

**Syllabus Area**

**“T**he range of methods, techniques and strategies involved in sociological research:

Surveys, experiments, ethnography, case-studies, content-analysis. Multiple methods. The use of secondary data. The role of values. Ethical issues”.

**Learning Objectives****What?**

The keywords in this unit are:

- **Ethnography**
- **Focused interview**
- **Hierarchically focused interview**
- **Unfocused interview**
- **The Interview Effect**
- **Non-Participant Observation.**
- **Participant Observation (Overt and Covert)**
- **Subjective sociology**
- **Empathy**
- **The Observer Effect.**
- **Impression management**

**Why?**

You will be able to define:

- **Focused and Unfocused interview techniques.**
- **Overt and Covert forms of participant Observation.**
- **The Interview and Observer effects.**

**How?**

You will be able to apply your knowledge to:

- **An understanding of primary, qualitative, data collection methods.**

**Decision**

You will be able to evaluate:

- **The difference between objective and subjective sociology.**
- **The uses and limitations of focused and non-focused interviews.**
- **The uses and limitations of overt and covert participant observation.**

**Primary Research Methods.**

What?

first of these two Units on **primary methods of research** I noted that sociologists use a wide variety of research methods (**primary and secondary, quantitative and qualitative**) to collect data and, as part of the process of making sense of this variety, we are going to focus our attention in this second Unit on methods that can be roughly categorised in terms of their **primary, qualitative**, nature.

The type of data collection at which we are going to look can be grouped under the general term of "**ethnography**", something which originally meant the study of institutions, customs and the like in small, well-defined, communities in technologically under-developed societies.

- **Ethnographic research** was originally used by **anthropologists**, but it has been adopted fairly extensively by branches of both sociology and psychology. Nowadays, **ethnography** tends to mean the **detailed study** of any **small group** in any type of society.

See, for example, **Margaret Mead's** classic study "**The Coming of Age in Samoa**")

However much the general meaning and focus of **ethnographic** research may have changed over the years, it's **basic rationale** remains the same - namely, the attempt to see and understand the world from the **point of view** of the **subject or participant** in that world. In this Unit, therefore, we will be focusing our attention on various primary methods of data collection that are associated with ethnographic forms of research. We can begin by extending the discussion of **interview** methods to look at the two forms of interview.

We will be exploring this rationale in a number of different ways, starting with a couple of different forms of **interview** and leading into various types of **observational study**.

The key ideas in this section are:

These will be **focused** (or **semi-structured**) and **unstructured / unfocused** interviews

What?

- **Ethnography**
- **Focused interview**
- **Hierarchically focused interview**
- **Unfocused interview**
- **Qualitative data**
- **Biased data**
- **Impression management**

**Unfocused** interviews are sometimes called "**unstructured interviews**". However, since "unstructured" suggests there is very little planning involved in this type of interview, the term "unfocused interview" is used in this Unit.

**Unintentional. Inherent (The Interview Effect)**

Why?

You will recall that in the **previous Unit** **interviews** as basically an elaboration of **questions** that instead of being sent to a respondent are simply asked to the respondent in the presence of the researcher. **Focused and unfocused interviews** are quite different in scope to **structured interviews** and we need to explore each in more detail now.

**Focused (semi-structured) Interviews.**

Why?

We can begin by noting that a **focused** or **semi-structured interview** technique is used when a researcher wants to collect **qualitative data** from a respondent. They do this by setting up a situation (the interview) that allows the **respondent** the **time** and **scope** to talk about and develop their opinions on a particular subject.

The **focus** of the interview is decided by the researcher and there may be particular areas that the researcher is interested in exploring, which is why this type of interview is sometimes called a **semi-structured technique**.

The basic **objective** of a focused interview, therefore, is to understand the **respondent's point of view** - how and why they do things for example - rather than to make **generalisations** about people's behaviour (although this may be possible). As such, it is a technique that involves the extensive use of **open-ended questions**, some of which are suggested by the researcher ("Tell me about...") and some of which arise quite naturally during the course of the interview ("You said a moment ago that...can you tell me a little bit more about what you meant by this?").

In addition, since the **basic objective** is to **focus** on the **respondent**, to get them to reveal information by telling the researcher something about themselves (whether this be highly personal revelations or simply their opinions about something), it is important that the researcher builds some sort of **rapport** with the person being interviewed. In order to do this, the researcher may have to think very carefully about:

### Respondents and Informants

A distinction is sometimes made between a respondent and an informant on the basis that, in **structured interviews** the interviewee simply responds to questions being asked (it suggests a **passive role**), whereas in focused / unfocused interviews the interviewee plays a more **active, informing, role**. Whether or not you feel this distinction is useful (or even particularly valid given that someone who responds is informing the researcher of their opinion), in these Modules the term **respondent** is used throughout.

For example, unlike structured interviews (a list of questions that must be answered in a particular order), a semi-structured interview may involve the researcher starting with a **major topic** (the **focus**) and some subsidiary questions or topics they want to explore. These may or may not be asked, depending on the situation. If they are asked, they may not be asked in the original order they appeared on the researcher's **interview schedule**.

An **interview schedule** consists of two basic areas that the researcher has pre-planned.

- Firstly, a list of general topics they would like to discuss.
- Secondly, within each of these topics the researcher may have a list of possible questions, prior to the interview, that can be used as prompts to get the respondent to talk about a particular topic. In effect, they are questions that the researcher has reflected on and considered to be potentially important.

These questions can be used as part of an overall interview strategy (see **Hierarchically focused interviews**) or they can be used to get the respondent to talk about something - either because the respondent has not given the researcher enough information or, more usually, as a means of getting the respondent to focus on a particular area of interest to the researcher.

The research **objective** of establishing a **rapport** with the respondent relates to **data validity**; that is, we assume, rightly or wrongly, that people who trust and respect us are more likely to tell us "the truth" as they see it (what they really believe).

**The setting of the interview**

Focused interviews are likely to take time and this means that the respondent should be comfortable with both their surroundings and the interviewer. For example, unlike a structured interview which can be conducted almost anywhere, focused interviews cannot be conducted on street corners or in a noisy classroom.

**Trust**

Focused interviews are likely to deal with matters that are important to the respondent. Part of the reason for using this technique is, after all, the desire to explore "what people really believe" and it is important that the respondent feels that they are being taken seriously (whatever they may say or do) and that the information will be confidential.

**Personal demeanour**

In this respect, since the objective is to focus the interview on the respondent, the researcher has to be very careful about how they conduct a focused interview. They have, for example, to know when to prompt and when to listen. This type of interview is similar to a conversation, but it's not an argument. For the purpose of gaining information the researcher may well have to work hard to stop themselves arguing with opinions with which they fundamentally disagree since people are unlikely to open-up to a rude and aggressive interviewer...

How?

We can illustrate the technique involved in **focused interviewing** by using a simple example.

The researcher comes to the interview with a general **overview** of a topic but, unlike a structured interview, instead of a list of specific questions that must be asked, the interviewer has a number of prepared questions on this topic that may - or may not - be asked (depending upon the way the interview develops).

