

# Overview of social surveys

Source: Ivor Morgan (1998) *Letts 'A' Level Sociology Revision Notes*

## Overview of social surveys

### The strengths are that:

- they deliver objective, accurately measured, 'scientific' data which can be easily put into statistical form
- they provide a high degree of reliability — if the survey is replicated the same results should be obtained
- by studying large numbers of respondents and using effective sampling techniques generalisations can be drawn
- the quality of data is not dependent on the personal impressions, skills, and objectivity of a single researcher
- the research can be completed over a short time-span and at a low cost.

### Their weaknesses are that:

- the most important questions may not be asked
- the concepts and forms of language used in the survey may be misinterpreted, or the respondents may lie
- the high level of reliability of surveys (i.e. replication producing the same results) can be accompanied by low validity (i.e. a failure to convey a true picture of what is being studied)
- quantitative methods such as social surveys have been rejected by many feminists because 'they treat people as objects, as natural scientists treat chemicals or rocks, rather than as human subjects' — P. Abbott and C. Wallace *An Introduction To Sociology: Feminist Perspectives*, (1997).

1. Name four studies based on social surveys.
2. What theoretical perspective supports the social survey?
3. Name two perspectives that reject the social survey.
4. Name one perspective which accepts the survey and reconciles it with the methods adopted by those who reject the survey.
5. Why should sociologists treat the information gained by official surveys with some care?
6. What is the name for the official government survey which is based on the entire population of Britain?
7. Why does the government find it necessary to conduct such research?
8. What ethical problems are associated with the social survey?
9. What practical problems are associated with the social survey?
10. List the factors that can influence the choice of research method.

What do the following terms associated with social survey methodology mean?

Self-administered questionnaire, longitudinal research, formal or closed questionnaires, informal or open questionnaires, field experiments, interviewer bias, non-response, secondary statistics, population, quota sampling, validity, reliability, ethics, hypothesis testing, paradigm.

