

# 1 Doing Sociology

## **What is sociology and social science?**

You probably chose to study sociology because you are interested in people. If you aren't interested in people, you should close this book now and try to select another subject!

Sociology is the study of how individuals relate to each other within and between groups. A group consists of two or more people. A family is an example of a small group, and a school is an example of a larger group. The study of how fathers relate to their children is an example of the study of relations within the family. The study of how children's family background can affect how well they do at school is an example of the study of relations between groups.

### **Activity (class)**

Working alone or in small groups, give as many examples as you can think of in a given time (say, ten minutes) of the following:

- 1 small groups other than families,
- 2 large groups other than schools,
- 3 relationships between family members other than fathers and children,
- 4 all the groups (large and small) of which you are a member.

As sociology covers the whole of social life, it is a good basis from which to study other social sciences, that is, economics, psychology and politics. These other social sciences specialise in particular aspects of society. Economics studies how people produce and consume (buy or use) goods and services; psychology specialises in the study of the individual mind and emotions, and politics studies power and decision making.

### **Doing sociological research**

'Research' simply means 'finding out about a particular topic or thing'. In doing research, 'natural scientists' — physicists, chemists, biologists — have an advantage over social scientists. They can often use an experiment. It is usually quite straightforward to experiment with non-living substances and non-animal organic matter, e.g. rocks, light waves, plants, etc, but there are often both practical and moral problems in experimenting on people. For instance, a sociologist cannot make people live in poverty simply to find out about the effects of poverty on them. There would be general agreement that this would be morally wrong, and in practice, few people would volunteer for such an experiment! Instead, the researcher must investigate poverty as and where it actually exists in the real world. Of course, it is not only social scientists who face moral problems in the use of experiments. Many people feel that the use of animals in experiments on the possible effects of new drugs also raises moral issues.



*Social scientists face some problems  
natural scientists don't.*

There are different ways in which a researcher, whether a natural or a social scientist, might go about tackling a piece of research, but the steps shown in Figure 1.1 are useful as a model. The left-hand column gives the stages, and the right-hand column gives an example from sociology of how this might work.

Figure 1.1

### The stages of research

- 1 Ask a question
- 2 Suggest a hypothesis (in everyday speech, 'hypothesis' is often called a 'theory', i.e. your suggested answer or 'guess' to the question you have posed)
- 3 Select your method(s)
- 4 Collect your data (another word for information)
- 5 Present your data
- 6 Draw conclusions, particularly with regard to whether your data have tended to support your hypothesis — in other words, does it look as though your hypothesis might be correct?

### Example

- 1 Do women spend more or less time on housework today than 40 or 50 years ago?
- 2 As there are now so many labour-saving devices, e.g. washing machines, microwave ovens, women are probably spending less time on housework than their grandmothers did
- 3 Checking earlier research into the topic; interviewing housewives
- 4 Find out what the average weekly time spent on housework was in the 1930s and 1940s. You may have to interview some elderly women to do this. Then, carefully choose a number of younger housewives and ask them questions which would show the average amount of time they spend doing different tasks
- 5 Write a report on your question, your hypothesis, your methods and the information collected. This would probably include tables, an example of your questionnaire, and extracts from the interviews
- 6 How does the average time spent on housework by the women in your group compare with the earlier research? How can the findings be explained in relation to your hypothesis? Suppose women are spending as long or even longer on housework than they used to? What have you found which might explain this?

### Activity (class)

Working alone or in small groups, take each of the following questions which a sociologist might ask about an aspect of society and try to suggest a hypothesis, and how you might collect the information to test that hypothesis. (We will be looking more closely at sociological methods in the next section, but you can start to develop your 'sociological imagination' and think of ideas.)

- 1 Why do some young people join gangs?

- 2 Why do many long-term unemployed people suffer from higher-than-average rates of depression and other illness?
- 3 Why do some people do better at school than others?
- 4 What is it like to live in a small, isolated, rural community, such as might be found in the Shetland Isles? (If you already live in such a community, develop a hypothesis about living in a large, urban area.)
- 5 What makes people satisfied with their work?
- 6 Do scenes of violence on television and in films lead some people to commit violent acts?

## Sociological methods

Without perhaps realising it, you already use a whole range of methods to get information about your own society. For example, you watch, listen, ask questions, read, and perhaps send away for information. The main difference between all that and 'doing' sociological research is that sociologists are more *systematic* (organised) in choosing and using their methods, and in how they make sense of, and use, the information they collect.