Normally, the interviewer will use questions in an attempt to focus the respondent on particular aspects of their research rather than to collect data on the basis of predefined questions. The interviewer may start by asking the respondent a general question to "get the ball rolling". For example, a way of getting the respondent to start talking a general question might be something like:

**"Tell me about your television viewing habits".**

**Hierarchically Focused Interviews**

A good technique to adopt when using focused interviews is what **Tomlinson** has termed "**hierarchical focusing**" (See: "**Having it both ways: hierarchical focusing as research interview method**": **British Educational Research Journal**, Vol. 15, No. 2, 1989).

This simply means the researcher should construct an **interview schedule** that **begins** with the **most general question** you want to ask and then **develops** with more **specific questions** that can be gradually introduced as the interview progresses if the respondent has not addressed areas that the researcher wants to cover.

In basic terms, therefore, general questions are used as the basis for encouraging the respondent to talk and specific questions (either ones already prepared as part of the interview schedule or ones that simply suggest themselves naturally as the interview develops) are used as-and-when required to **refocus** the interview.

In this case the researcher wants to **generally focus** the interview around the question of how, when and why people watch television.

The main objective, here is to get the respondent to **talk** (in a focused way) rather than to answer specific questions. In this respect the general questions the researcher asks aren't always very important in themselves. Rather, they can be a **device** for starting a general conversation (from which the researcher is subsequently able to draw data).

- If you were to observe this process as a non-participating outsider, the interview would probably look like a **conversation** between two people (although, since the objective is to collect data from a respondent, it would probably look like a rather **one-sided conversation**). This, therefore, is a **semi-structured interview** precisely because its structure is governed by the topics the interviewer wants to discuss - and if the respondent starts to wander too far from the point, they can be refocused by "prompting" questions from the interviewer.

Questions are asked, therefore, when the interviewer feels it is appropriate to ask them. They may, as I've suggested, be prepared questions or, more-likely, they will be questions that occur to the researcher during the interview (questions that arise from the responses given by the respondent, for example). In this respect, the wording of questions will not necessarily be the same for all respondents, but the **general area of questioning** will be much the **same**.

This may sound strange, since the point of asking questions is normally to receive answers. However, in this sense questions can be asked as a way of getting the respondent to open-up about themselves, their thoughts and their feelings. That is, the questions asked can be phrased to start a respondent talking about a general topic, during the course of which they start to reveal important information. The technical term for this is "**enabling questions**", which means a question designed to enable the researcher to get at a much greater depth of answer than might be provided by a simple, direct, question.

Questions can, of course, be phrased directly ("What programmes do you watch?", for example), but unless there is a very good reason for wanting specific information, direct, closed, questions are not used too often.

### Exercise 1

Identify and briefly explain two reasons why focused interviews may help a researcher discover what a respondent "really believes".

1.

2.

We can look at some of the **uses** and **limitations** of focused interviews in the following way:

**a. Information Overload.**

Because you are asking people to talk about themselves in a relatively free way, it is evident that much of the **data** collected will be **relatively useless** to the researcher in two main ways:

**Firstly**, by allowing the respondent to largely dictate the direction of the interview it is evident that they are likely to go off in directions that are of little or no interest or relevance to the researcher. In a focused interview, the researcher has to make decisions about when to stop a respondent by asking a question that **refocuses** the interview.

**Secondly**, too much information is likely to be collected, much of which will turn-out to be **irrelevant** to the research question / problem. The depth of data collected will also create **problems of interpretation**, especially when a series of interviews is carried-out with different people.

**b. Prior Knowledge.**

The interviewer can **probe** areas suggested by the respondent's answers and comments, thereby picking-up information that had either not occurred to the interviewer or of which the interviewer had **no prior knowledge**.

**1. Uses****c. Scope and Depth.**

By allowing the respondent scope in which to develop their thoughts and answers, the researcher may be able to get at what a respondent "**really means**" or "**really believes**". In this respect it is possible to focus on the things that the respondent believes are important and, in consequence, the researcher is likely to receive a much greater **depth of information** than would be the case with a questionnaire or structured interview (where direct, closed, questions may not encourage the respondent to think about and reflect on their answers).

**d. Help and Guidance.**

Within limits (see "**limitations**" below), the fact that a focused interview tends to be lengthy and carried-out in surroundings that encourage comfort and reflection, the researcher is able help and guide the respondent where necessary and appropriate. For example, the researcher may need to **explain questions** and / or general points to the respondent should the need arise.

**e. Practicality.**

**Focused interviews** are **not** as **reliable** as **questionnaires** and, in general, **less valid** than a method such as **participant observation** (see **page 19**). However, they are a very **simple, efficient and practical** way of gaining information, **face-to-face** with a respondent, about things cannot be easily observed directly (the **feelings** and **emotions** of a respondent, for example). These things are more likely to be revealed in a focused or unfocused interview if the researcher is able to establish a friendly **rapport** with the respondent.

### e. Pressure.

Respondent's may feel pressurised into "**talking for the sake of talking**". This is a more serious problem in **unfocused interviews** where **silence** is used as a **research device**, but it can be a problem in focused interviews.

In basic terms, one of the **strengths** of focused interviews (the fact that people are encouraged to

### a. Pre-Judgement.

Focused interviews **avoid** the problem of the researcher **pre-determining** what will or will not be discussed in the interview. Since there are few, if any, "pre-set questions" involved with this method, the interviewer is not "pre-judging" what is and is not important information. However, the fact such focused interviews are semi-structured helps to ensure that the area that the researcher is interested in remains the focus of the discussion.

attempt to keep the conversation going if only to avoid an embarrassing silence. This may have the unintended **effect** of making people say things they do not particularly believe, simply to "fill the silence".

For this type of interview to take place, **respondents** have to be reasonably **articulate** and **forthcoming**, since they are required to do a lot of talking.

Where a respondent, for whatever reason, is not particularly forthcoming, the likelihood of **bias** intruding into the research increases because the interviewer has to work harder to "prompt" responses. This may, in extreme cases, lead a researcher to "**suggest**" responses to questions or to prompt the respondent with phrases like "So what you really mean is...").

### f. Recording Information.

It is frequently difficult for the interviewer to **record** all that's being said and, if the researcher is trying to manually record everything (even if they can write in **shorthand**) this may be intrusive for the respondent. The use of a **tape recorder**, for example, is probably **essential** in this type of interview, but if the respondent knows they are being recorded it may make them nervous, uncooperative, self-conscious and so forth.

There may also be **ethical problems** involved here (depending on the topic of the interview) since the respondent may say things that need to be kept **confidential**. If the respondent is unsure about the confidentiality of what they say this may lead to the their being very guarded about what they reveal.

One way to overcome this is to **secretly record** the interview, but this also raises **ethical problems**; in addition, if the respondent **suspects** they are being secretly recorded this may bring the interview to a rapid, and uncomfortable, close. The best way to record an interview, with the **respondent's permission**, is probably to make the recording as **unobtrusive** as possible. For example, placing the tape recorder out of the respondent's line of vision and starting the interview with general, simple, questions that make the respondent forget they are being recorded.

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are to ask questions as-and-when they suggest themselves, the interviewer must have the ability to think quickly and relevantly about what the respondent is saying.

**Focused interviews** require, therefore, both **practical skills** (such as being able to put a nervous respondent at ease) and **intellectual skills**.

In addition, it is extremely easy for the interviewer to **bias** the respondent's answers in a number of simple ways. For example, a misplaced yawn may suggest to the respondent that the interviewer is not interested in what they have to say; an inadvertent frown may suggest disagreement and a subsequent modification of the respondent's views "to make them more agreeable or acceptable".

