunity to discuss the relationship between different sources of social power throughout history (see pp. 633–5).

Life documents

Life documents are created by individuals and record details of that person's experiences and social actions. They are predominantly qualitative and may offer insights into people's subjective states. They can be historical or contemporary and can take a wide variety of forms. Ken Plummer illustrates this diversity when he says:

People keep diaries, send letters, take photos, write memos, tell biographies, scrawl graffiti, publish memoirs, write letters to the papers, leave suicide notes, inscribe memorials on tombstones, shoot films, paint pictures, make music and try to record their personal dreams.

Plummer, 1982

All of these sources, along with many others, have the potential to be useful to sociologists.

The use of life documents has a long history in sociology. Their use was popularized by W.I. Thomas and F. Znaniecki in their study *The Polish Peasant in Europe and America* (1919). Thomas and Znaniecki made use of 764 letters, a lengthy statement by one Polish peasant about his life, reports from social work agencies, court reports and articles from Polish newspapers. From such sources they tried to understand and explain the experience of migration for the hundreds of thousands of Polish people who moved to America in the early years of the twentieth century.

The study was widely regarded as a classic at the time but, according to Plummer (1982), it is now rarely mentioned and infrequently read. This is partly because life documents themselves have fallen out of favour as a source for sociologists. Those who favour more quantitative methods tend to regard life documents as an inadequate source of data. They are difficult to obtain and the ones that exist are likely to cover an unrepresentative sample of the population.

Like all data, personal documents are open to interpretation. They may say more about the subjective states of individuals than the events they are describing. It is unlikely that the husband, wife, or political opponent of a diary writer would describe events in quite the same way. Personal documents that are meant to be read by others (such as letters and autobiographies) may be written with an audience in mind. As Ponsonby once commented, 'letters may be said to have two parents, the writer and the recipient' (quoted in Plummer, 1982). Such documents may be designed more to justify actions than to make a real attempt to explain the writer's feelings or motives.

Diaries, when they are available, may have greater validity if they are not intended for public consumption. One way of overcoming the scarcity of diaries and the unrepresentative nature of examples that exist, is for the researcher to prompt those being studied to keep diaries. Young and Willmott (1973) asked the subjects of their research into family life in London to keep diaries, recording how much time they spent on different activities and how they felt about them. Oscar Lewis (1961), studying poverty in Mexico, persuaded a number of families to keep detailed diaries recording the events of a single day. Such diaries may be more systematic than those obtained by chance; however, they may be less valid. The awareness that they will be used for research might influence the details included by their writers.

Despite these limitations, Plummer believes that personal documents should play a crucial role in sociology. Using them as a source avoids a preoccupation with abstract theories 'which can kill off any concern for the joy and suffering of active human beings'. Compared to other secondary sources, personal documents allow much greater insight into the subjective states of individuals, which in turn shape their behaviour.

Plummer supports symbolic interactionist approaches to studying social life. From this point of view some sort of participant observation may be the ideal method for studying social life. Where this type of research is not possible, life documents are the best alternative since they offer insights into the 'ordinary ambiguous personal meanings' that shape people's actions in their everyday lives. (More details of Plummer's theoretical standpoint are included in the section on case studies and life histories – see pp. 996–7.)

The mass media and content analysis

Many parts of the mass media are notoriously inaccurate. Sociologists would, for example, be unlikely to turn solely to a national newspaper for an objective account of social life in Britain. Although some parts of the mass media may provide sociologists with useful data, their main importance is as objects of study. Rather like the official statistics, mass media reports can be used to analyse the ideologies of those who produce them. Some sociologists have been highly critical of parts of the mass media for producing distorted images of society which might mislead the public or adversely affect the socialization of children.

There are a number of different approaches to carrying out content analysis, in which researchers analyse the content of documents. These may be largely quantitative, largely qualitative, or combine both approaches. Ray Pawson (1995) identifies four main approaches to carrying out content analysis:

1 Formal content analysis. Here the emphasis is upon objectivity and reliability. A systematic sample of texts is collected for study, a classification system is devised to identify different features of these texts, and these features are then counted. For example, G. Lobban (1974) conducted a study of the portrayal of gender roles in children's reading schemes. She listed and counted the toys and pets that children had, the

activities they engaged in, the skills they learned, and the roles that adults were shown in. The technique is reliable because other researchers can repeat the same techniques to check the findings. The same methods can also be replicated to carry out comparative studies. For example, Lesley Best (1993) repeated Lobban's research in the 1990s (see pp. 854–5).

The simplicity and reliability of quantitative content analysis makes it appealing. However, it is not without its problems. Simply counting the number of items tells you nothing about their significance, and the meanings of the texts or images being studied can only be implied. As Ray Pawson points out, there is an assumption that the audience are simply passive consumers of the message, and no attempt is made to examine how they actually interpret the messages in the text.

