AN OVERVIEW OF RESEARCH METHODS

Introduction

Sociologists seek to answer questions and develop theories about the social world. Theories are sets of abstract general ideas. Sociological theories usually take the form of explanations of how or why social life follows the patterns that it does.

A good theory is one that successfully explains all the available evidence that can be found about the topic in question. The test of a theory is whether it stands up to the evidence. If a theory fails to explain the evidence fully, then we need either to modify it or abandon it and replace it with one that does.

But where and how do we obtain the evidence? Sociologists engage in empirical research — that is, research to obtain facts about the real world — using a variety of research methods to gather information. The findings of this research are used to test sociological theories.

This Unit Guide focuses on the different research methods sociologists use to gather their evidence. It begins with an overview of the different types of data and the practical, ethical and theoretical issues associated with the choice of research methods. We then look at crime and deviance as a research context. After which we go on to look at the strengths and limitations of the major research methods used by sociologists. We also examine the usefulness of each method in relation to the study of crime and deviance.

In their research, sociologists make use of data from two types of source:

- **Primary data**, collected by sociologists themselves for their own research purposes. To gather it, they use methods such as questionnaires, interviews, observation and experiments.

- **Secondary data**, collected or created by someone else for their own purposes, but which the sociologist can then use. Sources include official statistics produced by government, and personal and public documents.

Data may be either quantitative or qualitative:

- **Quantitative data** are in numerical form. Examples include official statistics and most data from questionnaires, structured interviews and experiments.

- **Qualitative data** give a ‘feel’ for what something is like. Examples include data from participant observation, unstructured interviews and personal documents.

When selecting which research method(s) to use, sociologists need to take practical, ethical and theoretical considerations into account.
Researching victims of crime

With crimes such as drug deals there may be no easily identifiable victim.

It is not always self-evident who is a victim. For example, some may be partially responsible for the offence (starting a fight, for example), while others reject the label of ‘victim’ because it implies weakness.

Not everyone who is a victim of crime knows they are. This is especially true with corporate crime.

Some victimization is hidden from view — for example, domestic violence and child abuse.

Being a victim of crime is often traumatic and this has an important impact on the research process.

Most research with victims has to be retrospective and so is dependent on their memory.

Researching societal reactions

Content analysis of large quantities of media output also takes time.

The structure of media ownership and control makes the process of news creation difficult to investigate.

The media may trigger moral panics, but there are problems studying the process.

Measuring public responses to media messages also difficult.

It is hard to know how much deviance is ‘real’ and predates the panic, and how much is amplified. It is impossible to re-create the process in laboratory environments.

Different researchers interpret media messages differently.
We can identify themes running through the topics you have just read. These include:

- issues of legality and danger
- access to respondents
- availability of sampling frames
- ethical issues
- rapport and gaining trust
- confidentiality
- concealment and distortion

Draw up a table using these seven themes. Now go through the topic and find as many examples of each theme as you can, including the study of criminals, victims and the agencies of social control.

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