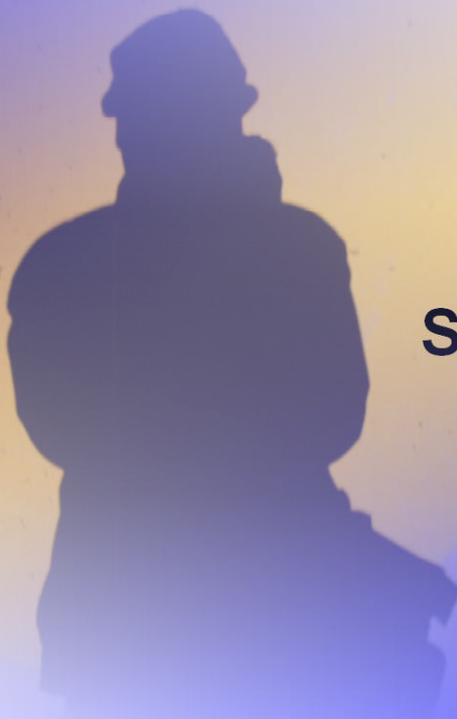


AS Sociology



Revision

**Sociological
Methods**

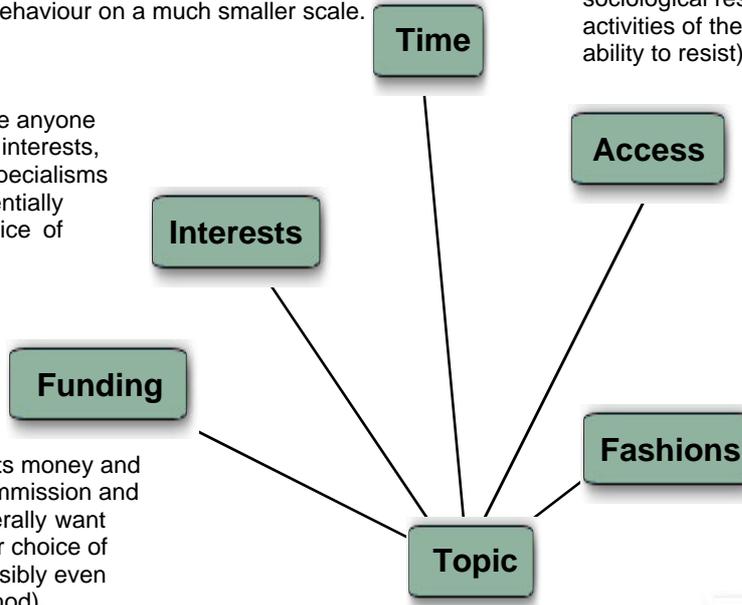
“The theoretical, practical and ethical considerations influencing the choice of topic, choice of method(s) and the conduct of research”.

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This applies in terms of things like the depth and scope of the research. Although a researcher may be interested in studying the behaviour of football supporters at major International tournaments, time and money considerations may restrict them to studying such behaviour on a much smaller scale.

To research a topic you need access to people and (usually) their co-operation. This is one reason why a lot of sociological research has focused on the activities of the powerless (who lack the ability to resist) rather than the powerful.

Sociologists, like anyone else, have their interests, concerns and specialisms and these potentially affect their choice of research topic.



Research costs money and those who commission and pay for it generally want some say over choice of topic (and possibly even choice of method).