Information you obtain for yourself, in other words, information which only exists because you have gone out and collected it, is known as *primary data*. Thus, information you obtain from people by questionnaires, or by watching groups of people going about their work, is *primary data*. Information which already exists, such as government reports or statistics, newspaper articles or textbooks, is *secondary data*.

## **Observation and participant observation**

In the following description of sociological methods, each will be illustrated by an example based on a large supermarket, like the ones in which some of you may have part-time jobs. This will show you that the *social situation* can be investigated using a variety of methods, and that the different methods will give you different kinds of information — all useful, but different.

### **Observation**

This simply means 'looking' — but you must first decide *what* you are going to look at, and *why*. Suppose you find that many people prefer shopping at supermarket X rather than at supermarket Y, even though the prices are largely the same. You might develop a hypothesis that the reason for this is that the check-out staff at supermarket X are particularly pleasant and friendly. You could then spend some time observing each group of check-out staff over a period of time, noting, for example, how many times they looked at customers, how many times they smiled, whether they said 'hello' and 'goodbye', how many customers they appeared to know by name, and so on. Your observations would need to be noted down accurately as soon as possible after you had made them, or even as you were making them. The good observer will find a way of blending with the background, otherwise the people under study will spend too much time looking at the observer looking at them! In the supermarket example, rather than hanging around the check-outs, you would probably volunteer to do the family shopping for a given period, and also accompany friends on their shopping trips too.

#### **Activity (class)**

Think of another situation where a hypothesis could be tested by observation — not necessarily in a supermarket.

### **Participant observation**

This method is also about looking and listening, only this time, the sociologist is a part of the group, instead of a 'bystander'. In our supermarket example, suppose another hypothesis regarding the two stores were that employees in supermarket X were happy in their jobs because they had very good relationships with supervisors and managers. To do a participant observation study, you would need to be an employee. Again, you would need to think carefully about what you were going to observe — for example, what does 'good relationships' mean, and how can you tell if they are present? This time, you would be getting firsthand experience of how employees were treated by supervisors and managers, but you would need to observe and listen to the experience of all your fellow workmates as well; your own experiences alone would not be sufficient — you might be related to the boss! Participant observation can be carried out with the knowledge and consent of those being observed, in which case it is called 'overt' (open), or in secret, in which case it is called 'covert' (hidden). It is more polite and considerate to let people know if you are studying them, especially if the findings are going to be written up and read by other people. Unfortunately, when people know they are being studied, they may change their behaviour. However, as most participant observation takes place over a considerable period of time, it could be argued that behaviour may well go back to 'normal' as people get used to, or even forget, that they are being studied.

#### **Activity (class)**

Think of another situation, not necessarily in a supermarket, where participant observation would be a useful method of research. Say whether you think it should be overt or covert observation.

### Stimulus question

The method of research used in the first extract is participant observation, and that used in the second extract is non-participant observation. Read the extracts carefully, and then answer the questions.

#### ITEM A (participant observation)

(Sallie Westwood was studying the largely female work force of a large knitwear factory.)

I was a participant observer in one department, where I watched and listened, talked and worked, and generally joined in the life of the shop floor. The problems associated with this method are well known, but though I am aware of the criticisms, I am unimpressed. This does not mean that there were no practical problems. I had to find a way of keeping lots of notes, but in ways which did not intrude on my relations with the women. I took notes during the day which formed the basis for field notes, which I wrote up at the end of every day, and it was not long before the writing-up period was longer than the hours I spent in the factory. It became more complicated once I started to move beyond the factory and into the women's houses, or when I started to go out with groups of women in the evenings or on day-trips.

(Adapted from Sallie Westwood, *All Day, Every Day*, Pluto Press, 1984.)