2 Thematic analysis. The second approach identified by Pawson is thematic analysis. Pawson says:

> *The idea is to understand the encoding process, especially the intentions that lie behind the production of mass media documents. The usual strategy is to pick on a specific area of reportage and subject it to a very detailed analysis in the hope of unearthing the underlying purposes and intentions of the authors of the communication.*
>
> Pawson, 1995

Thematic analysis is sometimes aimed at discovering the ideological biases of journalists and others involved in the production of mass media documents. Pawson cites the example of Keith Soothill and Sylvia Walby's study of newspaper reporting of sex crimes such as rape (Soothill and Walby, 1991). Soothill and Walby found that the reporting tended to emphasize the danger of being raped in public places and the pathological nature of individual rapists. It tended to ignore the prevalence of rape by partners and friends of victims, and the wider context of patriarchal power within which sex crimes take place. According to Pawson the main method involved in such studies is simply the repetition of examples.

Critics of such studies argue that they rarely use scientific samples, and they therefore tend to use examples selectively to fit the preferred interpretation of the researchers. Like formal content analysis there is no attempt to check whether consumers of the media interpret the messages in the same way as the researchers.

3 Textual analysis. Pawson describes this approach as involving examining the 'linguistic devices within the documents in order to show how texts can be influential in encouraging a particular interpretation'. This approach, for example, looks at how different words are linked together so that readers will interpret stories in a particular way. An example is the Glasgow Media Group's study of television reporting of strikes (Glasgow Media Group, 1976). It found that strikers tended to be described using verbs such as 'claim' or 'demand', while management tended to have verbs such as 'offer' or 'propose' applied to them. This meant that readers tended to view strikers as actively causing the strikes and being unreasonable, while managers were portrayed as being more reasonable and as the passive victims of the strikers. The linking of visual images and words can also be studied in this way.

As with thematic analysis, the main methodological problem with textual analysis is that it relies heavily upon the researcher's interpretation. This may not correspond to the interpretation of members of the audience or of other researchers. The method therefore lacks reliability.

4 Audience analysis. This approach overcomes some of the problems of earlier approaches by focusing on the responses of the audience as well as the content of the mass media. This then provides some check on the researcher's interpretation of the message and it recognizes that audiences actively interpret messages rather than just being passive. Sometimes audiences reject the messages apparently being advanced by the media.

Pawson discusses an early example of this approach, provided by a study of *Nationwide* (a British news programme) conducted by Morley (1980). He found, for example that groups such as shop stewards tended to be more critical and sceptical about *Nationwide*'s coverage of the news than groups such as bank managers.

Critics argued that Morley's study, which involved viewing and talking about *Nationwide* in groups, created a rather artificial research setting. Furthermore there is no guarantee that people are fully open and honest in discussing their reactions to the mass media with researchers. The messages of the media may have a long-term influence on people's interpretations of the social world around them, and such effects are difficult to pick up in audience research.

More thorough studies may try to combine a range of methods. The work of the Glasgow Media Group (1976) illustrates some of the benefits of combining methods. In their first study they combined formal, thematic, and textual analysis. They used quantitative counts to analyse the words used in newscasts and also looked in great detail at particular sentences. Their findings were used to develop a thematic understanding of the coverage of industrial relations. They did not carry out audience research, but there is no reason why such research could not be complemented by studies of the audience as well.

John Scott – assessing secondary sources

John Scott (1990a, 1990b) has provided some useful guidelines for evaluating secondary sources (or, as he calls them, documents). The criteria can be applied to all secondary sources, including existing sociological research. They offer systematic ways of trying to ensure that researchers use secondary sources with as much care as they employ in producing primary data.

Scott identifies four criteria:

1 Authenticity – this refers to the question of how genuine a document is. There are two aspects of authenticity: soundness and authorship. Scott says, 'A sound document is one which is complete and reliable. It should have no missing pages or misprints and, if it is a copy of an original it should be a reliable copy without errors of transcription' (Scott, 1990a). When the document is not sound, the researcher needs to consider carefully how far the omissions detract from its reliability and validity.

   The question of authorship concerns who it was written by. Many documents are not actually produced by those to whom they are attributed. For example, many letters signed by the prime minister may have been written by civil servants and might reveal little about the prime minister's own views. The most extreme problem of authenticity occurs when documents are faked, as in the case of the so-called 'Hitler Diaries' which were originally authenticated as the work of the former German leader but which later proved not to be genuine.

2 Credibility – this issue relates to the amount of distortion in a document. Any distortion may be related to sincerity or accuracy. In a sincere document the author genuinely believes what they write. This is not always the case. The author may hope to gain advantage from deceiving readers. For example, politicians may distort accounts of their actions or motives in their diaries or memoirs to justify what they have done. Inaccuracy might result from unintended distortions, such as when an account is written some time after the events described and faulty memory makes absolute accuracy impossible.

3 Representativeness – Scott points out that 'Sampling of documents must be handled as carefully and as systematically as the sampling of respondents in a survey.' A researcher must be aware of how typical or untypical the documents being used are, 'in order to be able to assign limits to any conclusions drawn'.

   Two factors which may limit the possibility of using representative documents are: survival and availability. Many documents do not survive because they are not stored, and others deteriorate with age and become unusable. This is obviously a particular problem when doing historical research in sociology. Other documents are deliberately withheld from researchers and the public gaze, and thus do not become available. For example, many official documents are not made available for 30 years; others which are classified as secret may never be made public. Individuals and private organizations may also be unwilling to make many of their documents available to researchers.

