CHAPTER COMMENTARY

The second chapter, alongside Chapter 3 on Theory, takes forward the basic sociological approach to studying social life that was introduced in the introductory chapter. Chapters 2 and 3 draw upon issues from throughout the discipline by returning to the central questions raised in chapter 1, namely, ‘What does it mean to think sociologically and how does one go about applying this?’ Both these questions are addressed during chapter 2, which starts out with a vignette from Humphreys’ *Tearoom Trade*. In this edition, the links between theory and research are much tighter and the range of methods is wider. In the course of the commentary it is pointed out that the different strands of theoretical thinking outlined in chapter 1 play a key role in driving the nature of the questions, or at least the way in which they are couched. This is the launch pad to revisit chapter 1 by thinking about the types of question that sociologists pose and how they attempt to answer them (and there are strong linkages here with the themes of the book itself). Success in this endeavour depends on questions being precise and the evidence being of high quality. To this end a sound knowledge of appropriate research methods is essential for sociologists.

The different types of question fall into various categories. Factual questions give us information about what, who and how. The text uses the example of crime statistics to illustrate the value of being well informed about the background to a topic or issue. The next step is to ask ‘How usual is this?’ – in other words, to ask comparative questions about the situation in other countries or in different types of system. A different type of comparison is the one undertaken over time rather than across space. Such an approach involves developmental questions, reflecting the strong historical orientation in Giddens’s sociology. Following these distinctions, the text then identifies the equal importance of empirical and theoretical questions and the nature of their interrelationship, while offering an initial nod towards the idea that ‘real world research’ often differs from ‘ideal-type’ approaches found in the textbooks.

Before proceeding further, the text investigates the extent to which sociological research can be bracketed as a scientific endeavour. In so far as it is, this is because of its

- systematic method;
- empirical investigation;
- data analysis;
- theoretical thinking; and
- logical assessment of argument.

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While sociology fits this definition, it differs from natural science because the subject under study – human beings – endow their actions with their own meanings and explanations. This is boon and bane; the sociologist can directly interrogate their subject, but that subject may behave in a ‘modified’ way, for instance by telling the investigator what he or she thinks they wish to hear.

The remainder of the chapter covers four themes: process, inference, data collection methods and other miscellaneous issues. The first section traces the various stages of the research process. This starts in all cases from a problem, whether in the shape of a knowledge gap, or perhaps a puzzle or a lack of understanding. Most pieces of research are embedded within larger ongoing programmes of research; such is the purpose and product of academic journals and peer-group interaction at conferences. New research projects are sometimes stimulated by perceived changes in society or from specific policy initiatives. These are then followed up with a systematic review of existing studies in order to identify possible insights and omissions. At the third stage the research problem is honed down to aid the formulation of hypotheses which, to be of much use, must be couched in such a way that the results of the research either support or disprove them. From here, some thought must be given to designing a piece of research using methods most likely to achieve the research’s objectives.

The execution of the research is by no means straightforward, with problems of access and possible restrictions on the content of what may be published. Added to this is the difficulty of interpreting the data produced and of presenting the findings in a range of formats suitable for particular audiences. As figure 2.1 implies (p.40), the end of one person’s project is likely to signal the start of someone else’s. The ongoing research programme is a seamless robe.

The next section looks at the thorny problem of cause and effect. It defines the term causal relationship and stresses the need to separate causation and correlation of variables. There is some discussion of inference, distinguishing independent variables from dependent variables and also the use of controls to this end. The section also contains a treatment of how causal mechanisms are established.

The next section looks more specifically at a number of well-known research methods. The first of these is ethnography, involving fieldwork using participant observation. The discussion here covers a number of the same issues raised in the opening account of Humphreys’ work. At this point the focus switches from intensive to extensive research, with a coverage of survey method. The survey is usually operationalized through either standardized or open-ended questionnaires. Key considerations such as consistency, comprehension and characteristics of respondents are raised, and are the main reasons for the use of pilot studies. Naturally, the survey method could not operate without recourse to sampling, which needs to be representative in order to be accurate. To this end, random sampling can be employed, which in its purest form involves the use of computer-generated random numbers as a basis for the eventual sample. The study of voting behaviour by Lazarsfeld et al. is cited as a pioneering piece of survey work. While surveys are cost-effective ways to get simple facts about large numbers of people, they are criticized for high levels of non-response and the shallowness of their analysis.