#### Questions

- 1 Give one thing which Sallie Westwood did as part of her participant observation study. (Item A) (1 mark)
- 2 What practical problem did Sallie Westwood find in carrying out her study? (Item A) (1 mark)
- 3 How did she overcome this? (2 marks)
- 4 Would you say that the study in Item A was overt or covert participant observation? Give a reason for your answer. (2 marks)

#### ITEM B (non-participant observation)

When I began my study of Churchmans, a tobacco factory in Bristol, I was met with astonishment from management; what could I possibly want to know about 'factory girls'? Was I, then, a 'troublemaker'? On the shop floor I was met with a mixture of suspicion and curiosity. I was not an employee, and had to explain that I felt many people had no idea what factory life was like and I wanted to listen, learn and write about it. Slowly, I became a familiar figure, with notebook and cassette recorder in hand, and suspicion turned to amusement, even sympathy: 'Go on, my love; I think it's a good thing: people ought to know how people live — not just think about themselves.'

(Anna Pollert, 'Girls, Wives, Factory Lives', in *New Society*, 22 October 1981.)

- 5 Why were the management at Churchmans concerned about Anna Pollert? (Item B) (1 mark)
- 6 Why was Anna Pollert doing the research? (Item B) (1 mark)
- 7 Why did the employees begin to accept Anna Pollert? (2 marks)
- 8 Give two methods of collecting data referred to in the stimulus materials. Discuss one advantage and one disadvantage for each method. (10 marks)

### Social surveys — interviews and questionnaires

A social survey involves the collection of information about a particular group of people, usually by interviewing or questioning members of the group. As it is not usually possible, for reasons of time or cost, to ask questions of everybody in the group you are interested in (for example, *all* housewives), researchers usually choose a *part* of the group, or a 'sample'. The aim of a sample is to make the people in it as similar as possible to the people in the whole group, so that if, for example, 53 per cent of the people in the sample answered 'yes' to a particular question, the researchers could know that, if they had been able to ask everybody, *about* 50 per cent would also have said 'yes' to that question. This is called making the sample *representative*. The people in samples have to be chosen very carefully. If, for some reason, the people in the sample are *not* representative of (not similar to) the whole group, we say that the sample is 'biased'. As a general rule, the sample should be as large as possible.

For example, if you were doing research in a school of 2000 pupils (1000 boys and 1000 girls), and if you interviewed only ten pupils, it would be very unlikely that you would have obtained a representative sample. Your sample would possibly have contained one girl and one boy from each of the third,

fourth, fifth, lower sixth and upper sixth years. Try to think of *one* boy and *one* girl in your particular year group who is typical of *all* the pupils in your year. Even if you are able to think of such a person, he or she might not have been the one chosen in the sample! If you had been able to have 100 pupils in the sample, however, it would have been less likely to be biased.

There are two main types of samples — *random* and *quota*. Random samples are helpful in avoiding bias. A random sample is one in which every person in the whole group has an equal chance of being picked. A quick way of taking a random sample is to put everybody's name in the group on a separate slip of paper, fold them and put them in a hat, and draw out the required number for your sample, rather like a prize lottery. Sometimes, of course, the group involved is very large (such as all members of a political party), or the researcher may not even know people's names, such as when a whole town is being surveyed. In such a case, each person or household is given a number, and the sample will be chosen by selecting numbers, often from random number tables (yes, they really do exist!).

Sometimes, samples are *stratified*. This means that the whole group is divided into separate sub-groups which are then sampled separately. For instance, suppose that you wanted to take a sample of students in a college class in which there were 21 males and nine female students. If you wanted to be sure of representing both males and females, you would divide or stratify the class list into two parts — males and females — and sample each separately. This is called a *stratified sample*.

#### **Question**

Using the example of the college class from the last paragraph, what would the number of (a) males and (b) females be in the sample if you sampled every third member from each group?

The second main type of sample is the *quota* sample. In this case, the researcher decides what groups he or she is interested in — rather as in the case of the stratified sample. He or she then takes a certain number (the quota) from each group. Many opinion polls are based on quota samples. For example, there must be a certain quota of middle-class and working-class people, males and females, young, middle-aged and elderly people, northerners and southerners, etc, if the opinion poll is going to be representative of the population as a whole.

#### **Activity**

Suppose that you are going to do a survey of your town or village, and you have to draw up a quota sample which will ensure that all groups are represented. Which categories (groups) would you put people in? The list above will help, but you should be able to think of others which take into account the nature of your particular area.

#### **Interviews**

Interviews take place when a researcher asks somebody (the respondent) some questions. There are different types of interview and different types of question, and the main ones are summarised below.

##### *Structured interviews*

Each respondent is asked the same questions in the same order.

##### *Semi-structured interviews*

The interviewer has a list of topics to be covered, but can choose the order and the wording of the questions asked.