4 Meaning – this concerns the ability of a researcher to understand the document. At one level the researcher may have difficulty with literal understanding. It may be in a foreign language, in old-fashioned handwriting, or it could use archaic vocabulary which is difficult to comprehend.

   Interpretative understanding is even more difficult to achieve: it involves 'understanding of what the document actually signifies'. For example, there has been a long-standing debate about whether suicide statistics signify more about suicides or about the officials who define certain acts as suicides (see pp. 974–81).

   Some of the problems involved in deciphering meaning are discussed in the section on the mass media (see pp. 1020–1). Whether quantitative content analysis or qualitative semiotic analysis is chosen, interpretative understanding is always open to debate.

Scott shows that all secondary sources need to be evaluated and used with great care. Research using them needs to be as systematic and rigorous as research which produces primary data. The same care should be employed when reading and using existing sociology books and studies. In particular, as Scott points out, 'readers must always be aware of the interests and commitments of authors', since these may influence the way that secondary and other sources are interpreted and used.

Triangulation

As an earlier section indicated (pp. 981–2), it is difficult to see quantitative and qualitative methods as mutually exclusive. Increasingly sociologists are combining both approaches in single studies. As Bryman puts it:

> *The rather partisan, either/or tenor of debate about quantitative and qualitative research may appear somewhat bizarre to an outsider, for whom the obvious way forward is likely to be a fusion of the two approaches so that their respective strengths might be reaped.*
>
> Bryman, 1988

In reality, the degree to which quantitative and qualitative approaches are different has been exaggerated. Bryman points out that 'Most researchers rely primarily on a method associated with one of the two research traditions, but buttress their findings with a method associated with the other tradition.' The practice of combining quantitative and qualitative research has a long history, and is evident in the approach advocated by Weber (see p. 972).

Bryman has suggested a number of ways in which using a plurality of methods – a practice known as triangulation – can be useful:

1 Qualitative and quantitative data can be used to check on the accuracy of the conclusions reached on the basis of each.
2 Qualitative research can be used to produce hypotheses which can then be checked using quantitative methods.
3 The two approaches can be used together so that a more complete picture of the social group being studied is produced.
4 Qualitative research may be used to illuminate why certain variables are statistically correlated.

The following examples illustrate the advantages of combining research methods.

In her study of the Unification Church, or Moonies, Eileen Barker used participant observation, questionnaires and in-depth interviewing. She claimed that this combination of methods allowed her to 'see how the movement as a whole was organized and how it influenced the day-to-day actions and interactions of its members' (Barker, 1984). She tried to test hypotheses formulated from qualitative data using questionnaires.

Quantitative techniques have been used to systematically analyse data from observation or participant observation. For example, Delamont (1976) used the Flanders Interaction Analysis Categories in her studies of classroom interaction. These allowed her to categorize the different types of interaction and to time them in order to determine differences in the educational experience of boys and girls. She used qualitative data to explain the reasons for the quantitative relationships she found.

Amanda Coffey and Paul Atkinson (1996) note that qualitative data can be analysed in many different ways. Amongst them is the systematic coding of different types of data so that related pieces of data can be easily found and linked together. Furthermore, computer programmes such as *Ethnograph, QUALPRO and ATLAS/ti* are now sometimes used to make the analysis of qualitative data easier and more systematic.

The combination of methods is not just confined to the use of primary data. In a study of secondary schooling, Paul Corrigan (1981) used interviews, observation and historical and contemporary documents. These enabled him to place his analysis of school life within the context of the historical development of the education system in Britain.

Bryman (1988) believes that both qualitative and quantitative research have their own advantages. Neither can produce totally valid and completely reliable data, but both can provide useful insights into social life. He argues that each has its own place, and they can be most usefully combined. Generally, quantitative data tends to produce rather static pictures, but it can allow researchers to examine and discover overall patterns and structures in society as a whole. Qualitative data is less useful for discovering overall patterns and structures, but it does allow a richer and deeper understanding of the process of change in social life. Bryman says, 'A division of labour is suggested here in that quantitative research may be conceived of as a means of establishing the structural element in social life, qualitative research the processual.'

As the next section will show, the view that sociology should use both qualitative and quantitative methods does not necessarily preclude the possibility that it can be scientific.

Sociology and science

Scientific methodology

The early parts of this chapter described how sociologists have adopted varying views on the relationship between sociology and science. Positivists claim that science uses established methods and procedures, and that these methods and procedures can be applied to the social sciences. They believe that social facts can be observed objectively, measured and quantified. Analysis of statistics can reveal correlations, causes and ultimately laws of human behaviour. From this point of view, sociological studies using such methods can be considered to be scientific. Positivists see the use of scientific methods as highly desirable, and they tend to be critical of those sociologists who study subjective and unobservable mental states.

Popper (1959) also sees it as highly desirable that sociology should be scientific, but argues that science

is a deductive rather than inductive methodology. Scientists should make precise predictions on the basis of their theories so that they can strive conscientiously to falsify or disprove them. Popper rejects many sociological theories as being unscientific because they are not sufficiently precise to generate hypotheses that can be falsified. He is particularly critical of Marxism for failing to make precise predictions: for example, for failing to specify exactly when and under what circumstances a proletarian revolution would take place in capitalist societies. Marxism cannot be falsified since the day of the proletarian revolution and the dawning of the truly communist society is pushed further into the future. Marxism is an article of faith rather than a scientific theory.