This is an important area we need to look at in more detail, since some sociologists have argued that an **unbiased** interview is a logical **impossibility** (see the section headed "**Interview Effect**", page 13).

Why?

## Limitations.

### g. Validity.

There are **three basic problems** here, outside of those already noted.

**Firstly**, a researcher probably has no real way of knowing whether or not the respondent is **lying**.

**Secondly**, a more subtle problem may be that the respondent does **not consciously lie** but rather suffers from **imperfect recall**. If you were being asked to remember things that happened days, weeks or months ago it's likely that you would actually remember very little about what happened...

**Finally**, an interview can sometimes be like a "second chance" to do something in the sense that, having been given the time to **reflect** on something they did, the respondent tries to make sense of their behaviour by **rationalising** their actions. They are not consciously lying (since they will believe what they are saying is true, but their explanation for their behaviour, with **hindsight**, may be very **different** from what they actually felt **at the time**).

- **Criminals**, for example, frequently express feelings of **guilt** and **remorse** for what they have done (which they may genuinely feel) and this may be taken as evidence that they **accept** the values of the society in which they live. On the other hand, this remorse may simply be an expression of what the respondent believes the researcher wants to hear...



**a. Validity.**

This type of research method involves the minimal intervention of researcher in the research process. In this respect, because the respondent leads and researcher follows the data collected will reflect the interests of the respondent and, in consequence, is more likely to be a valid expression of their feelings, beliefs and so forth.

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**b. No pre-judgements.**

The main objective of this research method is to **describe reality** on the respondent's terms and, as such, the researcher who adopts this technique is attempting to minimise their pre-judgements about what is or is not important data.

Unlike a "real conversation", the researcher's contribution is fairly **minimal**, since the basic aim is to record what is being said **without influencing** a respondent's ideas. If you were to observe this type of interview **How?** taking place, all you would probably see would be someone talking (the respondent) whilst the researcher provides various **non-verbal cues** (nodding, smiling and so forth) in order to keep the respondent talking.

In this respect, the relative silence of the researcher is part of the interview technique, not just because they want to avoid influencing what is said, but also because, as I noted earlier, "silence" means something to us in everyday conversation.

Finally, simply because such interviews are non-focused, you shouldn't assume that they are somehow aimless and / or pointless - the final objective, as with other methods of data collection, is to accumulate evidence about the aspect of it). In this respect the researcher will **focused topic for research** and a very clear idea that will be asked in order to focus the respondent on the topic.

If you observe people talking, for example, periods of silence are quite rare. People feel uncomfortable about silence when they are "supposed to be conversing" and when two people fall silent in a conversation one or the other will usually attempt to keep the conversation going if only to avoid an embarrassing silence. This use of silence is an important technique, since if the researcher uses it purposely it encourages the respondent to keep talking.

Considered in terms of specific **uses** and **limitations**, non-focused interviews probably share the same (or very similar) uses as **focused interviews**, so there seems little point in repeating the ideas that have just been noted.

**Decision**

...ver, since they are different techniques, we can note a couple of **uses** that **non-focused interviews** have that are perhaps not shared by **focused** techniques.

## 1. Uses

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- Similarly, the **limitations** of this technique are similar to those for **focused** interviews but, as with the uses, there are a couple of additional **limitations** specific to this technique.

## 2. Limitations.

### a. Skill.

Unfocused interviews require great patience and skill on the part of the researcher, since the temptation is to try to "converse" with the respondent when the objective is simply to **listen** and record. In addition, when the researcher does talk (or respond) it will be for **clarification** purposes - asking the respondent to "explain what they mean by something" they have said - rather than for the purposes of asking direct questions.

In addition, this technique means the respondent has to be reasonably **articulate** (able to express themselves clearly and understandably) and forthcoming. If the respondent is none of these things then it becomes very difficult to use this research method to produce data.

### b. Information.

By its very nature and intention, unfocused interviews give the researcher little or no control over direction of interview. In basic terms, it can go in whichever direction the respondent feels is important. This creates two potential problems for the researcher.

**Firstly**, the respondent may start to talk about things that are of little or no immediate interest to the researcher; there is the likelihood, for example, of the respondent wandering into areas that have little or no relevance to the research topic.

**Secondly**, the amount of information received is likely to be extensive and this will involve some form of selection and interpretation process on the part of the researcher when the data is finally analysed.

### Exercise 2

**Identify and explain one major difference between focused and unfocused interviews.**

Many of the points I've just noted relate to **potential problems of bias** in interviews. That is, the idea that for one reason or another the researcher is receiving distorted data and we can develop this in the following section by looking more closely at potential problems of **biased data** from two main points of view:

- Firstly, we can look at possible problems of **unintentional bias**.

In general terms, it should be possible, if the interview is constructed and conducted carefully enough, to overcome (or at least limit the possible effect of) any of these types of problem.

- Secondly, however, we will look at the idea of **inherent bias**.

This argument that claims interviews, by their very nature, produce unintentional forms of bias. This view - which focuses on an idea called the **interview effect** - is potentially more damaging to researchers who use interview methods since it effectively claims that nothing can be done to eliminate bias from interviews. **Bias**, in effect, is an **inherent** part of the **interview process**.

How?

### Sources of Unintentional Bias.

The ability to conduct an interview successfully involves a great deal of skill on the researcher's part and an unskilful interviewer can easily allow the intrusion of bias into the interview process. A **biased interview** will, of course, produce **invalid data** and since bias can creep into the process in a number of different ways, it might be useful to have a brief look at various potential sources of bias in more detail.

#### 1. Tone of voice, general demeanour, etc.

A fairly obvious point. An interviewer who gives the impression that she / he is not really bothered about what the respondent is saying, looks bored, reacts irritably and so forth is unlikely to make the respondent feel that their responses are important and / or interesting.

#### 2. Organisation.

A focused or unfocused interview requires a great deal of organisation on the part of the interviewer. If a tape recorder is used to record data it must be unobtrusive and it must work properly - fiddling around with tapes and so forth is hardly likely to settle the interviewer. It also gives a bad impression...

Similarly, if responses are recorded manually, the interviewer must be able to record things accurately and quickly - making the respondent stop or repeat things is not conducive to a successful interview.

### 3. Leading the respondent

This is a general problem in relation to interviewing technique, but is more apparent in a focused / unfocused interview (in a structured interview the respondent is free to answer "don't know"). It's likely to occur when the respondent is not very forthcoming or where they have problems expressing themselves. In such cases there may be a tendency to interpret responses for the respondent, using phrases like:

- So what you are really saying is...
- What you mean by that is...
- What you are trying to say is...

In structured interviews, the problem arises when a respondent is unsure of their answer and the temptation for the interviewer is to try and interpret their uncertainty - to "help the respondent decide"...

### 4. Not wanting to offend

In some cases there arises the problem of the respondent who is so intimidated by either the researcher or the effect of "being interviewed" that the answers they give are designed to "please the researcher". In this case, the respondent may not want to offend and so gives answers that they think the interviewer wants to hear (we will develop this further when we look at the "interview effect").

### 5. The setting of the interview.

The physical surroundings of the interview must be carefully chosen (especially if the interview is going to take a reasonable length of time). For example, interviewing a woman with young children in a busy shopping centre is unlikely to produce considered answers...