Note: once you have decided how to select your sample — you must not 'doctor' it.



Questionnaires can reach widely scattered possible respondents — but they are not always returned!

### Unstructured interviews

The interviewer knows the general topic he or she is interested in, but is free to follow up things the respondent says and allow the interview to develop into what is more like a 'normal' conversation.

Interviews, particularly unstructured ones, are often tape-recorded, so that the questions and answers can flow naturally, and the respondent is not distracted by the interviewer trying to scribble everything down, and the interviewer is free to devote all his or her attention to the interview, also being able to notice gestures and facial expressions.

### Closed questions

These limit the answers to either Yes/No/Don't Know, or give the respondent the choice of ticking one of a number of pre-selected answers. In other words, the researcher has decided on the range of answers allowed. An example of a closed question would be: 'Do you consider that there is a need for a new community centre in this area? Yes/No/Don't Know'.

### Open-ended questions

These are like 'normal' questions, and the respondent is able to answer in any way he or she chooses. An example of an open-ended question would be: 'What are your views on the proposed new community centre?'

### Questionnaires

The questionnaire is like an interview put into writing, and answers are usually written down. Some questionnaires are sent to people through the post, while others are directly asked by the researchers or their assistants. Questionnaires are like structured interviews: all the questions are identical and pre-set, though both closed and open-ended questions may be used. Usually, the questionnaire method is used to reach a large number of respondents. The postal questionnaire is probably the cheapest and quickest way of doing this.

The main problem with postal questionnaires is that not everybody sends them back, i.e., they have a low response rate. Most questions on postal questionnaires are simple and closed so that answers can easily be counted. The Census — a survey of all households in the country which takes place every ten years — is perhaps the best-known questionnaire. You or your parents may also have been stopped in the street by market researchers with questionnaires about shopping habits, or which television/radio programmes you have watched or listened to.

It is actually very difficult to write good questions for interviews or questionnaires. A 'good' question is one which is clearly worded, easily understood, obtains the information which is required, does not try to ask too many things in the one question, does not 'push' respondents towards one particular answer (i.e. is not 'loaded' or biased), and is not embarrassing or offensive. Social surveys are usually so expensive to run that a small-scale 'mini-survey', called the 'pilot study', is often carried out first, to try out the questionnaires in case something needs to be altered.

### Activity (class)

The questions below are examples of poor questions — the sort to be avoided! Study them carefully, and try to decide what is wrong with each of them. Then, in a small group or as a class, discuss how each of them could be improved.

- 1 How old are you?
- 2 Do you watch television (a) occasionally (b) often (c) a lot?
- 3 Don't you agree that unemployed people get too much benefit?

- 4 Have you bought a new washing machine, microwave oven or vacuum cleaner within the last six months, and if so, are you satisfied?
- 5 Some people say that to have newspapers with models posing topless is a way of exploiting women and they should stop doing it. Do you agree?
- 6 Do you need a deodorant?

In the supermarket example below, it would be possible to find out why people preferred supermarket X to supermarket Y by the use of interviews or questionnaires. How staff felt about relationships with supervisors/managers could also have been investigated using these methods.

### Questions

- 1 What would be the problems of using a postal questionnaire to find out why some people preferred supermarket X to supermarket Y? (3 marks)
- 2 If you wanted to find out how the staff felt about the way they were treated by supervisors/managers, would you choose a structured or an unstructured interview? Give reasons for your answer. (5 marks)

### Quantitative and qualitative data

Information which is, or can be, expressed in terms of numbers, percentages, tables, bar charts, pie charts, etc, is known as *quantitative* data. Information obtained from questionnaires and structured interviews is often of this kind.

Information on people's feelings about issues or events, or descriptions of their life-styles, is known as *qualitative* data. Information from unstructured interviews and participant observation is often of this kind.

### Stimulus question

Read the following extracts and answer the questions.

#### ITEM A

The fifth year in Jane's school had recently changed from single-sex (boys and girls separated for lessons) to mixed-sex classes. Jane had become interested in whether pupils really liked the change, and especially what the girls thought about it. She had a hunch that more boys liked the change than girls did. She decided to do a social survey on this topic as part of her Sociology GCSE project. Her teacher agreed, after having cleared the matter with the Head Teacher. Altogether there were 100 fifth formers, 25 in each of four sets. Jane decided that she would interview only twenty of the 100 in order to keep the survey down to a manageable size. There were 60 girls and 40 boys in the fifth year. Jane divided the fifth-year pupil list into boys and girls, and put them into two separate alphabetical lists. She then interviewed every fifth person on each list; twenty people in all. She was confident that this would produce a representative sample of fifth-year pupils.