Like positivists, then, Popper believes that it is possible for 'social sciences' in general, and sociology in particular, to become scientific by following a particular set of methodological procedures. He parts company with positivists in denying that science can deliver the final, incontrovertible truth, since the possibility of falsification always exists. Instead he believes that the longer a theory has stood the test of time, the more often researchers have failed to falsify it, the closer it is likely to be to the truth.

Phenomenologists reject the view that natural science methodology is appropriate to sociology. To phenomenologists, objective observation and measurement of the social world are not possible. The social world is classified by members of society in terms of their own stereotypes and taken-for-granted assumptions. In these circumstances the social world cannot be measured objectively; statistics are simply the product of the categorization procedures used. The best that sociologists can hope to do is to study the way that members of society categorize the world around them. They cannot collect meaningful statistical data and establish correlations, causal connections and laws. Indeed, phenomenologists reject the whole possibility of finding laws of human behaviour.

The social context of science

All of the views discussed so far are based upon the assumption that there are established methods and procedures that characterize science. However, as Kaplan (1964) has pointed out, it is necessary to distinguish between 'reconstructed logics' and 'logics in use'. Reconstructed logics consist of the methods and procedures scientists claim to use. Both positivism and Popper's methodological approach represent reconstructed logics. However, there is no guarantee that scientists actually do follow such guidelines. Logics in use refer to what scientists actually do during their research, and this may depart considerably from their reconstructed logics.

Michael Lynch (1983) has conducted research in a psycho-biological laboratory, which illustrates how scientists may be less objective than they claim. The scientists studied brain functioning by examining thin slices of rats' brains under microscopes. Photographs and slides of the brain slices were examined to see how useful they were in developing theories of brain functioning. Sometimes unexplained features were found in the photographs. Very often these were put down to some error in the production of the photograph or slide: they were seen as artefacts, rather than being a real feature of the rat's brain. (An artefact is something produced by the research process which does not exist in the phenomenon being studied.) Some of these features were held to be an error in staining, others were believed to be the result of scratching of the specimen when it was being sliced.

There was much discussion in the laboratory about whether these features were artefacts or not. In reaching their conclusions, the scientists were influenced by their existing theories, the types of features they were looking for and expected to find. If the visible marks on the slide or photograph did not fit their theories of how rats' brains functioned, they were much more likely to dismiss the marks as errors. Their interpretations of the data were guided by their theories. Far from following Popper's methodology and striving to falsify their theories, the researchers tried to use the evidence to confirm them. Many scientists may be reluctant to dismiss perhaps years of intellectual effort and research because a single piece of evidence does not support the theory that they have developed.

The social context of Darwin's theory of evolution

It may also be the case that the sorts of theories that are developed in the first place – and which scientists try to confirm rather than falsify – are influenced by social factors rather than the detached pursuit of objective knowledge. Roger Gomm (1982) has used Darwin's theory of evolution as an example to illustrate this.

Darwin claimed that species developed and evolved by a process of natural selection. Most followers of Darwin believed that this process took place gradually. Natural selection occurred through adaptation to the environment. Genetic differences between members of a species make some better-suited to survival in a particular environment. Those that have a better chance of survival are more likely to produce offspring and so shift the species towards their genetic characteristics. For example, giraffes with longer necks may have been more likely to survive and produce offspring than those with shorter necks because they were able to feed off leaves which

other species and certain members of their own species could not reach.

Gomm points out that the ideas of natural selection and gradual evolution are not supported by all of the evidence. According to Gomm, Darwin himself did not believe that evolution was a gradual process, but that it was initiated by sudden genetic changes or mutations. Fossil records do not support the gradualist theory of evolutionary change; instead there appear to be rapid periods of genetic change and eras of mass extinction. Gomm claims that the popularity of 'gradualism' was not the result of careful interpretation of the evidence but 'because it lined up with a preference for gradual social and political change among the dominant social groups of the time'. Darwin's theories were often misused – for example, by the English functionalist sociologist Herbert Spencer – to indicate how societies should be run. Those in power did not want it to appear that revolutionary change was the answer to society's problems, because it could undermine their dominance.

The idea of natural selection suggests, as Herbert Spencer put it, 'survival of the fittest'. The weak – those unsuited to survival in a particular environment – must perish to ensure the healthy genetic development of a species. In this theory, competition is the key to genetic and evolutionary progress.

However, as Gomm points out, 'the idea of natural selection as a red in tooth and claw struggle for survival is only a half truth at best. It leaves out of account the extent to which individuals within a species cooperate with each other.'

In his book *Mutual Aid* (published in 1902) the Russian anarchist Prince Peter Kropotkin amassed a wealth of evidence to show that cooperation rather than conflict allowed animals to survive in flocks, herds or other groups. Many animals are best able to resist predators, or at least ensure that casualties are minimized, in such groupings.