### 6. The "embarrassing admission"

On occasions, bias may intrude into the interview when the respondent is asked to disclose information that is a source of embarrassment. A male interviewer questioning teenage girls about the extent of their sexual activity, for example, may find that the respondents underestimate their sexual experience out of embarrassment, not wanting to appear sexually promiscuous etc.

### 7. Boasting.

Conversely, the interviewer has to be aware of the possibility that a respondent may try to impress by overstating the extent of their knowledge about something.

### Inherent Bias: The Interview Effect.

Why?

The potential problems of bias we've noted so far have been basically **technical**, but we can now consider an idea that suggests interviews, as a method of data collection, are fundamentally flawed.

The criticism, in this respect, is not just that interviews involve sources of potential bias .

Rather, the argument is that interviews are **inherently biased** methods of data collection because of the **interview effect**. What we need to do next, therefore, is outline the basis of the theory on which this criticism is based before looking briefly at some examples of the way in which this effect may inherently bias the reliability and validity of data collected by interview techniques.

The users of such data collection methods would argue that there is nothing fundamentally wrong with them as a means of collecting data - any sources of bias can, with care and attention to detail, be overcome / negated by the interviewer.

Any data collection method must, almost by definition, involve the potential for bias but, with care, it should be possible to minimise the level of bias that intrudes into the research process

How?

Criticism of interview methods begins with the observation that all forms of conversation between human beings have some kind of **structure** or, if you prefer, **framework of unwritten rules**.

This is true whether it involves talking with your friends, parents, strangers and so forth, or the "talking" that takes place between an interviewer and a respondent.

Thus, in order for a conversation / interview to take place, the participants must understand the basic **ground rules** (or **norms**) of the interaction process. In any conversation, therefore, the participants' behaviour will make reference to various **conversational norms**, such as:

- The relative **status** of the participants,
- The **purpose** of the conversation,
- The **place** in which the conversation is held and so forth.

In this respect, a **conversation** is a **process of social interaction** between two or more people - people who are **aware (conscious)** of this social process and who make constant **reference** to various **conversational norms** (when to speak, what to say, how to address someone and so on). In addition, whenever we communicate with others, we don't just **communicate verbally**. **Communication** also involves a series of **non-verbal cues**. These can be:

**Explicit:** For example, a **gesture**, a **pause**, a **question**, the way that **body position** changes to express interest, boredom and so forth.

**Implicit:** For example, in conversation with our doctor, we recognise they will be the driving force of the conversation (since, in such a situation, we are implicitly asking them to share some of their knowledge with us - therefore, we **expect** them to **lead** the conversation). In this sense, unspoken **status** considerations apply and we tailor our part of the conversation to their requirements (we try to make it easy for them to give us the information we require).

In "Talking About Prison Blues", (1977), **Cohen and Taylor** pointed-out one form of **interview effect** when they argued that the act of questioning people involves a series of subtle and not-so-subtle ways of **manipulating** an interview so that people effectively tell us what we want to hear. Their argument here is that, unintentionally or otherwise, the researcher "tells" the respondent enough about what is required from them to produce answers desired by the interviewer.

- Thus, the interviewer comes into the interview with a set of questions to which they want not just answers, but answers that will confirm their view of the world (that is, confirmation of their particular **definition of reality**). By their behaviour, the interviewer gives the respondent **clues** as to desired answers. The respondent picks-up these clues and answers questions accordingly.

The **theory** that underpins this argument is that, just as in any "normal" process of interaction which is unfamiliar to us, we look to **others** to give us clues about how we are **expected** to behave. In effect, when we are unsure about the specific **norms** of behaviour that operate in any situation, we **observe** the behaviour of others to discover what is - and what isn't - appropriate behaviour.

- **Cohen and Taylor** argue that **any interview** is, in effect, a **learning process** (a form of **social learning**) where the interviewer is "helped" by the respondent giving answers they believe will help the interviewer in their research. In this respect, a significant form of **interview effect** is the possibility that respondents produce answers that they **think** the interviewer wants to hear.

As I suggested earlier, this problem of possible bias is not simply a **technical** one.

Rather, for critics of interviews as a method of research, this is a problem of **methodology**. In this sense, the basic argument is that, by using interviews, it is **impossible** to get at "the truth" because an interview, like any other form of process of what **Erving Goffman** ("The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life") has called:

For example, how can we improve and refine our interview techniques to eliminate possible sources of bias.

That is, it relates to the **logic** behind the way in which we choose - or think it possible - to study the social world.

- **Negotiation,**
- **Manipulation** and
- **Impression Management.**

These ideas lead us to consider a **second form of interview effect** in the sense that if interviewing is seen as a **process of communication**, it follows that the respondent will be aware of the **social consequences** of what they say.

These consequences may relate to:

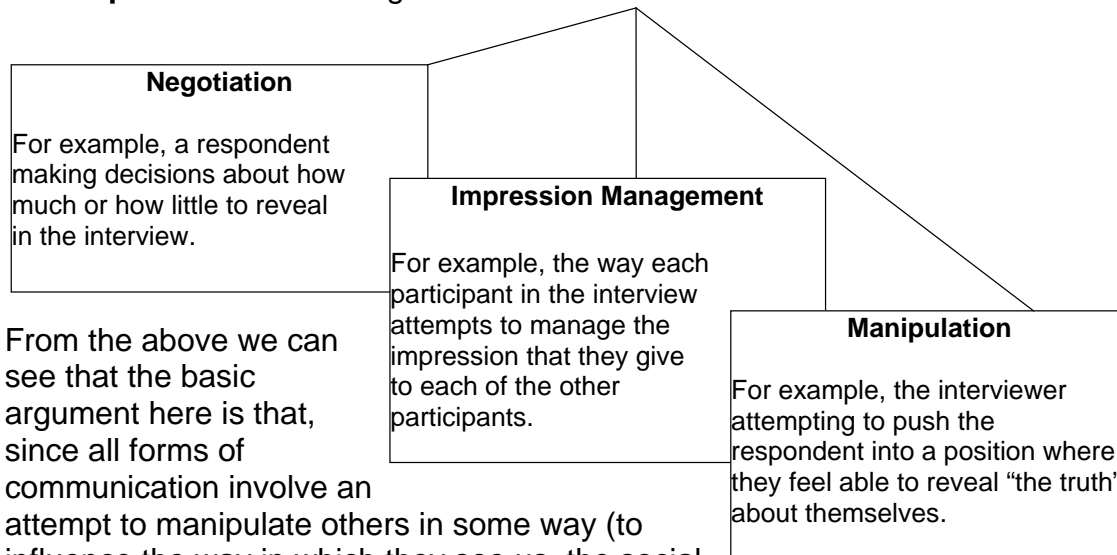
a. The possible **wider social consequences** of the information given.

For example, the possible consequences involved in the admission that you are a paedophile, bank robber, thief and so forth.

b. The **immediate social consequences** of the information given.

A simple example here might be the extent to which the respondent cares about what the researcher thinks about them.

In this respect, an awareness of the **social consequences** surrounding what is said in an interview involves:



From the above we can see that the basic argument here is that, since all forms of communication involve an attempt to manipulate others in some way (to influence the way in which they see us, the social world and so forth), it follows that the **respondent will always** attempt to present themselves to the interviewer in a way that they would like to be seen.

