Outline and explain two practical limitations of using self-completion questionnaires in sociological research (10)

One practical limitation of using self-completion questionnaires in sociological research is the low response rate. Self-completion questionnaires can be made up of open. Closed or a mixture of both types of questions and are usually distributed to respondents for them to complete in their own time. They can be administered by hand, through the post or via email and can be sent out to large numbers of people for relatively little cost. However, as they are sent out to potential respondents rather than being completed in the presences of a researcher, many people do not choose to complete these questionnaires, and this can have an impact on the overall conclusions of the research being conducted. Hite found in her research that after sending out over 100,000 questionnaires, only 4.5% were returned completed. This can have further impacts on the research as several rounds of questionnaires may have to be distributed in order to obtain a sample size large enough to be analysed or generalised to the population being studied.

A second practical limitation of using self-completion questionnaires in the access to potential respondents and the storing of their data. Recent changes to data protection legislation have meant that previously accessible ways of gaining information on potential respondents have been limited severely by the introduction of GDPR. This legislation not only limits the access to lists of potential participants, such as parents at a school or people who subscribe to a media service, but it also has implications for how the data collected by a researcher will be stored and used. GDPR states that people participating in the survey have legal rights to have their data protected and data erased or amended if they so wish. This could have severe cost implication for researchers if they are found to breach these regulations. Whilst this is also an issue for other research methods, the scale of self-completion questionnaires means that access, storage and maintenance of data would be a considerable practical limitation to using self-completion questionnaires.