

Key Sociological Concepts

Identified

Validity

Defined

Data is only useful if it actually measures what it claims to be measuring and, in this respect, the concept of validity refers to the extent to which the data we collect gives a true measurement / description of "social reality" (what is "really happening" in society).

Valid data will have a depth and level of detail that gives the researcher a well-rounded picture of whatever they are studying.

Applied

Unemployment statistics: We can be reasonably sure the statistics are collected reliably, month-on-month, but we need to know how accurate (or "valid") a picture of unemployment they represent. For example, if we wanted to compare levels / rates of unemployment in our society between today and twenty years ago, could we use government statistics for this purpose?

Although such statistics are **collected** reliably, **definitions** of "unemployment" have changed over time - and since the definition has changed about 25 times over the past 15 years, such statistics are **not valid** for purposes of comparison (we are not, in technical terms, "comparing like with like").

Additionally, since such statistics do not use a definition of "unemployment" that involves counting everyone who wants to find a job (but can't) it's unlikely that they represent a true or valid picture of unemployment in Britain...

Related

The concepts of reliability and **validity** go together in sociological research:

- If data is **reliable** but **not valid**, it may have limited use. We can make general statements about the world, but such statements may not actually apply to any one social group (such as the "unemployed").
- If data is **valid**, but **not reliable**, we may not be able to use it to make general statements about the world (for example, we may be able to understand something about one group of unemployed people that doesn't necessarily apply to all unemployed people).

➤ **Triangulation**

➤ **Research methods:** some methods, (such as participant observation), have greater validity than others (such as questionnaires)

➤ **Generalisation**