**Erving Goffman ("The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life")** argues that the process **impression management** is not only something that people try to do all the time, it is more-likely to occur in an **extreme form** between people who do not know each other well. This is simply because the opportunities for successful impression management are that much greater with someone who hasn't observed our actual behaviour over a period of time.

For example, Philip Jones ("Theory and Method In Sociology", 1985) notes:

"Since we soon come to learn that others will interpret our behaviour, our own interpretive abilities allow us to manipulate these interpretations to suit our vision of ourselves. We use our capacity to be self-reflexive [that is, our ability to see ourselves as we think others see us] in order to present the person we wish others to think we are.

We play roles in a creative way to elicit from others the response we desire. In effect, we manage or orchestrate the responses of others by presenting the image of our self we wish them to hold. We become actors on the stage of life, writing our own lines."

What?

Exercise 3

Test this idea by thinking about the ways you attempt to "manage the impression" others have of you:

Why?

Think about any time you wanted to get to know someone socially. Describe how you presented yourself to them (and how they presented themselves to you).

b. After you got to know them, how difficult was it to maintain the impression that you had given to them on your initial meeting?

If the above is a **valid** expression of the way people interact, it follows that in a social situation such as an interview, the respondent will be attempting to present themselves to the interviewer in a way they want to be viewed. This, in turn, must cast doubts over the **validity of interviews** as a research method.

- Thus, if we agree with the logic of the **interview effect**, it follows that we must seek some other form of data collection method that allows us, as sociologists, to collect data in as "natural" a way as possible - in effect, we need to **observe** people as they go about their daily lives, getting to know them and their behaviour. In short, we need to employ some form of observational method of research...

### Observational Methods.



What?

Thus far in our discussion of **primary methods** of data collection we have moved from an outline of more-or-less wholly **quantitative methods (closed questionnaires)**, through a gradual **mix of quantitative and qualitative methods (open questionnaires, overt (or "open") and covert (or "hidden" / secret) interviews)** to the collection of wholly **qualitative data (open-ended interviews)**. In this respect, we have seen that, for sociologists, it is possible to express ideas about the nature of the social world in two basic ways, namely, in terms of:

a. **Statistical patterns of behaviour**

For example, how many people intend to vote Labour rather than Conservative or the number of people who prefer to buy the Sun rather than the Daily Telegraph).

b. An **understanding** of the **meanings** people give to the social world.

People's beliefs, experiences, motives, etc.

All thing in common, namely that the researcher is collecting data on the basis of

Decision

what people **say** they believe or **say** that they do. In effect, these types of primary data collection methods rely on:

- a. People **telling the truth** (not deliberately lying) and
- b. People **remembering the "truth"** about their behaviour

These ideas, as we have seen, raise all kinds of questions about the **validity** of interviews as a method of research and, in an attempt to increase the level of **validity** of their research many sociologists have argued that what is missing from these types of data collection is the ability to **observe** people going about their everyday lives. In this sense, it is frequently argued, the focus of attention needs to be placed on the ability to observe people in their "natural setting" - as they go about their daily lives.

The argument here is that by **observing people** we can get an **insight** into the way people **actually behave** (rather than simply taking it on trust that what people tell us is "the truth" as they believe or remember it).

**For example**, if I ask you to describe how you go about doing your homework, I've no real way of knowing whether you're telling me the whole truth, the partial truth or if you're simply making it all up to keep me happy. However, if I were to **observe you** in the act of doing your homework, it should be possible for me to get a much more accurate picture of what you actually do and how you go about doing it. In effect, because I, as a researcher, can "**see for myself**" how you go about organising and doing homework it should provide me with a more **valid picture of reality**.

- **Non-Participant Observation.**

- **Participant Observation.**
- **Subjective sociology**
- **Empathy**
- **Naturalistic method** \_\_\_\_\_
- **Observer Effect.**

Why?

**Interactionist sociologists** in particular argue that interviews can be characterised as **complex** systems of **social interaction**, whereby people's behaviour is dependent upon such things as the **social context** in which the interview takes place (for example, the relative **status** of participants), the **purpose** of the interview and the level of personal **rapport** between the participants.

Since all interview-type methods (**questionnaires, structured interviews, focused interviews** and so forth) are seen to have these characteristics, it follows that to really understand social interaction we have, as sociologists, not simply to "observe" it (in the sense of asking people questions about their behaviour), we must also try to **experience** it.

- However, before we look at the methods that are the focus of this particular section (**participant observation**), we can look briefly at the other observational method, namely, **non-participant observation**.

As **Max Weber** argued, we must use the concept of, "**Verstehen**" (literally, "to understand" or "to comprehend"). In effect, this means trying to understand the social world by **experiencing** it as the people you are researching experience it (sometimes known as the attempt to "**take the part of the other**" - you become part of the interaction process you are studying).

This type of observational method is relatively common in sociology and, as the name implies, the sociologist observes behaviour "from a distance". That is, they do not become personally involved in the behaviour being studied.

In one sense, an **experiment** might be an example of **non-participant observation** since the involvement of the sociologist is limited to setting-up the experiment and then observing its outcome. Alternatively, a sociologist interested in the social psychology of crowd behaviour might simply observe and record behaviour witnessed at a football match or a pop concert.

Whatever the approach, the key point here is that the sociologist does not become involved, actively or passively, in the behaviour they are observing and recording.

## Exercise 4

As a general rule-of-thumb, there are two forms of **non-participant observation** we can briefly note.

- **Covert (or secret) observation** involves observing behaviour in such a way that the subject of your observation is unaware they are being observed.
- **Overt (or open) observation** involves observing behaviour in such a way that the subject of your observation is aware they are being observed.

There is, however, no suggestion that the researcher participates in the behaviour they are observing.

A simple (non-sociological) example here might be the numerous “fly-on-the-way” television documentaries that involve a camera-crew following someone around as they go about their daily lives. The camera-crew observe and record behaviour but they are not part of that behaviour (although this will, of course, raise all kinds of questions about how such an activity might influence the behaviour of people who are being filmed / observed).

A sociological example of this type of observation might be that of Yule (“**Why are parents so tough on children?**”: **New Society**, Sept. 1986) when she observed the way mothers treated their children in public places (such as the street or shopping arcades).

## What?

**Participant Observation.**

## Why?

In the section on **questionnaires** and **interviews** we saw the importance of the idea that the researcher does **not** become **personally involved** with the respondent, in the sense that the researcher maintains some form of **personal** and **social distance** between themselves and the people they are researching.

The technical term for this social distance is **objectivity** - the ability to remain detached, aloof or personally separate from the people you are researching. There are a couple of important dimensions to **objectivity** (namely, **personal** and **methodological**) but for the moment we can consider it as involving the ability to avoid:

- The intrusion of our **personal beliefs** (or **values**) into the research process.
- **Influencing** the way respondents reply to our questions or behaviour.

**Participant observation**, on the other hand, is sometimes referred-to as a form of **subjective** sociology, not because the researcher sets-out with the aim of imposing their beliefs on the respondent (this would simply produce biased data), but because with this method of research the **aim** is to **understand the social world** from the **subject's point-of-view**.

This, in some ways, is similar to the aim in an unfocused interview. However, a new dimension is added to the research process by the ability to “**see for yourself**” the behaviour that people describe in an interview or questionnaire. The distinction is perhaps initially confusing, but it will become clearer in a moment.

Using a textbook, briefly define the concepts of:

a. Objectivity.

b. Subjectivity.