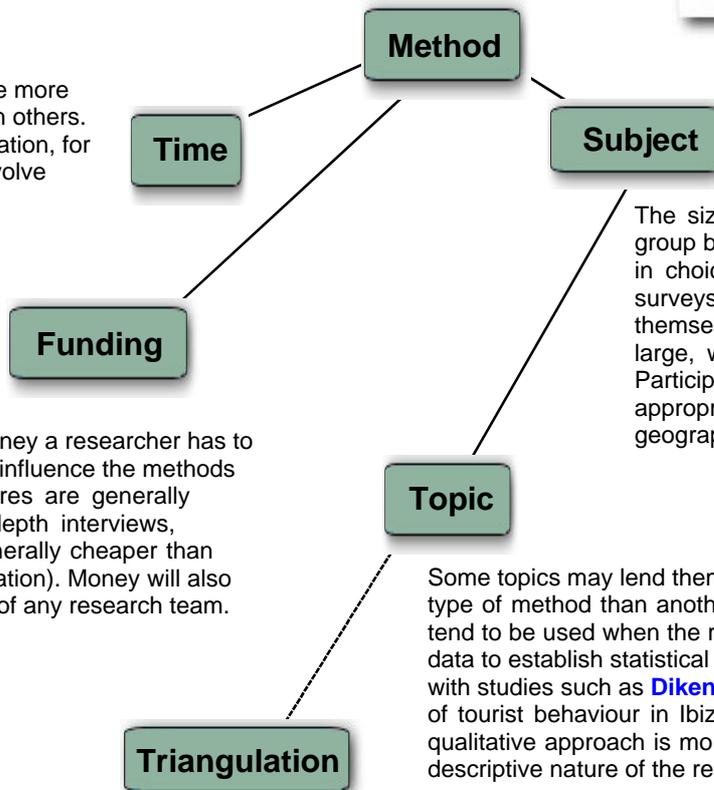
Research topics go in and out of fashion and sociologists reflect these trends (although factors like research funding always exert some form of influence here).

Practical Research Considerations

Sociological research involves confronting and resolving a range of practical factors relating to choice of topic and research method.



Some methods are more time-intensive than others. Participant observation, for example, may involve years of research.



The size and composition of the group being studied may be a factor in choice of method(s). Social surveys and questionnaires lend themselves easily to the study of large, widely-dispersed, groups. Participant observation may be more appropriate for the study of small, geographically-localised, groups.

The amount of money a researcher has to spend will directly influence the methods used (questionnaires are generally cheaper than in-depth interviews, interviews are generally cheaper than participant observation). Money will also influence the size of any research team.

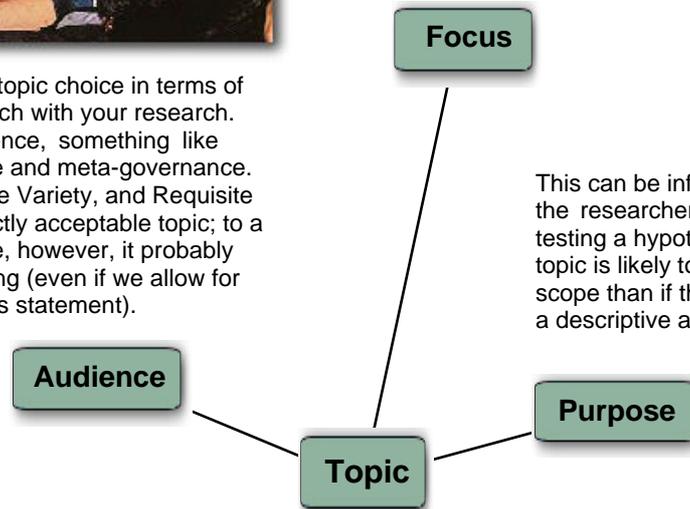
Some topics may lend themselves more easily to one type of method than another; quantitative methods tend to be used when the researcher wants reliable data to establish statistical relationships. Alternatively, with studies such as **Diken and Laustsen's** analysis of tourist behaviour in Ibiza and Faliraki (2004), a qualitative approach is more appropriate, given the descriptive nature of the research.

A mix of methods is frequently used to satisfy different types of research question within the same topic . For example, if I'm interested in understanding "Why people fear crime", I will probably use a method that provides in-depth, qualitative data (such as a focused interview). However, before doing my interview-based research I might do a small establishing study using a simple (quantitative) questionnaire.



Research often evolves, in the sense of changing to meet new interests and concerns; while it's rare for a central topic to change during the research (if you begin by researching family life, you're not likely to end by researching education), aspects of the topic may well change. As research develops, changes may be made to quantitative questions or new areas of interest may open up in the light of respondent comments or researcher observations).

