

### **Should Sociologists make use of official statistics?**

Official statistics refer to data already collected by the government and its agencies. Official statistics can be used as a general research tool covering topics ranging from the economy, unemployment, health, education and crime. They enable researchers to understand the dynamics of society as well as charting trends within society. They provide the government and social policy formulators with data, which in turn influence social policy and bring to light areas in society, which need attention. In recent years the Government Statistical Service which was set up in 1941 has co-ordinated the production of government statistics, but the production of large scale statistical data goes back at least to 1801, when the first census was conducted. The question of whether sociologists should make use of official statistics is much debated and often depends on the theoretical standpoint of the sociologist. Sociologists influenced by positivism argue that official statistics should be made more use of as they provide quantitative, empirical and systematic data and can be seen as emulating scientific methods. On the other hand sociologists such as Maxwell-Atkinson, Cicourel influenced by the institutionalist school of thought would argue that statistics are a product of the meanings and taken for granted assumptions of those who construct them. In order to fully assess the usefulness of statistics it is also necessary to take into consideration the practical advantages/ disadvantages and the theoretical advantages and disadvantages. Thus it is this debate I shall now turn to.

In order to answer the overall question it is necessary to firstly take into account the practical arguments in favour of using official statistics in research. Arguments in favour include that official statistics are widely available in large quantities. This allows the researcher to generalise to the whole of the population. Due to statistics being readily available and free this in turn saves the researcher time and money and therefore they can turn their attention to more serious matters concerning their research. Statistics allow examination of trends over time and thus allow for comparisons to be made. According to Bulmer what we know about phenomena in contemporary society such as health, wealth and education are heavily dependent on statistics. Therefore, they prove to be useful to sociologists. However, despite this there remains resistance of the use of official statistics in research. Firstly the validity of statistics can be questioned. Do statistics measure what they claim to measure? For example, in relation to crime a criminal only includes those who are caught or found guilty. Additionally, within crime statistics there is a 'dark figure' of unrecorded crime, a phenomenon which is more widely acknowledged. For example, it is suggested that around

40% of crimes reported to the police are not recorded by them and thus do not end up in the official statistics. Similarly, in regards to suicide rates the validity can also be questioned as it is argued coroners are more likely to categorise certain deaths as suicide. Hammersley argues, we have but no choice to use government statistics as it only that state that has the power and resources to produce them on such a large scale. However, this can bring in the question of political bias. For example, according to the Labour Party the Tories changed their methods to count unemployment over thirty times and in every case the unemployment rates dropped. Thus with problems such as political bias and statistics being produced with the political agenda of the party in power should sociologists really make use of them? Finally, official statistics are generally derived from surveys or questionnaires. Therefore, they are open to distortion on the part of the public. For example, with victimisation surveys people are less likely to lie about being a victim. However, when it comes to self-report studies people are most likely to report minor crimes such as speeding than grand crimes. Therefore, from above it can be seen that statistics are subject to many practical disadvantages. However, in order to gain a greater understanding of whether sociologists should use such methods it is necessary to take into account those who do use them and their theoretical arguments for doing so.

Depending on the sociologists standpoint it will determine not only what research methods are used but also they views to particular methods. Sociologists influenced by positivism such as Durkheim would argue in favour of the use of official statistics and this can be related back to their theoretical standpoint. Sociologists influenced by positivism believe that only science can provide the objective 'truth' or facts about the world. Human nature is determined by social forces (generally referred to as 'laws' or 'social facts') beyond the control of society's members and this is a product of the way in which societies are organised. They therefore believe sociology should be a scientific discipline based on the logic and methods of natural sciences. Thus the job of sociologists is to uncover the social laws that govern human behaviour. It is this viewpoint that was taken by sociologist Durkheim. Durkheim agreed sociologists should confine themselves to social facts, information about phenomena that can be observed and classified. He went onto suggest that objectivity and value- freedom was necessary and indeed achievable by emulating methodology of the natural sciences. In Durkheim's study of suicide he chose to study suicide because of the availability of social facts (suicide statistics) from all over Europe. Durkheim used official statistics, as he believed they were reliable, objective and systematically collected and thus were a step in the direction of emulating scientific methods. Positivists believe that it is possible to observe society and collect information such as social facts, just like a scientist in a lab. With these facts it is possible to produce

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statistics. In Durkheim's study of suicide he collected data on social facts such as suicide rate and membership to religions. With these social facts positivists can seek to find correlations between different social facts. Thus an advantage of official statistics is that they can be manipulated to show trends over time. For example, in terms of weight, health and age statistics. In reference to Durkheim's suicide study statistics enabled him to find correlation between religion and a high suicide rate and between gender and a high suicide rate. According to Positivists any problems with official statistics can be ironed out. We simply need to employ more accurate methods in order to account, objectively for certain patterns of behaviour in society. Therefore, sociologists influenced by positivism would argue sociologists should make use of official statistics as they go towards making sociology a science.

In contrast, despite the advantages of official statistics there is much suspicion surrounding the use of statistics. This is not only from sociologists such as J. D. Douglas, Maxwell Atkinson and Cicourel but also from sociological theories such as Marxism and Feminism. According to Tim May the criticisms of official statistics can be broadly categorised under 3 headings, the realist school of thought, the institutionalist school of thought finally the radical school of thought. It is the institutionalist school of thought that shall be looked at in greater depth. Sociologists influenced by the institutional school of thought reject the use of statistics for measuring or determining the causes of the social facts to which they claim to refer. Institutionalists also reject the idea that official statistics are objective and neither do they find them valid or reliable. For institutionalists statistics tell us more about an organisation's behaviour or the discretionary actions of individuals. Therefore, they see official statistics as socially constructed.