**Participant observation**, therefore, involves the researcher "getting to know" the people they are studying by entering into the subject's world and participating (either **openly** or **secretly**) in that world. This **subjective** method of research involves the researcher putting themselves "in the shoes" of the respondent in an attempt to **experience** events in a way that is similar to the **experiences of the people being studied**.

Sociologists who use **participant observation** aim to discover the nature of **social reality** by understanding the **actor's perception / understanding / interpretation** of the social world. In this respect, participant observation is sometimes called a **naturalistic** method that involves the researcher, "Telling it like it is" or, if you prefer, "Really understanding, through personal experience, what is going on in any given situation".

This is called **empathy** - the ability, as human beings, to "see ourselves as we think other people see us". In this respect, the **Interactionist** sociologist **George Herbert Mead** ("**Mind, Self and Society**", 1933) has argued that **empathy** (or, as he terms it, the "**ability to take the part of the other**") is a valuable human ability that the researcher should exploit in order to understand how people experience the social world.

The participant observer, as we have just noted, tries to take advantage of human ability to **empathise**, the main idea being to participate in a social group while, at the same time, employing the insights and understanding of a sociological observer. The point, therefore, is to observe and experience the world as a participant, whilst retaining an observer's eye for understanding, analysis and explanation.

- Participant observation, therefore, attempts to understand the **motives** and **meanings** of people's behaviour from the viewpoint of the participant.

How?

**Classic Study: "Asylums": Erving Goffman 1962**

Goffman worked in an asylum for the mentally ill as an **Assistant** was **mainly covert** (the inmates (patients) and hospital authorities research), with **overt elements** (a couple of the staff knew he was

Goffman attempted to discover "unofficial reality" of mental institutions

a. Answer the question "what is really going on here?"

How?

b. To attempt to discover the "sense" in a place of insanity and, in particular, to analyse how

patients coped with both their labelling as "mentally ill" and the "abnormal social situation" in which they found themselves.

**a. Howard Parker ("A View From The Boys").**

"...because by visiting the deviants in prison, borstal and other 'human zoos' or by cornering them in classrooms to answer questionnaires, the sociologist misses meeting them as people in their normal society".

Goffman claimed to have discovered the "tricks and strategies" in order to cope with their situation. How, in short, people cope with their situation: how?

**c. Anton Cicourel ("The Social Organisation of Juvenile Justice")**

This study of juvenile delinquency involved a four-year observation of proceedings in juvenile courts in America. One of Cicourel's aims was to understand the "interpretive procedures" used by court officials in their routine interactions (that is, how they made sense of the behaviour around them).

"Positivist methodology [e.g. focusing on the "official reality" and procedures in the courtroom] would find it impossible to uncover the everyday routines of the police, courts and probation officials because their 'taken for granted' assumptions about the nature and character of deviant activity are part of everyday activity. Often the style of dress and tone of voice employed by the deviant is used by the control agents as evidence of a defiance of authority".

**b. David Downes and Paul Rock ("Understanding Deviance").**

"It is a theoretical commitment that drives the sociologist into participant observation. The claim is made that social behaviour cannot be understood unless it is personally experienced...Sociologists who lean on external accounts and objective evidence can have no appreciation of why people act. Neither can they understand environments and history as their subjects do..."

Interactionists and others who elevate meaning to a central place contend that participation is indispensable to the interpretation of human conduct."

**Anthony Giddens ("Sociology")**

"Goffman managed to see the asylum from the patients' point of view rather than in terms of the medical categories applied to them by psychiatrists.

'It is my belief', he wrote, 'that any group of persons, primitives, pilots or patients, develop a life of their own that becomes meaningful, reasonable and normal once you get close to it'.

Goffman's work indicates that what looks "insane" to an outside observer is not quite so irrational when seen in the context of the hospital. Asylums involve forms of discipline, dress and behaviour that make it almost impossible for inmates to behave like people in the outside world."

Decision

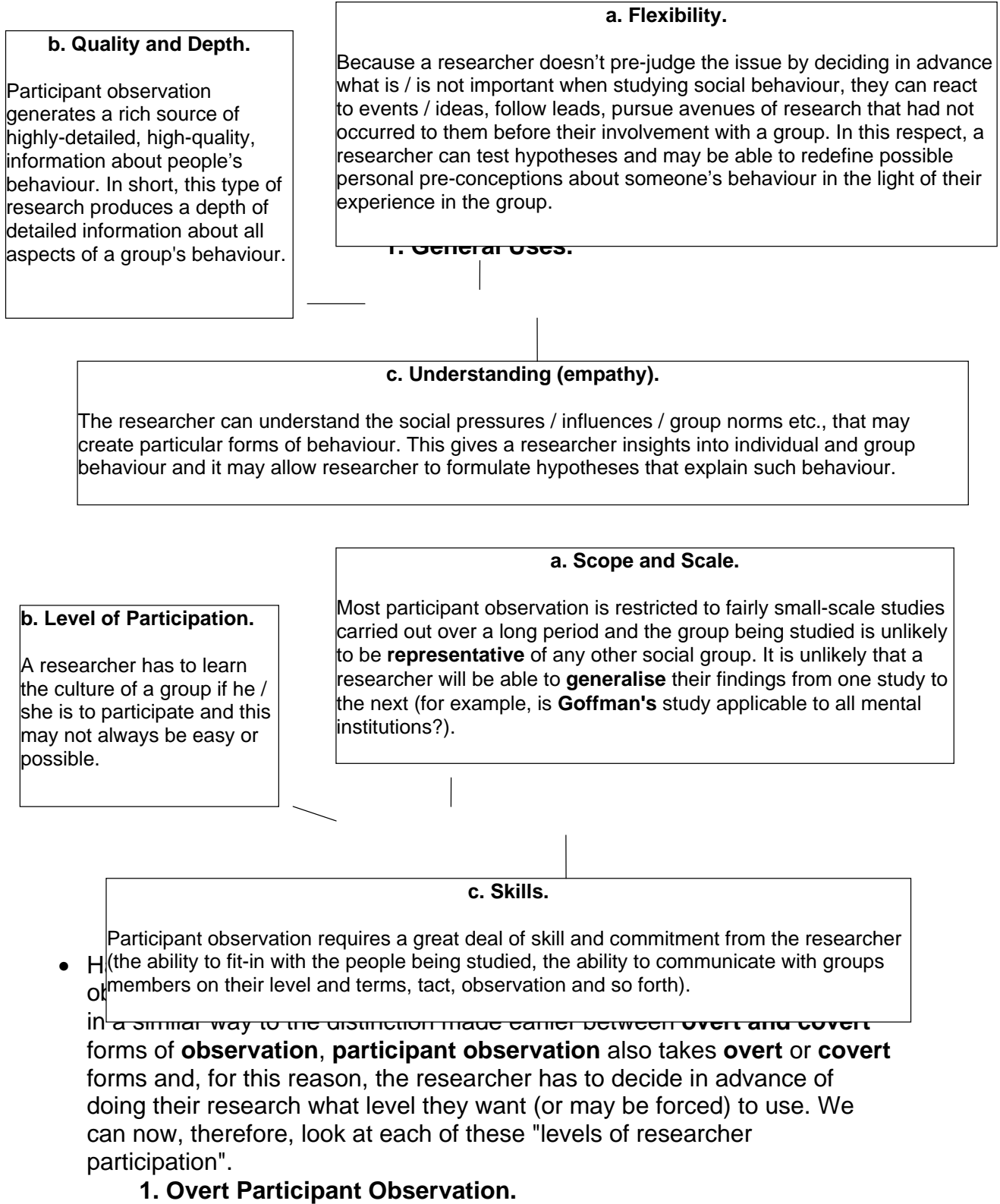
**Exercise 5**

Identify and briefly explain two reasons why Goffman used participant observation as a method of research in his study of a mental institution.

observation (overt and covert), each of which has its own

What?