Experiments test hypotheses under controlled conditions. While overwhelmingly associated with natural sciences, on rare occasions such methods can be applied in sociology, one
example being Zimbardo’s prison experiment, presented in this sixth edition as a Classic Study. In total contrast is biographical research, which is entirely restricted to the social sciences. Advantages are the richness of detail and historical scope, but this type of research does rely on subjective accounts and human memory and as such is subject to criticism. Historical analysis can be carried out with recourse both to oral history and documentary research. In similar vein but covering a longer period is Skocpol’s States and Social Revolutions, here cited as a Classic Study, which successfully marries historical and comparative analysis, using examples from different contexts to attempt more wide-ranging judgements about general phenomena.

Visual sociology uses photographs, film, television programmes, video, and so on, not just as supportive illustrations in research studies, but makes them objects of study in their own right. The Internet acts as a readily available source of information, offers access to ‘virtual’ communities that can assist in research studies, and facilitates the speeding up of academic exchanges, spreading local research across the international scholarly community. However, learning how to assess such material for its accuracy and value will be much more important in the future.

The fourth section begins by noting that since all methods are likely to have their limits, it is necessary and desirable to employ triangulation. The value of multi-methods approaches is illustrated by returning to Humphreys’ research. In order to bolster his observational data, Humphreys collected car registrations which he then linked to personal details. He added his names and addresses onto an existing survey of sexual behaviour. A range of ethical issues are dealt with in this extended discussion of Tearoom Trade. The importance of sociological research is re-emphasized in a concluding paragraph stressing the ongoing reflexive relationship between sociology and the common-sense beliefs of the general public, as well as its input to policy-making.

The familiar boxed material ends the chapter, providing useful fodder for teaching sessions. Statistical terms are covered in ‘Using Your Sociological Imagination’ Box 2.2. The text covers the essential ones – mean, mode and median – as measures of central tendency and standard deviation as an aid to judging the degree of dispersal. It also highlights the use of correlation coefficients to measure association between variables.
TEACHING TOPICS

1. The research process
This topic follows the progress of social research from the initial formulation of a research problem, through literature review, hypothesis formation, project design, data collection and interpretation of findings.

2. Research methods
The aim is to review varying techniques for data collection and to assess the strengths and weaknesses of each in particular social contexts. Exemplars in each category help to reinforce this.

3. Ethics and values in research
Here the approach is to illustrate, through the example of Humphreys’ work in and around the infamous ‘tearooms’, the ethical pitfalls which await the social researcher. Some consideration is also given to the politics of social research.

ACTIVITIES

Activity 1: The research process
Many trainee social scientists are unsure about how to conduct research projects. Some concentrate on getting some data and only then do they worry about what to do with it! Others worry that only particular research methods can give them the ‘right’ answers. The following passage locates the research process within the broader pursuit of knowledge:

Our knowledge would not have grown as it has – unless in our search for confirming instances we accidentally hit upon a counter-instance. For the growth of knowledge proceeds from problems and our attempts to solve them. These attempts involve the propounding of theories which, if they are to provide possible solutions at all, must go beyond our existing knowledge, and which therefore require a leap of the imagination. The bolder the theory the more it tells us, and also the more daring the act of imagination ...

At no stage are we able to prove that what we now ‘know’ is true, and it is always possible that it will turn out to be false. Indeed it is an elementary fact about the intellectual history of mankind that most of what has been ‘known’ at one time or another has eventually turned out to be not the case. ... Nothing in science is permanently established, nothing unalterable, and indeed science is quite clearly changing all the time, and not through the accretion of new certainties. If we are rational we shall always base our decisions and expectations on ‘the best of our knowledge’, as the popular phrase so rightly has it, and provisionally assume the ‘truth’ of that knowledge for practical purposes, because it is the least insecure foundation available; but we shall never lose sight of the fact that at any time experience may show it to be wrong and require us to revise it. ...

