Methodology

The term 'Research *Methodology*' must not be confused with Research *methods* (the process of gathering and interpreting the results of research). As indicated by the suffix '*ology*', Methodology is 'the study of methods' and is a branch of philosophy which considers what 'kind' of information exists and is 'knowable' (ontology) and how this information can be known (epistemology) for different areas of study. Like *ideologies*, different methodologies (see the Saunders Research Onion) 'see' the world in different ways – and as a result, have different conceptions of what 'kind' of information might constitute 'data'.

For example, *Positivism* forces us to accept that there is just one 'true', objective reality and so is the foundation used to study disciplines such as physics, astronomy, biology, climatology or engineering. The conception that there is one 'true', objective reality allows us to construct tests in order to investigate and figure out how this objective reality works. How the researcher *feels about* the fact of global heating is rendered 'invisible' by *Positivism*, and so is not data. *Interpretivism* on the other hand, acknowledges that everyone's reality is different (sometimes radically different) than everyone else's but that, despite these differences, all these different 'realities' are equally 'true' and 'real' – and then attempts to understand the world as seen through their eyes and through their lived experiences.

As Neil Postman explains in his wonderfully accessible book Technopoly, *Positivism* investigates why we blink while *Interpretivism* investigates why we wink:

> There is an irrevocable difference between a blink and a wink. A blink can be classified as a process; it has physiological causes which can be understood and explained within the context of established postulates and theories. But a wink must be classified as a practice, filled with personal and to some extent unknowable meanings and, in any case, quite impossible to explain or predict in terms of causal relations. (Postman, 1992 pp.148)

If you'll permit me an overly simplistic example: the life experiences which produce 'the reality' of a white, suburban middle-class woman, an African American from an inner city, a Chicago cop and a guy who grew up on a farm are all radically different – but at the same time, they are all just as 'real' to the person who lives them and so shapes their perceptions and expectations. *Interpretivism* tries to find ways to 'tease out' valuable clues about how each person's 'reality' influences his/her attitudes. While we can never 'know' someone else's reality with the same degree of accuracy and objectivity with which we can 'know' the temperature at which water freezes, if we're thoughtful and methodical, *Interpretivism* can help us to identify and begin to understand the factors that shape his/her reality.

Methodology includes a careful consideration of:

- *Research philosophy*: the fundamental assumptions we make about the nature, structure and operation of the 'world' we are investigating (These are questions of *ontology* and *epistemology*)
- *Research design* (the most appropriate shape, or form, for your research, eg. a case study)

In the Methodology section of your dissertation/extended essay, you will be expected to demonstrate an understanding of what 'Methodology' means (read a few good texts, and summarise these in your paper), as well as how these issues have guided and informed your approach to your particular study.

An important element of your Research Methodology chapter will be the need to provide a brief but clear rationale for the 'chain of decisions'; how: (1) what you are trying to find out (your Research Aim) led you to identify (2) the 'kind' of knowledge you need (and whether this is quantitative, qualitative, or a combination of the two), and how this, in turn, led you to identify (3) the Research Philosophy you chose to adopt, and how all of these, in turn, led you to select (4) the most appropriate ways (your Research Method/s) to gather and then to interpret the data you will have to collect.

This will then assist you in your decisions about the selection of the most appropriate:

Research Method(s) – tools & techniques

There are several different methods for gathering and analysing/interpreting data.

To support the validity of your arguments (upon which, of course, the validity of your findings or conclusions are entirely dependent), you must provide a clear *rationale* for your choice of research methods. You must explain how the particular advantages of the chosen research method will assist you in gathering and analysing the most relevant and appropriate 'kind' of information/data.

In order to ensure (and be able to demonstrate to the assessor) that you have identified and selected the most appropriate research method/s, briefly describe the various methods available *as well as their respective advantages and disadvantages* and then provide a rationale for your decision based on the comparative advantages and disadvantages of each method. Every method has advantages and disadvantages. For example, an advantage of online surveys is that it they make it possible to collect a larger volume of data than street questionnaires, but a disadvantage of online surveys is that you have less control over who has completed your survey. (For example, if you are trying to collect data from females aged 20-30, it is difficult to prevent teenage boys from completing your surveys.)

If you want to find out what percentage of the demographic group you are studying are loyal to a certain brand of shampoo (that they always buy this brand regardless of the price of competitor's products), you might assume that the easiest way to get this information is to ask them in interviews or questionnaires. Instead (or possibly in addition), you could spend some time as a 'mystery shopper' and watch how the members of your chosen demographic group behave in supermarkets. (Do they go straight to the brand, or do they examine and compare the products of competitors before deciding?)

If you want to find out the age at which young mean had their first sexual experience, you might assume that the easiest way to get this information is to ask them in interviews or questionnaires. But this overlooks the very real possibility that your respondents might lie to you.

Therefore, in addition to identifying and describing the advantages and disadvantages of your chosen method(s), you will be expected to explain – clearly and in detail – what steps you will take in order to minimise (one can rarely eliminate entirely) the particular disadvantages inherent in the method(s) you have selected to collect data.

Ethical considerations

In order to ensure – and demonstrate to the assessor – that you have recognised and addressed the ethical concerns implicit in the collection *and use* of data, you must also explain what steps you have taken to ensure:

- *Autonomy* by ensuring that all participants have agreed to participate in your study and have been provided with a copy of the relevant *Participant Information Sheet* and signed a consent form that clearly explains his/her right to refuse and to contact the relevant authorising body
- *Beneficence* by minimising any risk and harm to those who may be affected by your research – including research participants
- *Justice* by ensuring that no one will receive advantages or benefits denied to others