...ities, **uses** and **limitations**. Before we do this, however, it might be useful to note some general **uses** and **limitations** of participant observation as a method of research.



Why?

This type of participation involves the researcher being **open** with the group they are studying. The researcher:

- Joins the group **openly**, telling its members about the research being undertaken (it's purpose, scope, etc.).
- Does research with the **permission** and **co-operation** of the group.

In simple terms, the technique here is that of "hanging-around" the group, observing behaviour, asking questions about that behaviour (when appropriate) and recording what is happening. The researcher is involved, to some extent, with the group itself (although not necessarily as a full participating member) and experiences things as group members experience them. In basic terms, therefore, the group being studied is observed in its "natural setting" (rather than from the "second-hand" reporting about "what goes on" that is received from questionnaires and interviews).

Decision

1. Uses.

a. Recording Data.

The fact that the researcher is involved with the group they are studying in an open way means that it is relatively easy for a researcher to generate and record data (especially in comparison with covert forms of participant observation). The researcher is able to record conversations, ask questions, take notes, etc. with the knowledge of the people involved. Since group members are aware of the presence of the sociologist, these things should, with time, become an almost natural, imperceptible, aspect of group interaction.

b. Access.

The researcher has access to all levels of a group. This is important if research is being done on a group that has a **hierarchical structure** (a large company, for example, where the researcher would have access to both the "shop floor" and the boardroom).

**W.F. Whyte ("Street Corner Society")**. Whyte was substantially older than the members of the juvenile gang whose behaviour he wanted to study. His solution to this problem came through doing overt participant observation. Whyte gained the co-operation of gang's leader ("Doc"), who served as his "sponsor" with rest of gang members.

c. Going Native

With this form of participant observation the researcher should find it easier to separate the **twain roles of participant and observer**. There is, consequently, a reduced chance of the researcher becoming so immersed in the behaviour of the group that they cease to be an observer and simply become a participant - a member of the group, full stop.

The term for this is "**going native**" - the situation in which the researcher ceases to balance the roles of participant and observer and, instead, simply participates like any other group member. A researcher who "goes native" effectively ceases to be a researcher...

**W.F. Whyte ("Street Corner Society")**. Whyte found that, as his research progressed, he became so involved with the lives of gang members that he progressively came to see himself as "one of the gang" and not as a researcher who just happened to be researching gang behaviour.



What?

### b. Superficial Involvement.

A major problem is that a researcher's involvement with the group they are studying may be too superficial. Given one of the purposes of participant observation is to experience the world from the viewpoint of the people being studied (the researcher experiences events in the same - or very similar - way they are experienced by group members), if the researcher does not become sufficiently involved with the group then this type of data might not be collected.

An example might be observation of a group involved in criminal activities. Clearly, to understand how and why people commit crimes it would be necessary - using participant observation - to accompany group members on their criminal expeditions. However, for the sociologist this might not be desirable, either **ethically** (since such behaviour might be interpreted as encouraging people to commit criminal acts) or **practically** (the police, for example, are likely to take a dim view of a sociologist caught shop-lifting or stealing a car. The plea that "I was only a research observer" is unlikely to be accepted since by accompanying someone in the commission of a crime you are an accessory to that crime; it is a criminal offence...).

### W.F. Whyte ("Street Corner Society")

Whyte recognised - but never really solved - this problem. In a classic observation, Doc put his finger on this problem when he said:

"You've slowed me up plenty, now when I do something I have to think 'what would Bill Whyte want to know about it?'. Before I used to do things by instinct."

### c. Data Interpretation.

Data collected using this research method may be difficult to interpret. This comes down to the **skill** of the researcher being able to observe events accurately, but there are clear problems involved here:

- How do you **decide** which observations are significant and which insignificant?
- In any social group (especially a large one) a lot of things will be happening at the same time. It will be difficult for the researcher to **observe everyone** in the group at the **same time** and **decisions** have to be made about who to observe and when to observe them (which may mean that significant evidence is missed).
- Since we, as a reader of a piece of research, are dependent upon the accuracy of a researcher's recording and interpretation of the behaviour of the people they are studying we have to place a great deal of **trust** in the ability of the researcher. There is no way of **testing** this, of course, so it frequently becomes a matter, on the reader's part, of assuming that a researcher did and saw what they claimed to do and see. Such studies, by their very nature, cannot be replicated, which casts doubt on their **reliability**.
- Human interaction is very complex - even in relatively simple forms of everyday interaction. In this sense, just as it is possible to "misinterpret" or "misunderstand" people's behaviour, so it's possible for the sociologist to misinterpret the significance of something...

### c. Personal Experience

With

By becoming a member of the group the researcher can **personally experience** incidents and events that happen to group members. Personal involvement means that the researcher can gather data which, as an interviewer for example, it might not have occurred to them to collect. In this respect, the covert observer may come, through personal experience, to understand the meanings and motivations within a group that explain why people behave in certain ways. Two points can be noted here:

- Firstly, people do not always clearly understand why they behave in certain ways (which is why sociological data is required). By combining the role of (full) participant and (detached / impartial) observer the sociologist may be able to understand situations and events that the participant is incapable of understanding and / or explaining.
- Secondly, when we look at people's behaviour "from the outside, looking in" it is frequently distasteful and even, depending upon the people you are studying, criminal, behaviour.

Decision

### 1. Uses

#### b. The Observer Effect.

Since the group under observation are not aware they are being researched, this clearly means that the problem of an **observer effect** is **avoided**. Using this method, the researcher can safely assume they really are observing people's "normal behaviour".

#### Howard Parker ("A View From The Boys").

One of the justifications for doing covert participant observation is that it supposedly avoids this type of problem. However, Parker's involvement with the gang (although covert) changed their behaviour not because of his presence in the group but because of his actions as part of the group. for example, Parker frequently tried to stop gang members from stealing cars. He also provided legal advice to gang members charged with theft. Was his behaviour changing the behaviour of the group?

#### a. Access.

It is possible to gain access to groups that would not normally allow themselves to be studied by a sociologist This is particularly true of people who are involved in:

- **Illegal** behaviour (a criminal gang, for example).
- **Deviant** behaviour (that is, behaviour which may not be illegal but which is sufficiently distasteful to people generally to make the participants wary of "outside interest" in their activities). A good example here is Laud Humphries' study of homosexuals in America ("Tea Room Trade").
- **Secret** behaviour. For example, "Freemasons" are a secretive organisation who admit (male) members only by invitation (a **problem** here might be how to get yourself invited to join such a group).

#### Howard Parker ("A View From The Boys").

Parker's solution to the "access problem" came through having met members of the gang he wanted to study through a country holiday centre for deprived children. Parker's appearance ("boozey, suitably dressed and ungroomed and knowing the score about theft behaviour and sexual exploits") helped him to gain entrance / acceptance.

