

Realist approaches to research – Student task

Read the extracts below. Using the material in section 5 to what extent could they be described as taking a realist approach. Explain why.

Eileen Barker – *The making of a Moonie: choice or brainwashing*

Barker carried out her research on the Moonies in a number of stages. She wanted to uncover whether Moonies were brainwashed or had made a choice about belonging to the cult. Barker wanted to understand the Moonies on an individual/personal level, to observe the interaction between the Moonies themselves and then to look at the structure of the movement and its overall role in society.

Barker undertook a study which was to last six years. She carried out unstructured interviews, attended workshops and seminars, lived in a number of the centres in Britain and abroad, observing the lives of the Moonies. Her participant observation involved three stages from the passive observer to the fully integrated active stage where she felt able to join in conversations and ask questions. She also interviewed some people who had left the movement.

Geoff Dench, Kate Gavron and Michael Young – *The new East End: kinship, race and conflict*

This research was a repeat of a study carried out in the 1950s – ‘Family and kinship in East London’ by Young and Willmott.

The researchers used a range of methods. They started by gathering statistical data from secondary sources to obtain a general picture of life in the East End. At this stage they looked for gaps and issues thrown up by the facts and figures.

They then carried out a survey based on a randomised sample, using a standardised questionnaire. Following that, they selected a smaller sub-sample of 799 and conducted interviews with them. At the end of these two stages they had accumulated data on approximately 8,000 people. A further 51 people with children were interviewed ‘intensively’ on at least one occasion. Additional in-depth interviews were conducted with some of the Bangladeshi respondents in order to ‘understand as much as possible about their family life’.

Paul Willis – *Learning to labour*

Willis studied a number of groups of young people, most notably 12 ‘lads’ from a town in the West Midlands. His work was set in the context of a number of changes to the education system in the 1970s, for example the raising of the school leaving age. He carried out an intensive study of the ‘lads’. He spent time with them in and out of class, went on school trips with them, he recorded group discussions, carried out informal interviews. He also interviewed in-depth the parents of the ‘lads’, teachers and careers officers. In addition,

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he conducted smaller-scale studies on a number of other groups in the same school and other local schools.

Willis was interested in the structures of the workplace, the ideology of capitalism and class culture.

Use these hint to support students.

1. Do they use a multi-method approach?
2. Are they seeking to go beyond the immediate observable lives of those they are studying?