SOCIOLOGY SHORT CUTS 1

Doing Sociological Research

Activities And Web Links

Introduction to Social Research
Social Surveys
Interviews
Observation
1. Introduction to Social Research

Activity 1: Key Criteria

Ask students to try to answer the following questions:

• What do you understand by the word research?

• Can you give an example of any research you have done as part of your everyday life? What ‘methods’ did you use?

• Imagine a sociologist is coming to our school to study us. Can you think of two ways their account might differ from that of the teachers or students?

• How can sociologists check out, or test, whether they are doing ‘good research’?

• Write down three qualities you would look for in someone you might consider dating or having a relationship with.

[If, for various reasons this isn’t a suitable example, the same point can be made with three things they would look for in, for example, a good friend or a teacher.]

Asking students to read out their answers to the final question can be quite amusing and lead to a lot of not strictly syllabus specific observations! However in our experience, the idea that if they value, for example, good looks, a sense of humour or kindness above all else, they’re going to be attracted to people exhibiting those qualities - and it helps them to understand the concept of criteria.

This is then a good point to reinforce the key research criteria that were illustrated in the video: reliability, validity and representativeness, maybe using the power points we have provided.

The final point to make here is that these criteria are ideals, or goals, for researchers. Refer students back to the end of the video where students talk about having to compromise their ideals about an ideal partner. Ask them why it may be much the same for researchers.

Supplementary Material:

Introduction to Research.ppt
Activity 2: Reliability and Validity

Jess, the sociologist in the video, was researching social interaction in a secondary school. She used two different methods:

• Questionnaire surveys
• Participant observation

Divide students into teams and ask them the following questions based on the video.
[If you want to turn this activity into a short game, award 1 mark for each correct answer].

1. Data from Jess’ survey is likely to be highly reliable. True or false?
2. For an extra mark can you say why?
3. Data from Jess’ survey is likely to be highly valid? True or false?
4. For an extra mark can you say why?
5. What is participant observation?
6. Data from Jess’ observational study is likely to be highly reliable. True or false?
7. For an extra mark can you say why?
8. Data from Jess’ observational study is likely to be highly valid? True or false?
9. For an extra mark can you say why?
10. What is the term used to describe a sociologist using two or more methods to study the same problem?

Supplementary Material:

Reliability pdf
Validity pdf
Activity 3: Representativeness and Sampling

Buy (or make if you fancy yourself as a celebrity chef) either a large pizza or a cake. Alternatively, a bag of pick-and-mix sweets would do just as well.

Explain the concept of population using the cake or pizza as the population of interest.

Pull off a bit of the crust and eat it. Then ask students if this is a representative sample, and if not, why not? Repeat by pulling off and eating a bit of the topping from the middle. Ask the students how you need to cut the cake / pizza up to ensure a representative sample that includes all elements.

Then cut it up and share around the whole class. Discuss sample size by asking whether their portion was enough/not enough to be a representative sample of the cake / pizza.

This activity can easily be integrated into a lesson and students remember it because eating the food made the lesson different, so it stands out in their minds. Many are really chuffed that you have gone to the effort of buying or making (or buying) them food.

Supplementary Material

Representativeness pdf
Activity 1: Concepts and Indicators

Remind students that Kiel, the researcher in the programme, explained how he ‘measured’ students’ socio-economic background or, in more everyday language, how wealthy their families were by using various indicators.

Explain that this activity will attempt to measure individual students’ wealth and, in particular, how many are in ‘relative poverty’.

NB. If poverty is a sensitive topic for your class the same points can be made using other examples, such as student earnings (how many ‘high earners’ in each group?), or ‘integration’ (number of close family and friendship ties).

Divide students into (at least) two groups based on some sort of division – such as areas of the town, gender etc. Nominate a researcher from each group. Give researchers very short questionnaires to administer to their group.