Why then was Darwin's competitive vision of the natural world preferred to Kropotkin's equally carefully-argued cooperative vision? Gomm argues that it was because Darwin's views fitted more closely with the ideologies of dominant social groups in Victorian Britain:

1 It justified the free-market capitalist system and did not support socialist ideas which argued for state intervention in the economy.
2 It legitimated harsh social policies which saw the poor as 'unfit' and therefore as not worthy of much assistance. (See pp. 316–17 for details of Herbert Spencer's Darwinist views on poverty.)
3 Since evolution allowed species to be seen as superior or inferior, it allowed groups within the species to be placed on an evolutionary scale. Gomm argues that the idea of evolution as progress 'allowed the Victorians to lay out the peoples of the world on an evolutionary ladder, with Australian Aboriginals at the bottom (least evolved) and Victorian intellectual males at the top'. It therefore justified the colonization of non-Western people on the grounds that the British Empire would civilize them.

A similar use of a scientific theory to legitimate the domination of one group by another (that is women by men) is provided by sociobiology (see pp. 129–31).

Thomas Kuhn – paradigms and scientific revolutions

The preceding section argues that the interpretation of evidence is governed by the theories that scientists hold, and that these theories themselves may be influenced by social and ideological factors. This suggests that in practice scientists operate in very different ways from those advocated by Popper or positivists.

Thomas Kuhn (1962) has developed an analysis of science which also sees it as being far from the objective pursuit of knowledge. In *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*, Kuhn argues that science is characterized by a commitment to a scientific paradigm. A paradigm consists of a set of beliefs shared by a group of scientists about what the natural world is composed of, what counts as true and valid knowledge, and what sort of questions should be asked and what sort of procedures should be followed to answer those questions. A paradigm is a complete theory and framework within which scientists operate. It guides what evidence is collected, how that evidence is collected, and how it should be analysed and explained. When scientists work within a paradigm, they tend to look for data that supports and refines that paradigm. The way that scientists perceive the world around them is also governed by the paradigm – they see the world in ways that are consistent with the paradigm.

Kuhn does not believe that the same methods and procedures are found throughout scientific history; rather they are specific to particular sciences at particular times. Nor does Kuhn believe that scientists are entirely objective – paradigms are not accepted or rejected on the basis of evidence alone. Each paradigm has a social base, in that it is grounded in a community of scientists committed to a particular view of the world or some part of it. Established scientists trained to think within the framework provided by an established paradigm find it difficult to see the world in any other way. Furthermore, they have a vested interest in maintaining it, for their academic reputations and

careers rest upon the work they have done within that paradigm. Consequently, scientists may ignore evidence that does not fit 'their' paradigm.

Scientific revolutions

Scientific beliefs do change, but, according to Kuhn, rather than changing gradually they are changed by scientific revolutions. In a scientific revolution one scientific paradigm is replaced by another: for instance, when Newton's paradigm in physics was replaced by Einstein's. Change in science is not a gradual process of accumulating new knowledge, but a sudden move from one paradigm to another. This occurs when an accepted paradigm is confronted by so many 'anomalies', or things it cannot explain, that a new paradigm is developed, which does not suffer from the same anomalies. A community of scientists may resist the change, but, once a new generation of scientists who have been trained within the new paradigm start practising, the new paradigm is accepted. A science then returns to its 'normal' state in which the paradigm is elaborated and developed, but the framework that it lays down is largely unquestioned.

Kuhn's work raises serious questions about other views of science. To Kuhn a scientific subject is one in which there is, at least most of the time, an agreed paradigm. There is no guarantee, however, that the accepted paradigm is correct: it may well be replaced by a new paradigm in the future. Scientific training has more to do with learning to see the physical world in a particular way than it has to do with a commitment to discovering the truth through objective research.

If Kuhn's view of science is accepted, then it is doubtful if sociology can be seen as a science. The sociological community has not accepted one paradigm, or, in sociological vocabulary, one 'perspective'. Marxists, functionalists, feminists, interactionists, ethnomethodologists and postmodernists all see the social world in different ways: they ask different questions and get different answers. Even within a perspective there is a lack of consensus. There are many variations within Marxism and feminism, while within functionalism Durkheim and Parsons reached different conclusions on many issues, and they did not analyse societies in the same ways.

In this situation, sociology can be regarded as 'pre-paradigmatic' – a single paradigm has not yet been accepted – and, as such, sociology is pre-scientific. It could, of course, become scientific if sociologists were to agree upon a perspective that all practitioners of the subject could accept. Given the present state of the subject, such an outcome seems highly unlikely.

Whether it is desirable for sociology to become a science is questionable. Sociology seems to exist almost in a permanent state of revolution, but the constant conflict may help to push the subject forward at a rapid pace.

Criticisms of Kuhn

Although influential, Kuhn's work has been criticized. It has been seen as having little relevance to social science and as being based upon inadequate evidence. Anderson, Hughes and Sharrock argue that Kuhn is doing no more than describing natural science, and his views have little relevance to sociology. Furthermore, they believe that he has underestimated the degree to which there is conflict and disagreement in natural science. Most of the time alternative paradigms are debated. Anderson *et al.* claim that a careful examination of the history of science shows that 'The periods of revolution grow in size while those of settled "normality" contract' (Anderson *et al.*, 1986).