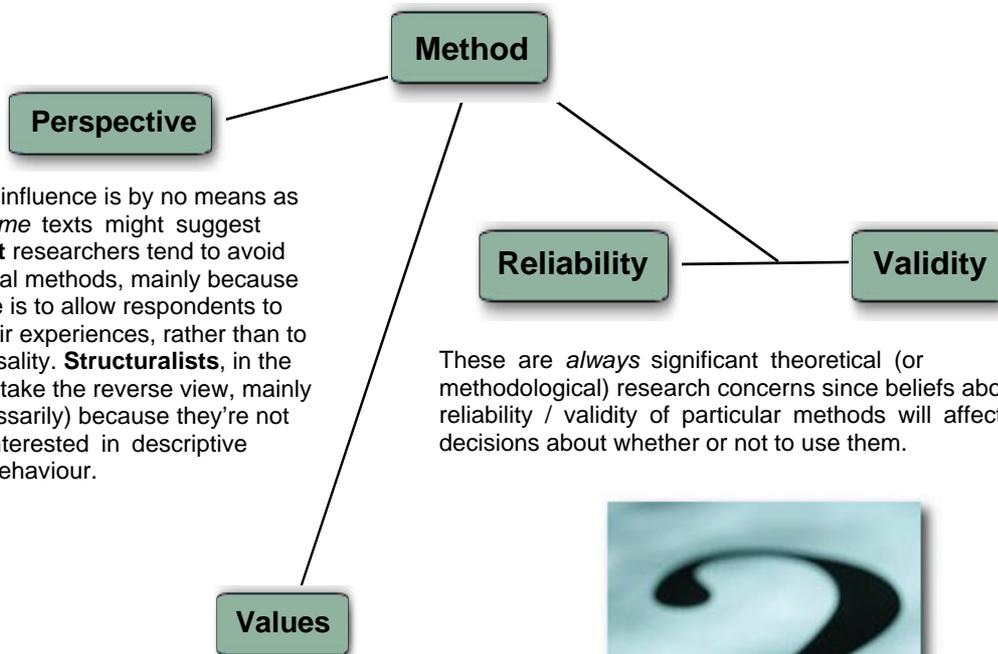
Audiences may dictate topic choice in terms of who you're trying to reach with your research. To an academic audience, something like **Jessop's** "Governance and meta-governance. On Reflexivity, Requisite Variety, and Requisite Irony" (2003) is a perfectly acceptable topic; to a non-academic audience, however, it probably wouldn't prove so alluring (even if we allow for the requisite irony of this statement).



This can be influential in terms of what the researcher is aiming to do – if testing a hypothesis, for example, the topic is likely to be much narrower in scope than if the objective is to provide a descriptive account of something.

Theoretical Research Considerations

Research involves confronting and resolving a range of theoretical questions - which we can express as the *how?* and the *why?* of choice of topic and research method.



Although this influence is by no means as strong as *some* texts might suggest **Interactionist** researchers tend to avoid using statistical methods, mainly because their objective is to allow respondents to talk about their experiences, rather than to establish causality. **Structuralists**, in the main, tend to take the reverse view, mainly (but not necessarily) because they're not particularly interested in descriptive accounts of behaviour.

These are *always* significant theoretical (or methodological) research concerns since beliefs about the reliability / validity of particular methods will affect decisions about whether or not to use them.

Researchers have values too and these are reflected in ethical beliefs about how something should (or should not) be studied. If, like **Polsky** (1971) you believe covert participation is unethical and methodologically invalid you're not likely to choose this research method.