Make the definitions of poverty (or whatever topic you choose) and the indicators different for each group. For example, in one survey the ‘poverty level’ could be set at ‘having less than £7.50 a week to spend on yourself’, while for the other group it is set higher at say, ‘having less than £15 a week’.

The researchers report back the findings.

Baring a freak result, there will almost certainly be more ‘poverty’ in the group with the higher, or highest, indicator.

• Ask students if they can think of some reasons for the differences, before (if necessary) drawing them back to the differing measuring tools.

• Ask students what they consider to be relative poverty. What criteria would they include? How do they justify their choice? For example, is not being able to afford a mobile phone a criterion of ‘poverty’

This exercise should help students understand that quantitative data aren’t just ‘out there’ waiting to be collected, they have to be constructed by using concepts and indicators.

Sociologists can only measure concepts of things like poverty, socio-economic background or educational motivation; measuring something in sociology, therefore, involves making choices and the concepts and indicators selected will influence the data that is collected.
Activity 2: Sampling

This Activity involves students using different types of sampling.

Begin with some ‘simple’ questions to focus the students.

• What is a sample in research?
• Why do sociologists use samples?
• How many different types of sampling can you identify?

A. Simple Random Sampling

Group 1 takes the name of every student in your class from the register, writes them on separate pieces of paper and draws 25% of the names at random. Explain that this is a simple random sample.

How representative of your class was the sample Group 1 created (for example, does it accurately reflect the relative percentages of males and females in the class?).

B. Systematic Sampling

A second group, using your class register as a sampling frame, constructs a 25% sample by selecting every fourth name.

How similar / different is this sample from the simple random sample?

C. Stratified Random Sampling

A third group identifies a known characteristic of the group (for example, girls outnumbering boys by 2 to 1). They then construct a 25% stratified random sample with (from the example above) girls outnumbering boys by 2 to 1.

Compare the results from the stratified sample with those gained from the simple random and systematic samples. Which type of sample gave the most-representative outcome?

D. Quota sampling

Group 4 simply takes the names of the 25% of the class who are nearest to them. How does this sample compare with the other samples? For example, it’s important to note here that any absent students cannot be selected. Students can also be asked why sociologists sometimes have to use samples that are not likely to be representative.
Activity 3: Evaluation

The video ends by asking ‘if you were one of the students filling in Kiel’s questionnaire, how much do you think it would really tell him about your social background and educational motivation?’

This activity is designed to explore this question further.

Give students a copy of Kiel’s questions on Motivation (reproduced on next page) and ask them to fill it in as honestly as they can!

• Ask students to work out their own ‘motivation score’ – giving themselves 5 for each strongly agree, 4 for each agree, 3 for each neutral and so on.

• Ask them if they think their score reflects how motivated they really are and, if not, why not.? If you’re feeling brave you could also ask students if they were surprised by other students’ scores.

• Ask 3 or 4 students who have ticked the same box to say what they actually meant by strongly agree, agree or whatever.

• Ask students if there were any questions where the answer they gave was not what they really meant.

• Ask students if there was anything they would have liked to have said about their educational motivation that the questionnaire did not give them the opportunity to say.

• Ask the students what they understood by a “good grade” a “top university” and “going out”. Was the meaning of these phrases the same for each student and, if not, what does this tell us?

In our experience, students will invariably be able to give a range of different interpretations of the same item, some will be able to illustrate how an answer they gave was not what they actually meant and some will give examples of things they would have said but weren’t asked.

In this way students can discover some of the limitations of questionnaire surveys for themselves. It is more likely that the ideas will then stay in their mind and improve exam performance.