Popper replaced this [the traditional approach to scientific method] with:
1. problem (usually rebuff to existing theory or expectation); 2. proposed solution, in other words a new theory; 3. deduction of testable propositions from the new theory; 4. tests, i.e. attempted refutations by, among other things (but only among other things), observation and experiment; 5. preference established among competing theories.

If we ask of Popper’s schema: where did the theory or expectation in 1 come from whose breakdown constituted our problem, the short answer usually is: from stage 5 of a prior process.


1. Go back and look at the diagram on page 40 of the text. Consider the way that this relates to the way that Magee outlines Popper’s approach to scientific method.

2. Look at the following list of research issues. For each, decide exactly how you would formulate a hypothesis which could be tested and refined to increase our knowledge about the subject.

(a) An exploration of attitudes towards drug abuse in one country.
(b) The significance of kinship networks in working-class culture.
(c) Do students believe that they should pay tuition fees in higher education?
(d) The effects of media coverage on attitudes to crime.
(e) How many people in London rent homes from housing associations?
(f) What is the average number of hours’ paid employment worked by students on your course?
(g) The experience of being a hostage victim.
(h) Why do people join political parties?

**Activity 2: Research methods**

A. Look at the list of research issues repeated below. This time think about what kind of data you would be looking to collect and the most suitable methods for that data collection.

(a) An exploration of attitudes towards drug abuse in one country.
(b) The significance of kinship networks in working-class culture.
(c) Do students believe that they should pay tuition fees in higher education?
(d) The effects of media coverage on attitudes to crime.
(e) How many people in London rent homes from housing associations?
(f) What is the average number of hours’ paid employment worked by students on your course?
(g) The experience of being a hostage victim.
(h) Why do people join political parties?

In each case consider your response and the reasons for it. Think about whether there might be more than one way of tackling the problem.

B. Re-read the section on survey method from pages 50–3 of *Sociology*. Have you taken part in a survey recently? It’s not just academic social scientists who use them – more and more commercial companies and public bodies are interested in finding out more about you, so that they can either sell you new products or provide you with more appropriate services. An experiment in Bristol was carried out by the City Council, which decided to hold a
referendum so that its citizens could decide on the level of local taxation and spending for the coming year. All households were sent supporting information and a ballot paper with four options:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>BUDGET OPTIONS</th>
<th>ORDER OF PREFERENCE</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>OPTION 1</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6% council tax rise</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>savings package plus £2.2 million extra spending</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>OPTION 2</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4% council tax rise</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>savings package, but including the [central] government’s assumed increase in education spending</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>OPTION 3</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2% council tax rise</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>savings package plus further savings of £2.2 million</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>OPTION 4</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>0% no increase in council tax</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>savings package plus further savings of £4.5 million</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

1. Now consider the nature of social surveys again. An election is, in fact, a survey in which the state asks its voters who they want to elect as their MP. But of course this is a very blunt instrument. The majority of respondents will give us an answer, but for each person there is huge uncertainty as to whether people vote for candidates, parties, policies, values or whatever. Indeed, there is a whole strand of political sociology devoted to getting to the root of these motives. Write down some ideas about how you would go about expressing your preferences in this situation.

2. Consider the strengths and limitations of carrying out this type of exercise. Think about what sort of information you would have needed in your guidance leaflet in order to make a decision. What does this say about your approach to voting?

C. Re-read the section on controls on page 46 and that on experiments on page 54. Pay particular attention to the section on ‘controlling variables’. The Bristol case cited above is interesting because it is the nearest thing we get to an experiment in social science. A high percentage of the public reports that they are willing to pay higher taxes in order to obtain higher-quality services. However, this does not correlate with the votes cast for ‘tax and spend’ parties. Either they are misleading us, or their voting behaviour is clouded by other issues. The referendum ‘controls’ for other issues as the only issues are taxation and spending. In the light of your readings, what other research activity would you want to carry out in the period leading up to the referendum, in order to refine the experiment still further?
D. Study table 2.3 on page 49. Which research method do you regard as:

(a) yielding the richest data?
(b) giving best value for money?
(c) being the quickest?
(d) providing the greatest reliability?