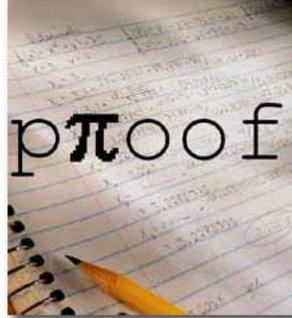


Theoretical Research Considerations

Questions surrounding the relationship between theory and methods boil down to four related ideas:

Ontology

This idea poses the question "What do we believe exists?". In relation to Sociology, an *ontological question* is one that considers what we believe the subject matter of Sociology to be. The significance of ontological questions is our answers will condition how we view the purpose and subject matter of Sociology, how we conduct research and, of course, how we see it as appropriate to study social behaviour (especially in terms of our choice of topic and method).



Epistemology

"How we know what we claim to know" about the social world - a question that relates to the kinds of *proof* we will accept to justify our answer to ontological questions ("Seeing is believing", for example. Alternatively, we may accept something on *trust*, or because we have *faith*, a characteristic of religious proof). *Epistemological questions* relate to the evidence we will accept to justify our belief something is true and this idea is important, sociologically, because our beliefs about evidence influence our choice of research method - if you don't, for example, believe questionnaires produce valid data, you're not likely to use them in your research.

Methodology

This idea is concerned with beliefs about how to produce reliable and valid knowledge. For example:

Effects

The Interview Effect

If you believe interviews are a manipulative process whereby the respondent presents a picture to you that accords with the picture they would like you to have, you are unlikely to see interview data as valid.