Supplementary Material

Social Surveys ppt
Attitudes to Education

Look at the following statements and identify the extent to which you agree or disagree with them. (Please circle)

1. I enjoy coming to school / college:
   - Strongly agree
   - Agree
   - Neutral
   - Disagree
   - Strongly disagree

2. I enjoy the academic work at college:
   - Strongly agree
   - Agree
   - Neutral
   - Disagree
   - Strongly disagree

3. Getting good grades at A-Level is really important to me:
   - Strongly agree
   - Agree
   - Neutral
   - Disagree
   - Strongly disagree

4. I want to go to a top university:
   - Strongly agree
   - Agree
   - Neutral
   - Disagree
   - Strongly disagree

5. Getting homework done is more important than going out:
   - Strongly agree
   - Agree
   - Neutral
   - Disagree
   - Strongly disagree

6. I would never take time off school / college unless I had to:
   - Strongly agree
   - Agree
   - Neutral
   - Disagree
   - Strongly disagree
Activity 1: Semi-structured (focused) Interviews:

The idea here is to help to illustrate the process of semi-structured interviewing from both the researcher’s and the respondent’s point of view.

Divide students into pairs: one takes the role of interviewer and the other the role of respondent.

The interviewer is given the schedule used by Christine in her study of educational decision making.

**Interview schedule.**

1. Can you tell me your parents’ occupations?
2. Are you going to university when you leave school/college?
   - If no, why not?
   - If yes, which university, what subject and why did you make these choices?
   - If not sure, can you elaborate?
3. How did you reach this decision?
   - Who did you talk to about this in your immediate family?
   - Who did you talk to about this outside your immediate family?
   - Were there any other influences on your decision?
4. What do you intend doing after college or after university?
   - Why do you want to do this?
   - Did anyone influence/help you with these decisions/If so, who?
5. Where do you see yourself in ten years time?

Interviews should last about 10 minutes.

Continues over...
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Continued...

Researchers are then asked to organise their findings, while interviewees are asked to write down their feelings about the interview (e.g. their preference, what they revealed, didn’t reveal etc.).

These reports and impressions are then written up for homework or done in class on the day.

The activity and the short reports arising from it are then used as the basis for addressing some of the following questions:

• For researchers: What are some of the main issues to be bear in mind when designing unstructured interviews (e.g. keeping participants on topic)

• For respondents: What did you like/not like about the interview? Were there things you expected to be asked about but weren’t?

• Ask the interviewers to read out their impressions of the interview (what problems were involved – recording and interpreting data, keeping to the point, rapport, etc.)

• Ask the respondents to read out their impressions of the interview (how easy / difficult was it to answer or know what was required etc.).

• Comparing interview methods: what advantages / disadvantages did the students find with semi-structured interviews as compared with the structured interviews they did previously.

Put a list of research topics on the board and ask students whether they would use structured or unstructured interviews.
Activity 2: Matching Pairs

Make two set of cards on different backgrounds from the templates on the following pages.

One set identifies a type of interview or a general issue arising from interviews, the other set provides a quote from the researcher.

Most of these issues are raised in the video.

Students have to try to match the pairs (which are given in the correct order on the templates):

Cards on the left hand side of the page = Type of interview or issue.

Cards on the right hand side of the page = Researcher’s quote.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>A leading question</th>
<th>“Do you want to go to university just because your friends are going?”</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>An ethical issue</td>
<td>“I’m not telling interviewees the real purpose of my research”.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Data analysis</td>
<td>“I’m going over transcripts of the interviews trying to identify common themes”.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interviewer bias</td>
<td>“I am always aware that my body language, expression or follow-up questions may be influencing the interviewee’s answers”.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interview effect</td>
<td>“Sometimes interviewees just give you the answer they think you want to hear”.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rapport</td>
<td>“To get good data you have to make the interviewee feel relaxed and comfortable”.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>---------</td>
<td>-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Semi-structured interview</td>
<td>“I have an interview schedule but I sometimes change it and adapt my questions to the replies of the interviewee”.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Structured interview</td>
<td>“I’m asking exactly the same questions in exactly the same order”.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Verstehen</td>
<td>“I’m trying to find out what it was like for the interviewee, I’m trying to get their point of view”.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unstructured interview</td>
<td>“These interviews are more like ordinary conversations”.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Activity 3: Focus Groups

In this activity you take the role of focus group facilitator.