The realist view of science

From the discussion so far, it would appear that it is either impossible or undesirable for sociology to be a science. Despite the claims of positivists and Popper, it seems inappropriate for a subject that deals with human behaviour to confine itself to studying the observable, to ignore the subjective, to try to falsify theories or to make precise predictions. However, partly in response to such problems, the realist theory of science – which stresses the similarities between social and natural science – has been developed. Realists such as Roy Bhaskar (1979), Russell Keat and John Urry (1982), and Andrew Sayer (1984) argue that none of the above points disqualifies sociology from being a science. They believe that positivists, Popper, and indeed Kuhn, are mistaken about the nature of science.

'Closed' and 'open' systems

Sayer (1984) argues that there is a difference between closed and open systems as objects of scientific study. Within closed systems all the relevant variables can be controlled and measured. In scientific laboratory experiments closed systems may be produced; and certain branches of science such as physics and chemistry have much more scope for the study of closed systems than others.

There are many areas of science in which all the relevant variables cannot be controlled or measured. As a result it is not possible to make the precise predictions advocated by Popper. For example, doctors cannot predict with certainty who will become ill; seismologists cannot predict exactly when an earthquake will occur; and meteorologists cannot predict the weather with anything like absolute precision. In all of these cases the reasons for the

lack of precision are similar – some of the variables cannot be measured, or the processes involved are too complex for accurate predictions to be made.

Sociology has similar problems. Within society as a whole, or within a social group, innumerable variables may influence what happens. Thus sociologists cannot be expected to predict exactly what the divorce rate will be in five years' time, or whether a revolution will occur within a given period of time.

Human consciousness

However, even if it is accepted that a science does not need to make predictions, this still leaves the problem of human consciousness to be dealt with. As outlined earlier, positivists believe that a science should confine itself to the study of the observable, whereas interpretive sociologists believe that reference must be made to internal and unobservable meanings and motives in explaining human behaviour. Realists point out, though, that science itself does not confine itself to studying observable phenomena. As Keat and Urry say, scientists may 'postulate the existence of entities which have not been observed, and may not be open to any available method of detection' (Keat and Urry, 1982).

Viruses, sub-atomic particles and magnetic fields all form part of scientific theories, despite the impossibility (at present) of directly observing them. Scientists cannot easily observe continental drift, because it takes place too slowly, nor can they see the mechanisms that produce it, because they are below the earth's surface. Darwin could not observe evolution, because it took place too slowly.

Causality

To realists, then, both Popper and positivists have failed to define science accurately, and so the objections raised by interpretive sociologists to seeing sociology as a science become irrelevant. Realists see science as the attempt to explain the causes of events in the natural or social world in terms of underlying and often unobservable structures, mechanisms and processes. Realists produce causal explanations and explain them in terms of such structures, mechanisms and processes. An example of a mechanism or process in science would be Darwin's idea of natural selection. In sociology, examples include ideas on the concentration of capital and the pauperization of the proletariat.

To realists, explaining the mechanisms through which events take place is a vital part of causal explanation. This requires the researcher to specify which factors or variables determine whether these mechanisms operate. For example, in different conditions the concentration of capital might be slowed down, speeded up or halted. Similarly, in Darwin's theory of evolution the actual consequences of the operation of natural selection depend upon the precise and changing environmental conditions in which species evolve.

According to realists, events take place and mechanisms operate within the context of structures. Keat and Urry argue that a structure is a 'system of relationships which underlie and account for the sets of observable social relationships and those of social consciousness' (Keat and Urry, 1982). Similarly, Sayer defines structures as 'sets of internally related objects or practices' (Sayer, 1984). Sayer uses the example of the relationship between landlords and tenants to illustrate a structure in society. The existence of a landlord depends upon the existence of tenants, and 'The landlord tenant relation itself presupposes the existence of private property, rent, the production of an economic surplus and so on; together they form a structure.'

Structures impose limitations or constraints upon what happens, but mechanisms and the variables that affect them determine the actual course of events. For example, the structure of relationships between landlords and tenants does not determine which individual occupies the property being rented, but it does determine that the tenant pays rent and the landlord does not. Structures are often unobservable, but a natural or social scientist can work out that they are there by observing their effects. Social classes cannot be seen, nor can the infrastructure and superstructure of society, but to a Marxist they are real.

Science and sociology

According to the realist view of science, much of sociology is scientific. To realist sociologists such as Keat and Urry (1982), Marxist sociology is scientific because it develops models of the underlying structures and processes in society, which are evaluated and modified in the light of empirical evidence. Unlike positivists, realists do not automatically reject interpretive sociology as unscientific, because they believe that studying unobservable meanings and motives is perfectly compatible with a scientific subject.

From this point of view there is relatively little difference between social and natural sciences. Some branches of natural science which have the luxury of studying 'closed' systems can be more precise than sociology, but others face the same difficulty as sociology in trying to deal with highly complex open systems. Both natural sciences and sociology have common aims: they try to develop models and theories that explain the world as objectively as possible on the basis of the available evidence.

Whether sociology can be completely objective is the subject of the final section.