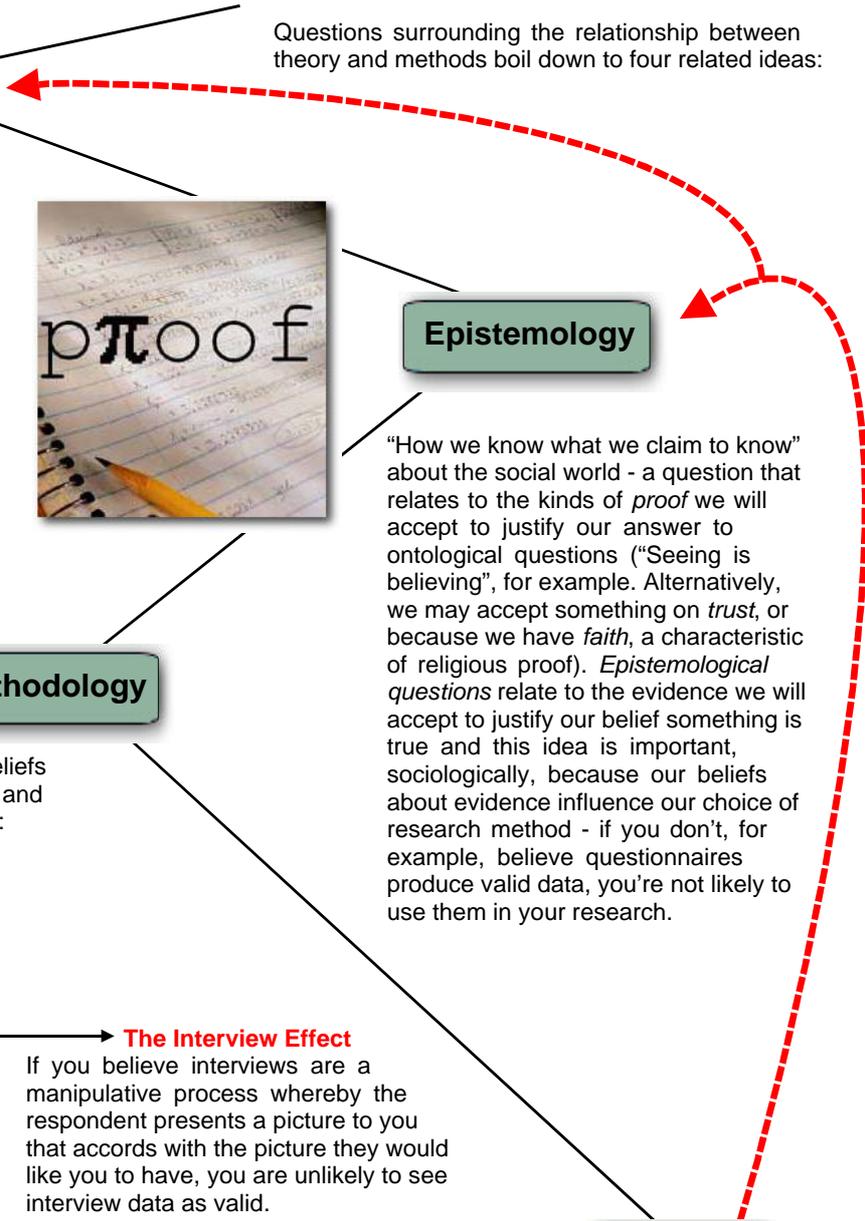
The Observer Effect

If you believe a researcher's presence affects the behaviour of those being observed, you would not see overt participant observation as a valid way of collecting data.



Methods

This refers to specific techniques of data collection and our ideas about their appropriateness (or otherwise) to our research (ideas which will be conditioned by our ontological, epistemological and (deep breath) methodological beliefs).





The researcher needs to safeguard the interests, rights and general well-being (both physical and psychological) of respondents. **Examples** here might be respecting respondent privacy or minimising anxiety / distress that may be caused by the research.

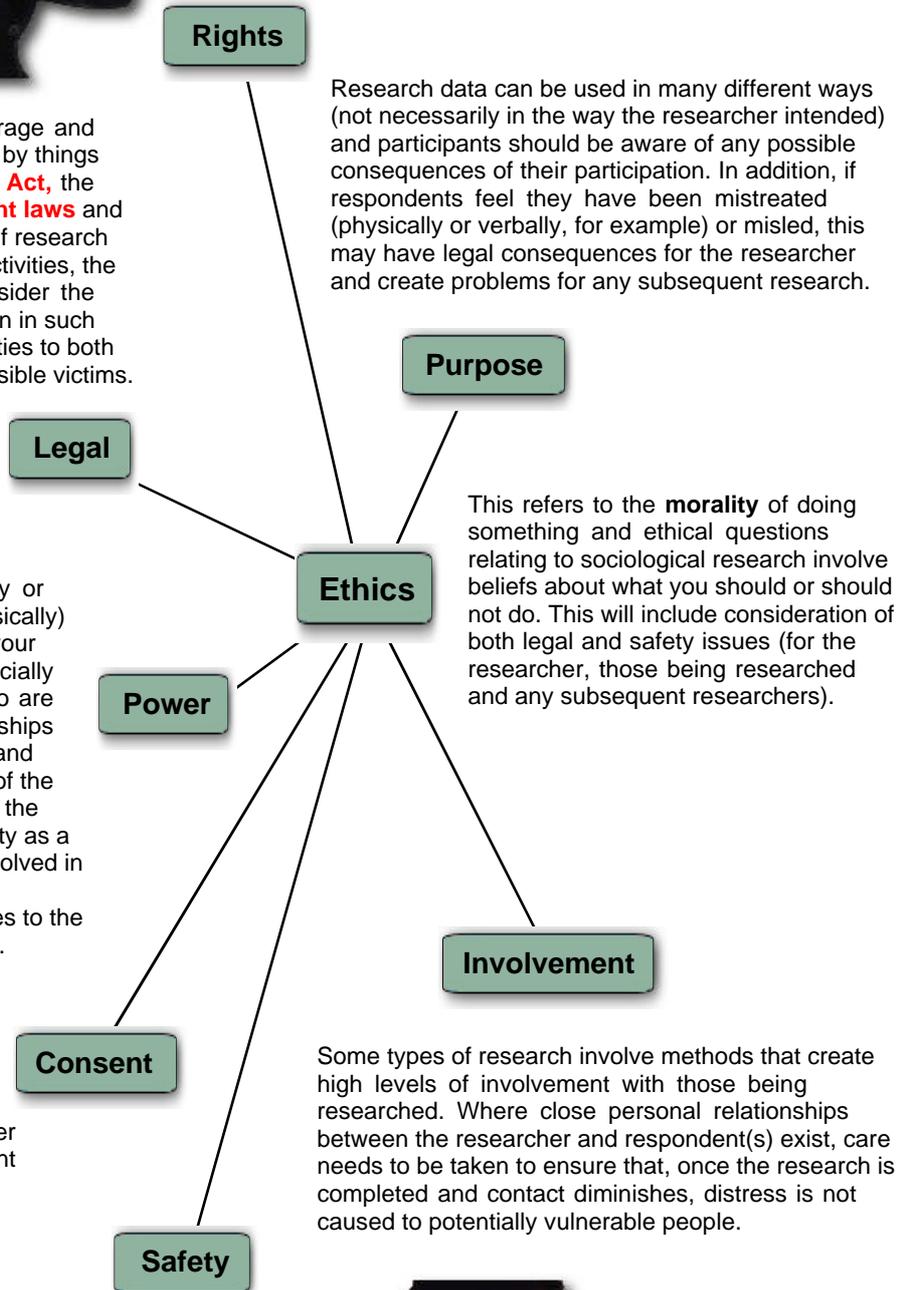
In the UK, the collection, storage and retrieval of data are governed by things such as the **Data Protection Act**, the **Human Rights Act**, **Copyright laws** and the **laws of libel**. In addition, if research involves criminal or deviant activities, the researcher may have to consider the ethical question of participation in such behaviour or their responsibilities to both the perpetrators and their possible victims.