On a whiteboard / OHT write the question “What factors affect educational achievement” and invite the students to brainstorm their ideas. As each student suggests a factor and records it on the board / OHT.

Students should be encouraged to suggest whatever they want (and you should not ignore any suggested factor) but encourage them not to elaborate at this stage (e.g. if someone suggests “gender” as a factor do not ask them to develop the idea yet).

Once all factors have been exhausted the next stage is to focus on each suggested factor and develop it in relation to the question. For example, if gender is a possible factor ask the student group to elaborate on how it might affect educational achievement. Record the responses on the board / OHT.

In this way, students quickly build-up an impressive amount of information about educational achievement.

Optional work:

1. Relate possible explanations from the brainstorming to research. Ask students to think of appropriate research designs to test these ideas.

2. For a sample of possible explanations ask the students to suggest an appropriate research method to test the explanation.

Supplementary Material:

[Interviews.ppt]
Activity 1: Observing the Observer

Prior to the class prepare a list of what you think are the most significant ideas raised in the Observational Research video (these can be used to fill in anything missed by students during the exercise). You might also want to prepare a list of advantages / disadvantages associated with participant observational research. Before you show the video segment, split the class into two groups (more if it’s a large class, but try to keep the groups fairly small if possible).

**Group 1:** These are designated as *covert observers* (they don’t need to know this at this stage) and they should be told they are *not allowed* to take notes while watching the video. They are to watch, listen and remember any important ideas.

**Group 2:** These are designated as *overt observers* (again, they don’t need to know this) and they are told they *should* take notes while watching the video.

Show the video without interruption and when it has finished, tell the groups they have 10 minutes (or whatever suits the length of the class) to assemble a set of notes that covers the key ideas raised in the video. Each group should produce a master copy of their observations. Start the groups on their task and then go to the overt group and quietly tell them they can ask you one question (or more if you judge it necessary) about anything they’ve seen in the video. After 6 or 7 minutes return to the overt group and quietly answer any question/s they may have (if possible the covert group should not hear your answer).

Each group (covert and overt) should then give their report to the class, identifying the key aspects of participant observation they have identified.

Ask the class the questions you have prepared. Some questions should refer to what is said (e.g. what types of surveillance did the school use?), some to what is seen (e.g. games being played by students) and there should be a couple from what you have told the overt group (the covert group will probably object here).

This activity can be used to illustrate a number of points.

1. Some of the difficulties of being a covert observer. Develop this by compiling a list of the advantages of overt compared to covert observation. Particularly important here - as illustrated by the Activity - is the ability to ask questions. Balance this list with some of the disadvantages of overt observation.

2. All observation is theory dependent. Different researchers (or groups) will see the ‘same’ thing differently.

3. In observational research researchers don’t usually have a clear-cut theory or hypothesis they are trying to test. Explanation or theory often arises from observation.
Activity 2: Observation Grid

This exercise can be completed in one of two ways:

**a. Whole class:** Print the [Observation Grid pdf](#) file and photocopy onto an OHP acetate. Display the grid on a whiteboard and ask the class to suggest examples of different types of observational research (for example, overt participant observation in a school).

**b. Small group:** Photocopy the [Observation Grid pdf](#) file and distribute to the class. Each group can be asked to generate examples for each segment of the grid (for example, one group looks at overt non-participant observation, another looks at covert participant observation etc.). Alternatively, all of the groups can be asked to identify possible examples for the complete grid. Combine the suggestions on a whiteboard for the whole class.

This exercise can be repeated later in the course, once the students have studied sociological examples of observational research, by asking them to identify sociological studies for each segment of the grid.

Alternatively, photocopy or draw the grid onto a large sheet of paper and attach to the classroom wall. Encourage students to identify examples for each section of the grid as-and-when they come across them during the course.