Activity 3: Ethics and values in research

A. Read the account of Humphreys’ work starting on page 33.

1. How far do you feel his approach was ethically justifiable? Were there areas of weakness in his approach to the research process?
2. Think of another potential research project which might present ethical problems or which arouses strong feelings about values. Think about the approach you would take to prevent such issues damaging the research process.

B. Another problem is that researchers often rely on data collected by others. Such secondary data is always vulnerable to the whims of those who design and collect it and those who fund the process. During January 1997 the Office for National Statistics (ONS) announced that its General Household Survey was not to be produced in 1997, in order to save half a million pounds. The survey is based on a sample of 10,000 households and provides data on consumption patterns, education, work and health. Responding to the news, Paul Barker, an academic from the Institute of Community Studies, summed up the value and danger of official statistics of this sort:

John Major once evoked his ideal vision of Britain as the land of warm beer, cricket on the village green, and maiden ladies out walking the dog. But if you want to find out how many people get up to such pastimes in reality, rather than in some dream of a Tory heaven, how would you go about it? Undercutting Major’s Orwellian imagery, it [the GHS] tells you that the sport which the men of Britain are most likely to take part in is not cricket, but snooker. ... More seriously, the survey has allowed decision-makers, and citizens, to scrutinise the many variables of social policy. But not any longer.

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1. Find out more about the General Household Survey. What other sources of data are available from government agencies? How do such sources of data aid the types of analysis mentioned in the course of chapter 2?
2. Given what you know about research methodology, what are the advantages of ‘secondary data’ of this type? What are the main risks and weaknesses for the social analyst?

REFLECTION & DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

The research process
Why does Popper argue for the ‘falsification principle’?
If most research projects start from research problems, who decides what the problems are and how? Why is the research ‘process’ hardly ever smooth and linear?

Research methods
Do ‘quantitative’ and ‘qualitative’ describe types of research strategy or just types of data? How could the researcher try to minimize the possibilities of error and/or bias distorting a research project? Are any of the research methods in the chapter more ‘scientific’ than others?

Ethics and Values in Research
If one accepts the need for research ethics, would it ever be possible to agree on one set of ethics with which we felt comfortable? Is a value-free approach to social research (a) possible or (b) desirable? Should the responsibility for ‘official’ statistics be transferred to independent academics?

ESSAY QUESTIONS

1. Why do sociologists so rarely do experiments? Is it because they are not scientific in their method?

2. Compare the relative merits of questionnaire surveys and in-depth interviews as methods of data collection.

3. Critically appraise the role of values and ethics in the execution of social research.

MAKING CONNECTIONS

The research process: The execution of research can be viewed as the means of achieving the aims of the discipline outlined in chapter 1. It can also be a yardstick against which to measure the quality of the research encountered by students during their studies.

Research methods: Again it makes sense to revisit chapter 1, but other substantive chapters could also offer insights into the application of method. In this regard the crime statistics in chapter 21 and the interpretation of church attendance figures in chapter 17 offer potentially valuable illustrations.

Ethics and values in research: This goes back to the heart of the relationship between the sociologist and society, a key component of chapter 1.
SAMPLE SESSION

Research methods

Aims: To explore the nature and limits of research methods through their application.

Outcome: By the end of the session students will be able to:
1. Assess the appropriate methods for collecting different kinds of data.
2. Define and distinguish between closed and open questions.
3. Apply 1 and 2 to the construction of a short questionnaire.

Preparatory tasks
Read the relevant sections of Sociology. Then complete Task A.

Classroom tasks
1. Feedback from preparatory task leading to broader discussion. (10 minutes)
2. Split the class into pairs. Each pair gets four topics to explore (such as memories of childhood holidays, attitudes to TV violence, etc.). In their pairs the students design an interview schedule comprising one closed and one open question for each topic. (15 minutes)
3. In pairs, students interview one another as per their schedule. (15 minutes)
4. Pairs report back their results while the tutor performs ad hoc data analysis on the board or flip chart. (20 minutes)

Assessment task
Write up your research in a report format, appending the interview schedule.