This is certainly the viewpoint taken by sociologist Maxwell Atkinson and J.D. Douglas in their critique of Durkheim's study of suicide. For Atkinson and Douglas suicide is a social construction determined by the coroner's report and how they categorise a certain type of death. Atkinson argued that a real rate of suicide did not exist. According to Atkinson statistics are produced by officials whom act as 'agents of social control' and thus have the ability and power to label certain deaths as suicide or not. Atkinson argues that coroners have a common sense theory of suicide, for example if the information of the deceased background fits these explanations then a verdict of suicide is likely. Thus suicide can be seen as an interpretation, which comes from a set of taken for granted assumptions. For example, a single, unemployed male found dead in an isolated place from a gunshot wound is more likely to be classed as a suicide than a married man found in the same conditions.

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Therefore, in terms of examining social action it can only be best understood by interpreting the meanings and motives an individual attaches to behaviour. In order to do this the researcher needs to 'step into the shoes' of the actor. For sociologists such as Maxwell and Douglas this can only be best done through qualitative methods and therefore not the use of quantitative methods such as statistics. Similarly, Aaron Cicourel who examined the treatment of delinquency in two Californian claims that the stereotypes held by the police and juvenile officers lead to youths from lower social classes being more likely to be seen as a delinquent. He argues that arrests rest heavily on the police's idea of a 'typical delinquent'. He goes on to suggest that if the individual approximates to the stereotypical image of a delinquent held by the juvenile officer, then a charge is more likely. Therefore, Cicourel sees statistics produced by official agencies as socially constructed and not a true representation of the reality. Thus in relation to the question it would appear from Cicourel's standpoint statistics should be treated with extreme caution as crime statistics in particular can be subject to the assumptions and prejudices of agents of social control. Furthermore, Paul Gilroy argued that there is a myth around black criminality and law enforcers such as the Police have negative stereotypes towards ethnic minorities. Thus due to the prejudices and stereotypes of such ethnic minorities the police arrest more members of ethnic minorities regardless of whether they have committed an offence.

In response to both positivist and institutionalist views a number of conflict (radical) sociologists have developed alternative perspectives on official statistics. They argue that official statistics are neither social facts nor subjective meanings. Instead they consist of information which is systematically distorted by power structures in society. Ian Miles and John Irvine argue that official statistics are 'developed in support of the system power and domination that is modern capitalism'. Unlike Marxism who argue official statistics are part of the state's ideological apparatus (will be discussed in depth later). Miles and Irvine do not believe that statistics produced by the government are complete fabrications because, this would be unable to explain statistics which, seem embarrass or humiliate the government. For example, high crime statistics seem to suggest government policies are failing to work. Thus Miles and Irvine suggest official statistics are produced according to the needs of the various state agencies for information to co-ordinate their activities and justify their programmes. The Marxist critique of official statistics can be used to illustrate this. According to Marxists official statistics are created by the government, which represent bourgeoisie ideology and thus reinforce the capitalist system, which in turn maintains the capitalist structure. According to Marxists, statistics should be treated with caution by sociologists as statistics provide information

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which help to maintain and justify the power of capitalism. In relation to crime statistics, Marxists suggest they function to protect the interests of the ruling class and divert attention away from corporate crime committed by ruling class capitalists. Therefore, statistics tell us very little about the real level of crime in society and do little to help us understand criminality.

Furthermore, official statistics come under scrutiny from a feminist perspective. Sociologists influenced by feminism such as Ann Oakley are critical of quantitative especially statistics and are critical of 'male stream' sociology. Unlike Marxists, for feminist statistics reinforce patriarchy as women are pushed out of statistics. For example, women who are housewives or engaged in domestic work are defined as economically inactive despite the contribution that housework makes to the economy. This is certainly the case taken by Ann Oakley. Furthermore, it is argued that statistics tend to represent the 'male experience' and fail to take into account the experience of women. For example, in relation to crime there is an underreporting of crimes within the private sphere, which includes acts of rape, domestic violence and child-abuse. Thus for feminists we cannot understand women's experience from numerical information and therefore it is necessary to come close to as possible to women's experience and this is best gained through the use of in-depth sensitive techniques.

Finally, perhaps official statistics should be made more use of in research purposes and not simply dismisses. The use of official statistics are best summed up by the likes of Martin Bulmer. Bulmer notes that while statistics are problematic they are still useful for research purposes. He argues they produce interesting findings on contemporary society and despite their problems have been used by radical and realist researchers alike. Secondly he argues they provide useful empirical data. Finally, with regards to the problems with statistics Bulmer argues that statisticians go to considerable lengths to reduce error. Thus if the researcher is aware of how these errors occur then can attempt to correct them.

In conclusion, it can be seen that official statistics have come under much scrutiny and many sociologists are reluctant to use them mainly because of their theoretical standpoint. It can be seen from above that depending on a sociologists theoretical standpoint will determine the research method they choose. For example, sociologists influenced by positivism are likely to choose quantitative methods such as statistics and questionnaires whereas; sociologists influenced by interpretivism are likely to choose qualitative methods such as interview and observation. However,

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despite the problematic nature of official statistics it is not simply the case to dismiss them. It can be seen that critiques of official statistics relate to statistics of suicide and crime and delinquency.

However, this does not necessarily mean that the problems in these fields should automatically be generalised to all official statistics. Therefore, perhaps it is better to suggest that official statistics as best used in conjunction with qualitative research methods as this would provide the most well rounded research.