**Social Issues Studies: Determining your methodology**

**Choosing qualitative or quantitative research methodologies**

Your research will determine the kinds of research methodologies you use to carry out your work and methods you use in order to collect data. If you wish to collect **quantitative** data you are probably measuring variables and verifying existing theories or hypotheses or questioning them. Data is often used to generate new hypotheses based on the results of data collected about different variables.

**Qualitative research** is carried out when we wish to understand meanings, look at, describe and understand experience, ideas, beliefs and values, intangibles such as these. **Using quantitative and qualitative research methods together**

This is a common approach and helps you to 'triangulate' ie to back up one set of findings from one method of data collection underpinned by one methodology, with another very different method underpinned by another methodology - for example, you might give out a questionnaire (normally quantitative) to gather statistical data about responses, and then back this up and research in more depth by interviewing (normally qualitative) selected members of your questionnaire sample.

**Qualitative research methods**

* Interviews

Interviews enable face to face discussion with human subjects. If you are going to use interviews you will have to decide whether you will take notes (distracting), tape the interview (accurate but time consuming) rely on your memory (foolish) or write in their answers (can lead to closed questioning for time’s sake).

If you decide to interview you will need to draw up an interview schedule of questions which can be either *closed*or*open* questions, or a mixture of these. **Closed questions** tend to be used for asking for and receiving answers about fixed facts such as name, numbers, and so on. They do not require speculation and they tend to produce short answers. With closed questions you could even give your interviewees a small selection of possible answers from which to choose. If you do this you will be able to manage the data and quantify the responses quite easily. You might ask them to indicate how true for them a certain statement was felt to be, and this too can provide both a closed response, and one which can be quantified (30% of those asked said they never ate rice, while 45% said they did so regularly at least once a week... and so on).The problem with closed questions is that they limit the response the interviewee can give and do not enable them to think deeply or test their real feelings or values.

If you ask **open questions** such as ‘what do you think about the increase in traffic?’ you could elicit an almost endless number of responses. This would give you a very good idea of the variety of ideas and feelings people have, it would enable them to think and talk for longer and so show their feelings and views more fully. But it is very difficult to quantify these results. You will find that you will need to read all the comments through and to categorize them after you have received them, or merely report them in their diversity and make general statements, or pick out particular comments if they seem to fit your purpose.

If you decide to use interviews:

* Identify your sample.
* Draw up a set of questions that seem appropriate to what you need to find out.
* Do start with some basic closed questions (name etc.).
* Don't ask leading questions.
* Try them out with a colleague.
* Pilot them, then refine the questions so that they are genuinely engaged with your research object.
* Contact your interviewees and ask permission, explain the interview and its use.
* Carry out interviews and keep notes/tape.
* Transcribe.
* Thematically analyze results and relate these findings to others from your other research methods.

**Quantitative research methods:**

* Questionnaires/Surveys

Questionnaires often seem a logical and easy option as a way of collecting information from people. They are actually rather difficult to design and because of the frequency of their use in all contexts in the modern world, the response rate is nearly always going to be a problem (low) unless you have ways of making people complete them and hand them in on the spot (and this of course limits your sample, how long the questionnaire can be and the kinds of questions asked).

As with interviews, you can decide to use closed or open questions, and can also offer respondents multiple choice questions from which to choose the statement which most nearly describes their response to a statement or item. Their layout is an art form in itself because in poorly laid out questionnaires respondents tend, for example, to repeat their ticking of boxes in the same pattern. If given a choice of response on a scale 1-5, they will usually opt for the middle point, and often tend to miss out subsections to questions.

You need to take expert advice in setting up a questionnaire, ensure that all the information about the respondents which you need is included and filled in, and ensure that you actually get them returned. You will need to ensure that questions are clear, and that you have reliable ways of collecting and managing the data. Setting up a questionnaire that can be completed online is an excellent idea if you wish to collect large numbers of responses and analyze them statistically rather than reading each questionnaire and entering data manually.

Developing and using a questionnaire - some tips

* Identify your research questions
* Identify your sample
* Draw up a list of appropriate questions and try them out with a colleague
* Ensure questions are well laid out and it is clear how to 'score them' (tick, circle, delete)
* Ensure questions are not leading and confusing
* Code up the questionnaire so you can analyze it afterwards
* Gain permission to use questionnaires from your sample
* Ensure they put their names or numbers on so you can identify them but keep real names confidential
* Ensure you collect in as many as possible
* Follow up if you get a small return
* Analyze statistically if possible and / or thematically
* **Other Methods of Research that you may choose to use include**: Experimental Studies, Longitudinal Studies, Case studies, Participant observation, Focus Groups…
* **Where to Research**: GoogleScholar, JSTOR (sign up on this online database), UN sites, EULEX sites, News sites like BBC, SETimes, BalkanInsight, other non-English sources can work too!

**Activity- Answer the following questions with your social issues research group.**

What kind of research methods are you going to use? Are they mostly:

1. Quantitative, or qualitative, or a mixture of both?
2. What do you think your methods will enable you to discover?
3. What might they prevent you from discovering?
4. What kinds of research methods would be best suited to the kind of research you are undertaking and the research questions you are pursuing?
5. What sort of problems do you predict in setting up these methods?
6. What are their benefits?
7. What materials will you need to do to ensure they gather useful data?
8. How will you split up the work to organize and carry out this research?