Sociology, methodology and values

One of the reasons that sociologists have been so concerned with the question of whether sociology is a science is the widespread assumption that science is objective, or value-free. Robert Bierstedt has stated:

> Objectivity *means that the conclusions arrived at as the result of inquiry and investigation are independent of the race, colour, creed, occupation, nationality, religion, moral preference, and political predisposition of the investigator. If his research is truly objective, it is independent of any subjective elements, any personal desires, that he may have.*
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> Bierstedt, 1963

However, even Bierstedt's own definition of objectivity may reveal his values. By assuming that the investigator is male, Bierstedt could be accused of having a patriarchal bias in his work. The quest for objectivity may not be as straightforward as it first appears.

Many of the founders of sociology believed that sociology could and should be value-free. Early positivists such as Comte and Durkheim argued that objectivity was attainable by adopting a 'scientific' methodology. Marx also believed that his sociology was objective and 'scientific', although he saw society very differently. Weber did not think complete value-freedom was possible, but he did believe that, once a topic for research had been chosen, the researcher could be objective. He argued that sociologists should not make value judgements, that is, they should not state what aspects of society they found desirable or undesirable.

Despite the claims of these important sociologists, it is doubtful whether their own work met the criteria necessary for complete value-freedom. The concluding sections of Chapters 2–13 have shown that the values of sociologists have influenced their work, whatever area of social life they have studied.

Functionalists in general have been accused of holding politically conservative views in assuming that existing social institutions serve a useful purpose. This implies that anything other than slow evolutionary change is harmful to society.

Durkheim accepted the need for certain changes in society, but his personal values are evident in his belief that the inheritance of wealth should be abolished and professional associations should be established (see pp. 691–3).

Few would claim that Marx's sociology was free from his political and moral beliefs. Marx's desire for proletarian revolution influenced most aspects of his work.

Weber's work often appears more value-free than that of functionalists or Marxists, but there is little doubt that his personal values influenced his research. Weber's writings on bureaucracy (see Chapter 15) are strongly influenced by his fear that bureaucratic organizations would stifle human freedom. In his words, 'What can we oppose to this machinery in order to keep a portion of mankind free from this parcelling-out of the soul, from this supreme mastery of the bureaucratic way of life' (quoted in Nisbet, 1967).

Even if it is true that such eminent sociologists allowed their values to influence their research, it does not necessarily follow that it is impossible to achieve value-freedom in sociology. To many contemporary sociologists, there is, however, no prospect of a completely value-free sociology. According to this view, total objectivity is impossible because values inevitably enter every stage of the production of sociological knowledge.

Weber recognized that values would influence the choice of topics for study. He argued that the sociologist had to have some way of choosing from the almost infinite number of possible areas of social life that could be studied. Weber believed that 'value relevance' would influence the choice. Researchers would choose to research topics which they thought were important, and, more significantly, which they thought were of central importance to society. Weber himself chose to study the advent of capitalism and the nature of bureaucracy, because he saw them as the most important developments in Western societies.

The values of other sociologists have also been evident in their choice of topics for research. Peter Townsend demonstrated his belief that poverty is a serious problem by devoting years of his life to its study (see pp. 296–300). Marxists have shown the importance they attach to inequality in their studies of wealth, income and stratification. Feminists have revealed their values by deciding that it is important to study such aspects of social life as domestic violence, rape and housework. Simply by selecting an issue to study, sociologists reveal what aspects of society they believe are significant.

Having selected a topic, sociologists then choose what aspects of that topic to study, and what approach they are going to adopt. According to Alvin Gouldner this involves making 'domain assumptions' (Gouldner, 1971). These are the basic assumptions that sociologists make about the nature of social life and human behaviour. Gouldner says:

Domain assumptions about man and society might include, for example, dispositions to believe that men are rational or irrational; that society is precarious or fundamentally stable; that social problems will correct themselves without planned intervention; that human behaviour is unpredictable; that man's true humanity resides in his feelings and sentiments.

Gouldner, 1971

Gouldner believes that in practice all sociologists tend to commit themselves to a particular set of domain assumptions, and these direct the way that research is conducted and conclusions are reached. Without some starting point, research cannot proceed and sociological knowledge cannot be created. Domain assumptions about human behaviour – such as whether it is governed by external or internal stimuli and whether it is rational or irrational – will tend to determine whether quantitative or qualitative methods are adopted.

In designing and carrying out research all researchers have to be selective. When producing a questionnaire or planning an interview some questions have to be chosen and others excluded. The choice will be influenced by the theories and hypotheses to which a particular researcher attaches credibility. Once the data have been collected, researchers need to interpret the results, and very often the results do not speak for themselves.

For example, in the debate about secularization, the development of sects, cults and new religious movements has been variously interpreted both as evidence for and as evidence against the theory of secularization, depending on the standpoint of the researchers (see pp. 485–6).

Similarly, the proletarianization thesis has guided much of the research into routine non-manual workers, and Marxists and non-Marxists have tended to produce different types of data, which they have interpreted in different ways, and which have led them to very different conclusions (see pp. 66–9).

Interpretive sociologists have tended to be very critical of those using quantitative methods. They have argued that many sociologists simply impose their own views of reality on the social world. As a result they distort and misrepresent the very reality they seek to understand. Research techniques such as interviews, questionnaires and social surveys are a part of this process of distortion. They come between the sociologist and the social world and so remove any opportunity he or she might have of discovering social reality.

