

Sociology Shortcuts

M4c. Interpretivist Methods

5. Field and Natural Experiments

While experiments are not normally part of the Interpretivist toolbox, experimental methods, in the form of **field** and **natural experiments**, are sometimes used to demonstrate certain features of the social world.

What the two types have in common is they are experiments that take-place outside the **artificial surroundings** of a laboratory. By so doing they avoid some of the problems - such as the **observer effect** - associated with this method.

Although the distinction is not particularly significant for our purpose, field and natural experiments do involve different techniques.

Field experiments are situations set-up by a researcher in a **natural** - or **naturalistic** - **setting**. Both **Zimbardo's** Stanford Prison Experiment and **Haslem and Reicher's** BBC Prison Study, for example, were set in a "prison environment" created by the respective researchers.

The basic principles of field experiments are similar to laboratory-type experiments in that the broad objective is to identify **dependent** and **independent** behavioural **variables** and manipulate (change) the latter to measure possible effects on the former.

Natural experiments are more-**opportunistic** - the researcher takes-advantage of a naturally-occurring situation to observe and compare different outcomes.

Because a natural experiment is not carried-out under **controlled, closed, conditions** this type is sometimes called *opportunity experimentation*; the researcher takes advantage of a *naturally occurring opportunity* to conduct the experiment. Such experiments are normally used in **open systems** (such as the social world) where the environment cannot be closely monitored or easily controlled.

This type of "experimental opportunity" may involve comparing two or more naturally occurring situations to examine their similarities and differences.

For example, two identical twins separated at birth and raised in different families (perhaps, if you're very lucky, even different societies) would provide an opportunity for a **comparative experiment** since it would be possible to identify similarities and differences in the twins' behaviour over time and construct theoretical explanations for such differences and similarities.

Garfinkel (1967)

A series of **breaching experiments** that deliberately violated people's social expectations to reveal **unobservable features** of the social world (such as **norms**) and the various ways people 'construct reality'.

In one experiment **Garfinkel** sent student researchers into restaurants where they were instructed to deliberately mistake customers for waiters while the latter's reactions were secretly observed.

Mann et al. (2003)

This contemporary "breaching experiment" involved researchers going into shops that had security cameras (*surveillance*) and 'reversing this gaze' (*sousveillance*) by filming the shop assistants as they served customers.

By breaking the **surveillance norm**, the experiment demonstrated how it has become an accepted, everyday, *uncontested* part of life in modern societies.

6. Documentary Sources

Qualitative analysis of personal documents is often carried-out using **content analysis**.

1. Conceptual (or Thematic)

Analysis focuses on the *concepts* or *themes* underlying documents (*texts*) and this type is an *extension* of **quantitative** content analysis. Philo and Berry (2004), for example, identified recurring themes in news reports of the Israeli - Palestinian conflict, such as language differences when referring to similar forms of behaviour: Palestinians frequently classed as "terrorists" while Israeli settlers called "extremists" or "vigilantes".

2. Relational (or Textual)

Examines how texts encourage readers to see something in a particular way by relating one idea to something different. Hall (1980) calls this a **preferred reading**: the way text is constructed (how language, pictures and illustrations are used) "tells" the audience how to interpret the information presented (without necessarily appearing to do so). British newspapers, for example, portray sport as a mainly a white male activity.

Strengths

Historical documents can be used for **comparative** purposes - contrasting how people once lived with how we live now is useful for tracking and understanding *social change*. Historical analysis also demonstrates the *diversity* of people's behaviour - things we now take-for-granted may have been seen differently in the past (and vice versa).

Documents can provide **secondary** data in situations where it's not possible to collect primary data. Documents about family life, education and crime may be the only available evidence for a researcher.

The researcher accesses data that would cost **money**, **time** and **effort** to collect personally.

Documentary evidence, such as diaries, may provide highly **valid** qualitative data of great **depth** and **detail**. They may also be used to compare accounts across time to test the validity of current accounts of social behaviour. Pearson (1983) used media accounts going back over 100 years to demonstrate that "hooliganism" has a long history in Britain.

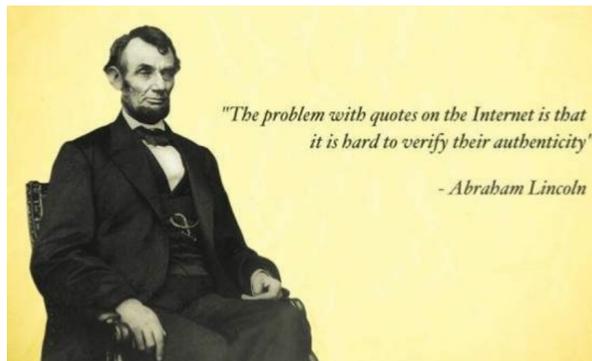
Documents can have two levels of meaning - **denotive** (what they actually say) and **connotive** (what they tell us about whoever produced them). *Newspaper articles*, for example, may be more useful for understanding their writer's beliefs and how they see social problems than for what they actually say about something.

Weaknesses

Documents have **reliability** problems in that they may be **incomplete**, **inaccurate** or **biased**.

Documents such as diaries, newspaper articles and the like tend to have low levels of **representativeness** - they tend to reflect the opinions of individuals or relatively small groups - and this makes them difficult to **generalise**.

This problem is magnified when dealing with historical documents, which may be from a single, individual, source - and there may be uncertainty over the **authenticity** of paper documents. These can be forged and we need to know whether they are originals or copies that may have been changed by other authors.



With electronic documents this problem is hugely magnified given it is relatively easy to **fake** all kinds of text, picture and video sources. This raises issues of **credibility** in that we don't always know

why or by whom a document was created.

In terms of **data control**, therefore, when evaluating the credibility of documentary sources we need to consider their **representativeness**, **authenticity** and **purpose** - by whom and for what reason was the document created? In the Internet age, however, this is not always as simple and straightforward as we might like.