It would be unethical to bully or blackmail (emotionally or physically) people into participating in your research. In addition - especially when researching people who are relatively powerless - relationships need to be based on trust and personal integrity on the part of the researcher. **For example**, if the researcher promises anonymity as a way of researching people involved in criminal or deviant activities, disclosing respondent identities to the authorities would be unethical.

Where possible, the researcher should always gain the consent of those being studied.



Care always needs to be taken to ensure the physical and psychological safety of both the researcher and the respondent.



Item A

Pamela Davies carried out research into the experiences of women serving prison sentences for criminal offences. She visited the women concerned in prison whilst they were serving their sentences. "Before carrying out the research, organisation and planning are needed. For example, decisions about whether to conduct personal, face-to-face research or to administer a postal survey have to be taken. One consideration is whether to use triangulation as a research strategy.

The decision was ultimately taken to reject postal surveys and instead to meet with female offenders in their prisons. Undertaking a longitudinal study, which would involve meeting with the same group of female offenders at regular intervals, would have been an ideal approach. However, this turned out not to be an option for my research. Once these decisions have been taken, there is a period of time needed in order to set up the research. Although carrying out research can be something a sociologist looks forward to, questioning known criminals, who have apparently done something serious enough to lead to a prison sentence, can still be a daunting prospect. Research in a prison environment involves many practical problems and concerns that have to be dealt with if the research is to be successful."

Source: adapted from V. JUPP, P. DAVIES AND P. FRANCIS, *Doing Criminological Research* (Sage

Exam Questions**6 Marks**

Suggest three "practical problems and concerns" that might occur when carrying out research in prisons.

20 Marks

Using material from Item B and elsewhere, assess the claim that a sociologist's choice of research methods is based mainly on practical and ethical factors.

2 Marks

Explain what is meant by "triangulation"

Item B

The British Sociological Association issues guidelines on important aspects of professional sociology. These include the following.

- Social researchers face a range of potential risks to their safety. Safety issues need to be considered in the design and conduct of social research projects, and procedures should be adopted to reduce the risk to researchers.
- There are serious ethical and legal issues in the use of covert methods but their use may be justified in certain circumstances. Researchers may also face problems when access to spheres of social life is closed to social scientists by powerful or secretive interests.
- Covert methods go against the principles of informed consent and may invade the privacy of those being studied. Covert researchers need to take into account the laws about the right to privacy.

Source: adapted from BRITISH SOCIOLOGICAL ASSOCIATION STATEMENT OF ETHICAL PRACTICE, www.britsoc.co.uk March 2002

20 marks

Examine the different factors that influence the sociologist's choice of research methods.