From this point of view, direct observation of everyday activity provides the most likely, if not the only, means of obtaining valid knowledge of the social world. This at least allows researchers to come face to face with the reality they seek to understand. Since the social world is seen to be a construction of its members, that world can only be understood in terms of members' categories and constructs. Thus Jack Douglas argues that sociologists must 'study the phenomena of everyday life on their own terms', they must 'preserve the integrity of that phenomena' (Douglas, 1971).

While phenomenologists might be looking in the right direction, the problem of validity remains unsolved. Though face-to-face with social reality, the observer can only see the social world through his or her own eyes. No two sociologists will see that world in exactly the same way. A participant observer cannot note and record everything that happens in their presence and, like the sociologist devising a questionnaire, has to be selective. In these circumstances the researcher's values will influence what events they believe to be important.

Critical researchers believe it is important to understand how the social world is seen from the viewpoint of those being studied. However, they do not accept that this alone will produce objective knowledge. To them it is also important to look beyond the commonsense knowledge of people to uncover the structures of oppression which lie behind everyday life (see pp. 982–6). However, critics believe that the oppressive structures they discover simply reflect their own prejudices: feminists will always find patriarchal oppression, Marxists will find class exploitation, critical gay sociologists will find homophobia, and anti-racists will find racism.

Because of these sorts of considerations, Derek Phillips argues that 'An investigator's values influence not only the problems he selects for study but also his methods for studying them and the sources of data he uses' (Phillips, 1973). In 'Anti-Minotaur: the myth of a value free sociology' (1975), Gouldner makes a similar point. He argues that, just as the bull and the man in the mythical Minotaur cannot be separated, so facts and values cannot be separated in sociological research.

Weber argued that sociologists' values should be kept out of their research, and that they should not make value judgements – judgements about right or wrong. Gouldner regards this as dishonest. Since sociologists must have values, they should be open about them so that others can decide for themselves to what degree values have influenced the research. Gouldner says:

If sociologists ought not to express their personal values in the academic setting, how then are students to be safeguarded against the unwitting influence of these values which shape the sociologist's selection of problems, his preferences for certain hypotheses or conceptual schemes, and

> *his neglect of others. For these are unavoidable and, in this sense, there is and can be no value-free sociology. The only choice is between an expression of one's values, as open and honest as it can be ... and a vain ritual of moral neutrality which, because it invites men to ignore the vulnerability of reason to bias, leaves it at the mercy of irrationality.*
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> Gouldner, 1975

Some postmodernists such as Lyotard (1984) reject altogether the possibility of producing any objective knowledge. To Lyotard the creation of knowledge is just a language game which can only be judged in terms of its saleability. There is no way of distinguishing between true and untrue knowledge, no way of being objective. For many postmodern writers, knowledge simply reflects the viewpoint and the values of different social groups. No one viewpoint and set of values can be seen as superior to any other. As Martyn Hammersley says, postmodernism involves 'a sustained scepticism and distrust of all claims to knowledge' (Hammersley, 1995).

Given these problems, sociology might appear to consist of little more than personal opinions. If this were the case there would seem little point in the subject existing. However, some sociologists believe that it is positively desirable for sociologists to be committed to certain values. For example, Phil Carspecken, along with other critical social scientists, believes that sociologists should be committed to changing the world.

Nevertheless, this does not prevent sociologists from trying to avoid bias in their research. Although humans might view the world differently, there is an objective world which 'resists' human action. For example, a person cannot walk through a brick wall whether they think it exists or not. The way the material world resists our actions provides some basis for reaching agreement about objective statements. Truth claims – claims that you have made an objective statement – are based upon reaching such agreements about what does and does not exist. These agreements in turn can be used to evaluate the claims of different theories. A critical researcher cannot therefore find whatever they want to find.

Empirical investigations, which are more than the subjective interpretations of individuals, mean that sociology can be more than just value-laden opinions. Truth claims, even if accepted now, may be rejected at some point in the future. A consensus about what is and is not true may break down. However, because they are based upon reaching agreements about what is true, they have a more solid foundation than individual interpretations.

Carspecken even argues that, up to a point, values can be evaluated as well. He uses the example of somebody arguing that poverty is not bad because 'there has always been poverty and always will be; it is natural' (Carspecken 1996). In this case the value claim that poverty is not bad can be critically examined by using examples of societies which have no poverty, and by trying to show that some things which are natural are not necessarily good. Carspecken says, 'We might point to many things in nature that are morally repugnant to human beings and claim that humans must alter nature and establish morality through their own efforts.'

Such arguments can only proceed by finding some sort of common ground – something which all those discussing the issue can agree is good or bad. Such common ground may not always be attainable, but often it is, and some rational evaluation of values becomes possible.

If Carspecken's views are correct, then values are integral to sociology and indeed to all disciplines, but that does not prevent rational debate and the empirical testing of theories. Sociology can make claims about the truth and hope to gain acceptance for them. From this viewpoint, sociologists should also accept and welcome a commitment to using the production of sociological knowledge to try to improve society.