**Required material:**

[Observation Grid.pdf](#)
Activity 3: Strangers

A key part of thinking sociologically, or developing a sociological imagination, is to try to see the “taken for granted” world around you afresh by looking at it as if you were a stranger. This is particularly important in observational research.

Divide students into small groups.

Ask them to imagine they are from a totally different culture. They are doing a non-participant observation study of your school or college as part of a study on British education.

They should observe, take notes and, if possible, use digital cameras and / or video. They should be asked to question consistently what they would usually have taken for granted as part of school life; for example, the ages and appearance of students, meal times, use of mobiles, lessons, what is posted on notice boards, socialising outside class, interaction with teachers and so on.

Each group should then write up their observations and compare their findings.

Not only does this activity give students some insight into one of the key techniques used by sociologists in observational research, it can also illustrate some of the familiar problems e.g. places that they weren’t able to observe (access), people possibly changing their behaviour (observer effect) different groups “reading” the same thing differently (investigator effect).

Reports can also be evaluated in terms of the key criteria of reliability, validity and representativeness:

Can the same observations be repeated?

Do the researchers believe they were seeing things as they really were or might there have been things distorting their observations?

To what extent do students feel their findings could be generalised?

Supplementary Material:

Observation.ppt
DOING SOCIOLOGICAL RESEARCH

Web Links

1. Introduction to Social Research

http://www.sociology.org.uk/rprocess.pdf
Notes and exercises covering various aspects of the general research process.

Sampling:

www.s-cool.co.uk
Revision notes (with some illustrations) on range of sampling techniques

http://www.wadsworth.com/psychology_d/templates/student_resources/workshops/resch_wrk.html
Notes and online student activities giving a comprehensive overview of a variety of sampling techniques, concepts and issues.

http://www.wadsworth.com/psychology_d/templates/student_resources/workshops/res_methd/surveys/surveys_01.html
The first part of these Notes (with online activities) deals with survey design (using questionnaires) while the second part deals with sampling techniques.

Reliability and Validity:

http://www.wadsworth.com/psychology_d/templates/student_resources/workshops/resch_wrk.html
Notes and online student activities giving a comprehensive overview of reliability and validity (quite advanced in places…).

2. Social Surveys

http://www.ucel.ac.uk/rlos/questionnaire/Default.html
Short presentation using text and Flash graphics to illustrate some basic points about questionnaires. Short activity and assessment questions are also included.

http://student.bmj.com/back_issues/0601/education/187.html
Notes explaining how to design a questionnaire.

http://www.ergonomics4schools.com/lzone/questionnaires.htm
Notes covering questionnaire use, design and problems.

http://www.cc.gatech.edu/classes/cs6751_97_winter/Topics/quest-design/
Comprehensive Notes on a variety of aspects of questionnaire use and design.

http://www.sociology.org.uk/v_home.htm
Two videos (Methods section) covering questionnaires and research ethics.
3. Interviews

http://www.everychildmatters.gov.uk/deliveringservices/targetedyouthsupport/disc
erover/activities/hints/
Hints and tips on conducting focused interviews (both individual and group).

http://www.sociology.org.uk/game1.htm
Online simulation that asks students to examine ideas about reliability, validity and representativeness in the context of interviews relating to crime and deviance.

http://www.sociology.org.uk/methfi.pdf
Outline and brief evaluation of focused interviews as a research method.

4. Observation

http://www.ucel.ac.uk/rlos/p_np_observation/
A short presentation that uses mixture of text and Shockwave Flash graphics / narration (you will need Flash player installed) to illustrate some key points about participant and non-participant observation. Short activity and assessment questions are also included.

www.s-cool.co.uk
Revision notes (with some illustrations) explaining participant observation (includes evaluation and examples).

http://www.connectpublications.co.uk/sociology_central_issues_samples.htm
Sample chapter (in pdf format) from Connect Publications that outlines various aspects of participant observation. Includes a range of student activities.