### Questions

- 1 How many pupils were in Jane's sample? (Item A) (1 mark)
- 2 How many girls were there in Jane's sample? (1 mark)
- 3 What is meant by 'respondents'? (1 mark)
- 4 Jane divided her sample into boys and girls. What is the name given to a sample divided in this way? (1 mark)

#### ITEM B Extracts from Jane's Interview Schedule

##### Extract 1

Name of respondent ..... Male/Female .....  
Taught in: Class A Class B Class C Class D

##### Extract 2

Do you prefer being taught in a mixed-sex or single-sex class? Mixed/Single

##### Extract 3

Can you say a few words about why girls find boys a nuisance in class?

- 5 What is meant by a 'representative sample'? (2 marks)
- 6 Why was it important that Jane's sample was representative? (2 marks)
- 7 Give two reasons why Jane might have asked the pupils interviewed to state which class they were in. (2 marks)
- 8 Which question is open: Extract 2 or Extract 3? (Item B) (1 mark)
- 9 Which question is more likely to produce quantitative data: Extract 2 or Extract 3? (Item B) (1 mark)
- 10 What criticisms could be made of the way in which Jane has worded the question in Item B, Extract 3? Rephrase the question in your own words to deal with the criticism. (3 marks)

### Activity: mini-project suggestions

At this point, you may find it useful to do a very small piece of primary research yourself (perhaps using secondary research to suggest a hypothesis or to compare against your own findings). You will need to discuss this as a class with your teacher. You should choose an area of social life which you know well already, such as the family, school, leisure or work. Your mini-project could take the form of a pilot survey, which could later form the basis of your GCSE project. You could also use this exercise as a piece of course work.

#### Suggestions

**Family** — Compare the leisure activities of two adults of the same sex, one of whom has two or more small children, and the other of whom has none. A hypothesis might be based on the guess that a person with small children will not be able to have many expensive or time-consuming hobbies and might have much less leisure time than a person with no dependent children. What would be the best method to use in this case?

**School** — Do teachers give equal amounts of attention to both boy and girl pupils, or does one sex get more attention than the other? If your school has links with a local primary school, you might be allowed to observe one or two classes for about half-an-hour each. If you were fortunate, you might even get permission to video the classes. What would your hypothesis be? Would it be a good idea to tell the teacher what the purpose of the observation was? How would you actually measure 'attention'?

**Work** — We have already used a work situation to look at sociological methods. In a mini-project, you would be attempting much less than in the examples used earlier. You could do an hour or so of observation, or half-a-dozen questionnaires, or an interview. You could even use more than one of these methods. Most good projects use more than one method to produce data, but it is not necessary for you to do so at this stage. You could investigate job satisfaction, or how people come to choose their present type of work, or how shop staff dealt with customers.

#### Advice for your mini-project

- 1 Don't try to do too much. At this stage you are mainly trying to gain the skill to design a piece of research and to gain research experience. Nobody expects world-shattering findings!
- 2 Do go through all the stages of research:  
Ask a question.  
(Perhaps) formulate a hypothesis.  
Choose your method(s).  
Collect your data.  
Describe and present your data.  
Explain your data.
- 3 Finally, assess how good your choice and use of method was.  
What went right?  
What (if anything) went wrong?  
What would you change if you did the same type of research on a larger scale?  
What would stay the same?

#### Activity (class)

- 1 Read somebody else's mini-project and try to give as much helpful comment on it as you can.
- 2 Give a summary report of your mini-project to the class who can then comment.

#### Structured questions

You are a sociologist who wishes to do research about why some teenagers become members of 'gangs'.

- 1 Suggest an appropriate method for carrying out your research, saying why you would choose that particular method. (4 marks)
- 2 Briefly describe all the different stages of the research, from start to finish. (8 marks)
- 3 What difficulties do you think that there might be in carrying out your research? How would you try to deal with them? (8 marks)

#### Key words

Data	Participant observation
Hypothesis	Questionnaire
Interview	Sample
Observation	Survey