**e. Recording Data.**

Recording information will be **difficult** because the researcher cannot simply take notes or record conversations openly. Similarly, the ability to question people about what they are doing and why they are doing it will not be easy, since such behaviour is unlikely to be part of people's "normal", everyday, behaviour. The researcher who did such things would be very quickly **exposed**.

One way around this problem is to keep a **field diary**, where the researcher writes down observations in quiet moments at the end of the day. While this is a solution, it does mean that the researcher must remember things clearly and accurately. They must also make decisions about what events were important / unimportant hours (or days) after they occurred.

**a. Entrance.**

The researcher may not, for one reason or another, be able to join a group covertly for reasons such as:

- **Gender:** A man could not covertly study a group of nuns...
- **Age:** A middle-aged researcher could not join a gang of youths...
- **Access:** Many groups (such as Freemasons, for example) only allow people to join their group by invitation. In addition, various **professional occupations** (doctors, teachers, lawyers and so forth) require particular **qualifications** and a "non-qualified" sociologist would not be able to join such groups covertly.

**b. Access.**

Even where the problem of **entrance** has been overcome, a **covert** researcher will **not** have **access** to all **levels** of a group (especially hierarchical groups such as a business organisation, for example). Thus, in a factory it may be possible to join the group as a shop-floor worker (giving good access to such people), but someone employed in this capacity would not have access to boardroom discussions and decision-making.

**c. Going Native.**

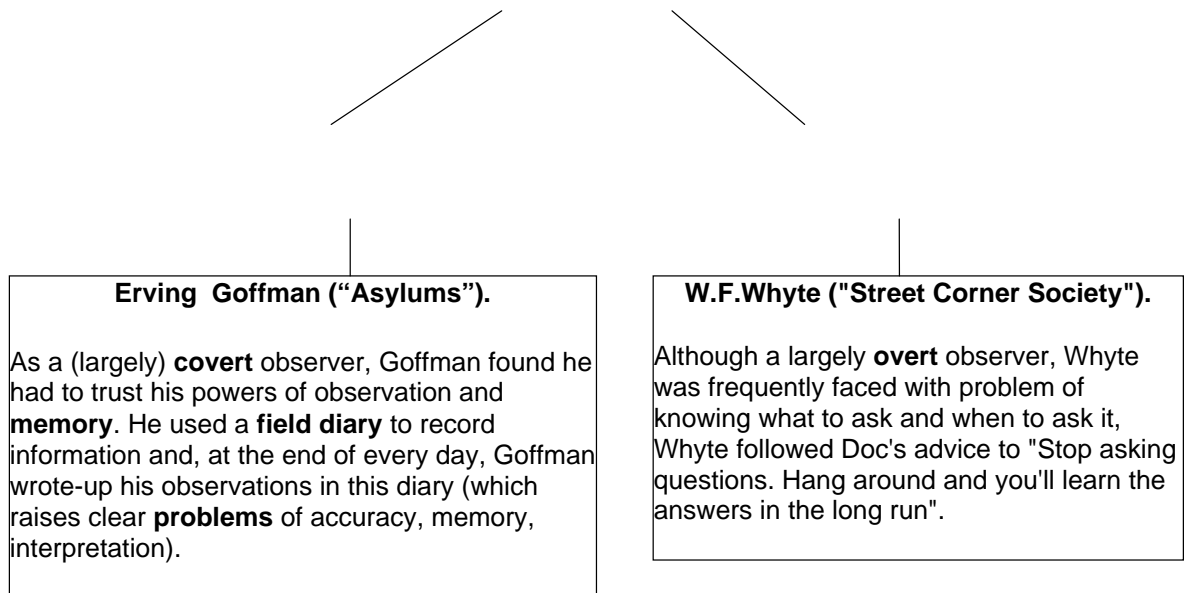
One of the major problems covert participant observers have is that of **separating** their **role of participant** from that of **observer**. The covert researcher is trying to be "two different people" at the same time and it may be difficult to remember which role is **appropriate** at different times. The researcher may find they have become so involved in their participation they cease to accurately record data.

**d . Trust.**

As with all types of participant observation, the data collected is based on the **subjective impressions** of the observer. In short, we as readers of this research have to take things on trust that they were exactly as described by the sociologist. In addition, what we may be getting from a piece of research may simply be the **subjective interpretation** of the researcher about "what was happening within the group" rather than the **reality** of the situation from the group's point of view.

**Howard Parker ("A View From The Boys").** Parker frequently found himself in the position of engaging in criminal activity while in the gang (receiving stolen goods, for example).

He argued that such involvement was necessary (although not totally **ethical**), if he was to maintain the trust, respect and friendship of the people he was researching.



#### f. Three Potential Problems...

Finally, **Goffman** ("Asylums") has noted three basic problems of covert participation:

- a. Getting In:** As we have seen, it may not be possible for the researcher to enter a group.
- b. Staying In:** This relates to the problem of what happens if the researcher fails to either participate properly or is exposed as a "spy".
- c. Getting Out:** In many groups it may not be particularly easy simply to cease participating. An extreme example might be a covert study of mental patients in an institution. Whilst the researcher might find it relatively easy to **get in** and **stay in** (by pretending to be mentally ill), the problem of how to **get out** once the research was complete might be more difficult to overcome.

In addition, there are **ethical problems** involved here, ranging from the simple fact that by spying on people you are not being entirely open and honest with them (you may, in a sense, be exploiting them for your own ends) to the more complex problem of suddenly ceasing to involve yourself in the lives of people who may have grown to like, trust and depend on you as a person.

**Howard Parker ("A View From The Boys").** An ethical problem for sociological researchers is the extent to which they should deceive people by pretending to be "one of them". **Parker**, for example, chose to withhold some data from publication and discussed publication of certain information with the gang members (he left the final decision over some matters with them). His main concern here was that his research did not harm gang members personally. This may go some way to resolving ethical problems, but it raises the problem of not being able to give a full account of the behaviour that has been studied.

views on this question.

**1. Ned. Polsky  
("Hustlers, Beats and Others", 1971).**

**Overt Participant Observation.**

"You damned well better not pretend to be 'one of them', because they will test this claim out and one of two things will happen: either you will...get sucked into 'participant' observation of the sort you would rather not undertake, or you will be exposed, with still grater negative consequences. You must let the criminals know who you are and if it is done properly it does not sabotage the research".

**2. Laud Humphreys  
("Tea Room Trade", 1970).**

**Covert Participant Observation.**

"From the beginning, my decision was to continue the practice of the field study in passing as a deviant...there are good reasons for following this method of participant observation.

In the first place, I am convinced there is only one way to watch highly discreditable behaviour and that is to pretend to be in the same boat with those engaging in it. To wear a button [badge] saying 'I am a watchbird, watching you' into a tea room would instantly eliminate all action except the flushing of toilets and the exiting of all present.

Polsky has done excellent observation of pool hustlers because he is experienced and welcome in their game - he is accepted as one of them. He might also do well, as he suggests, in interviewing a jewel thief or a fence in his tavern hangout. But it should be noted that he does not propose watching them steal, whereas my research required observation of criminal acts.

The second reason is to prevent distortion. Hypothetically, let us assume that a few men could be found to continue their sexual activity while under observation. How 'normal' could that activity be?"

**You have now completed this Unit.**

**The next Unit looks at Secondary Methods**