

## SC831 LECTURE #4

### DATA COLLECTION AND ANALYSIS

#### 1. Data Collection

(i) If you are carrying out secondary research, that is, the analysis of pre-existing data sets, you should (i) familiarize yourself with these sets as soon as possible, and (ii) prepare—and check with your supervisor—the steps in the assembling/sorting out of these data that are necessary to answer the research questions you announced in the Introduction as informing your project.

(ii) If you are carrying out primary research, that is, collection of new data from people and/or observation sites, you should (i) prepare your research questionnaire/list of themes you intend to talk about with your respondents and check it with your supervisor; and (ii) get into the field to ensure access/entry to the site(s) you will investigate and contact your respondents to arrange for interviews and obtain their informed consent, and (iii) run the so-called pilot study, that is try out your questionnaire/themes for discussion on a small sample (2-3) of respondents to see if they generate the information you are looking for; if not, revise the questionnaire/themes for discussion—steps (i), (ii) and (iii) should be accomplished as soon as possible.

Stay attentive to yourself during the interview: if you hear yourself talking too much, shut up—it is not an interview of yourself with yourself! Also, you will probably find some people less talkative than others or even not talkative at all—if you happen upon a respondent who repeatedly answers with ‘yes,’ ‘no,’ or ‘hmmm...’ to your questions, after, say, 5 minutes, politely conclude the interview and look for another informant. (If it happens once or twice, it is perfectly normal, if all your interviews go like this, something is wrong with your questionnaire or the way you conduct the meeting—consult your supervisor or come to me for a chat what to do about it).

If you are conducting an observation, you should either unobtrusively take notes of what you see/hear during this activity, or do it immediately after you will have completed it (or you’ll quickly forget the interesting nuances of what you saw/heard)—plan your observations so that, in case you cannot take notes in site, you have enough time to do it afterwards.

(iii) If you plan to examine what in sociological research is called ‘documents’ (and falls with in-between secondary and primary sources/analysis), such as newspaper articles, internet communications, letters or photographs, you should (i) familiarize yourself with what’s available as soon as possible, and (ii) collect the data that interest you, taking detailed notes of the source and messages, keeping in mind the research questions you announced in the Introduction as informing your study. The information you collect/note from the documents you examine should focus on/be directly relevant to those questions and be guided by the research goal informing your project. For example, if the topic of your study is the increase of

anti-Islam/Muslim sentiments in the UK and its guiding goal is exploring diversity, in the newspapers/internet communications you examine you should pay attention to differences in the forms and contents of such orientations between specific newspapers and chat rooms/platforms.

(iv) Regardless of the methods/sources of your data collection, as soon as you start this process, create the filing system to record the progress of your fieldwork and the (daily) details of particular steps you are taking, things that in your opinion went well, potential problems that emerge and ways you have dealt with them.

IT SOMETIMES HAPPENS THAT IN THE COURSE OF COLLECTING DATA THE RESEARCHER REALIZES THE NEED TO REVISE/SHIFT THE FOCUS OF HIS/HER PROJECT. IT IS OK, BUT THIS POSSIBILITY IS YET ANOTHER REASON WHY YOU SHOULD START YOUR FIELDWORK (= COLLECTION OF DATA) AS SOON AS POSSIBLE.

SHOULD THE NEED TO CHANGE THE FOCUS OF YOUR PROJECT EMERGE, DISCUSS IT WITH YOUR SUPERVISOR AS SOON AS POSSIBLE TO REORGANIZE YOUR FIELDWORK.

## 2. Data Analysis

(i) Once you have completed the collection of data, go back to the research goal and specific research questions you announced in the Introduction as informing your project, and start arranging your data by the themes/main findings that address/answer this guiding purpose and the research questions. For example, if the goal of your project was to explore diversity in the experience of prejudice and discrimination of minority students on U Essex campus and your research questions probed the areas and frequency of this experience, and the differences & similarities therein between black and Asian students and men and women, you will organize your findings in three main themes (i) students' experience of prejudice/discrimination (areas, frequency) in general—here, you identify the main/recurrent findings; (ii) similarities and differences between racial groups; and (iii) similarities and differences between genders. Identify your main findings, think how you could arrange them, formulate the initial thematic organization, and check it with your supervisor.

(ii) **IMPORTANT**: In this phase of your work, you should establish what are the main/recurrent findings of your project **AND** explain/interpret them, that is propose why you found what you found and do it in sociological terms, that is, taking into account both macro- and micro-level contributing factors; to put it differently, you should use what C. Wright Mills called 'the sociological imagination' in explaining/interpreting your findings. Think, and then write down how you believe you can explain/interpret your findings, and then check your ideas with your supervisor.

(iii) **IMPORTANT**: Even if the guiding goal of your project is not exploring diversity, if your study involves people with different sociodemographic characteristics which in

sociological research have been traditionally recognized as the major ‘social dividers,’ such as class, gender, and race, in analysing your data you should comment on similarities and differences you found regarding these features. DON’T LEAVE IT UNATTENDED TO OR YOU WILL GET A QUERY FROM A SOCIOLOGIST-READER OF YOUR DISSERTATION ABOUT WHY THERE IS NO COMMENT ON POSSIBLE CLASS (GENDER, RACE) DIFFERENCES IN THE REPORTED FINDINGS, ALTHOUGHT DIFFERENT SOCIOECONOMIC (GENDER, RACE) BACKGROUND OF THE SAMPLE/RESPONDENTS WAS STATED IN THE RESEARCH METHODS SECTION THE PROJECT. Last year a BA student came to my office in panic because, he said, he did not find any customary gender differences in the subject he investigated and did not know what to do about it. How interesting--I replied—as it was reasonable to expect some gender differences (other studies report such) and you didn’t—so try to explain why. He did that and with a good sociological insight.

### 3. A Useful Hint Regarding Your Analysis of Data You Collected

As you analyse/interpret your data, try to stay aware of possible biases, particular viewpoints, and ‘blinkers’ you may be imposing on the evidence you collected as a researcher with the specific national, racial, religious background/ worldviews, age, gender, and/or class position, and also scholarly agenda (pre-defined problems, concepts, presuppositions) you conducted your research with. As I proposed in Lecture #3, it is perfectly legitimate for social research to aim for the best possible approximation of the examined world rather than at the perfectly objective, ‘self-same’ representation of it. If you agree with this approach, it would make sense—but discuss it with your supervisor-- to confine a paragraph in the Research Methods section of your dissertation to the limitations of your study deriving from your perspectives/biases embedded in your social-cultural person and your scholarly agenda as a researcher.