Year 1 / AS Sociology

**Paper 2: Research Methods and Topics in Sociology**

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***Section A***

Research Methods

Name:\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_Class:\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_

**Specification Content:**

You will be expected to know:

* Quantitative and qualitative methods of research; research design
* Sources of data, including questionnaires, interviews, participant and non-participant observation, experiments, documents and official statistics
* The distinction between primary and secondary sources of data, and between quantitative and qualitative data
* The relationship between positivism, interpretivism and sociological methods; the nature of ‘social facts’
* The theoretical, practical and ethical considerations influencing choice of topic, choice of method(s) and the conduct of research

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| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| **Questions may be based specifically on the following areas:** | Do I have completed Notes? | Have I made revision Notes? | Have I memorised this info? | Have I practised exam style questions? |
| Qualitative/quantitative data  Primary/secondary sources   * What are they * Advantages/disadvantages of them |  |  |  |  |
| Factors influencing choice of method   * Practical (time, money, personal skills etc) * Ethical (informed consent, confidentiality, vulnerable groups etc) * Theoretical (validity, reliability, representativeness, methodological perspective) |  |  |  |  |
| Factors influencing choice of topic   * Practical issues (accessibility) * Funding (can they get this?) * Values (societies values) |  |  |  |  |
| Sampling   * Different types of sampling * Strengths and limitations of sampling techniques |  |  |  |  |
| Lab experiments (field experiments/comparative method)   * Advantages/disadvantages |  |  |  |  |
| Questionnaires   * Advantages/disadvantages |  |  |  |  |
| Interviews   * Advantages/disadvantages |  |  |  |  |
| Observation (participant / non-participant)   * Advantages/disadvantages |  |  |  |  |
| Official statistics   * Advantages/disadvantages |  |  |  |  |
| Documents   * Advantages/disadvantages |  |  |  |  |
| Triangulation/Mixed methods |  |  |  |  |

For each of the above methods, you need to know **advantages and disadvantages** of each and you will be required to answer questions on any of these areas. Also it is a good idea to colour code which ones are **primary and secondary sources** from the above as you may get a question asking specifically about this.

**This topic will appear on Paper 1 and 3 at A Level**

One Methods and Theory question will appear in Paper 1 as Question 06. It will be worth 10 marks and take the form of the following example…*Outline and explain two reasons why some sociologists choose to use official statistics in their research.* Two Methods and Theory questions will appear on Paper 3, worth 10 and 20 marks.

Why do we need to do research?

* Sociologists create theories to explain social phenomena but these need to be supported by evidence.
* Other sociologists may challenge the credibility of the theory and the sociologist.
* Theories may inform government policy so they need to be correct!
* To develop new theories so we can try to understand how society works.
* It is the acquisition of empirical evidence that separates sociology from common sense.

You need to be able to comment on whether research is ‘good evidence’ or not; in order to do this you need to understand the methods and issues involved.

**Types of data**

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| **Quantitative** | **Qualitative** |
| **Numerical data** e.g   * official statistics on how many girls achieved A\*-C * % of marriages ending in divorce | **Non-numerical data**  Gives a ‘feel’ for what something is like e.g   * What does it feel like to underachieve * How does it feel to get divorced   Often collected via in depth interviews or participant observations |

**Sources of data**

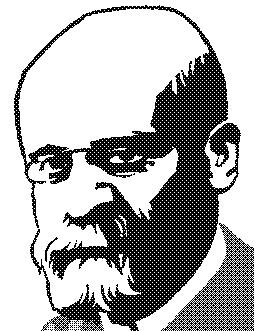
|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| **Primary** | **Secondary** |
| Information collected **by the sociologist** for their own purposes to test their hypothesis (an untested theory) e.g   * Questionnaires * Experiments * Participant observations | Information collected **by someone else** for their purpose, which the sociologist may then use. E.g   * Official statistics produced by the government (i.e unemployment figures) * Documents such as newspapers, diaries, TV broadcasts |
| **+ Advantages** | **+ Advantages** |
|  |  |
| **-Disadvantages** | **- Disadvantages** |
|  |  |

Many individual studies use a mixture of qualitative and quantitative data and primary and secondary sources

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| **Type of data** | **Primary source** | **Secondary source** |
| **Quantitative** | Statistics from a questionnaire | Official statistics |
| **Qualitative** | Notes from an observation | Documents |

**TASK – Decide whether the following are examples of primary or secondary data and whether they are examples of qualitative and quantitative data…**

1. Ridge (2002) examined poverty from the child’s perspective. She quotes 12 year old Bella: “I just want to fit in the group, ‘cos it’s like….people just take the mick out of me because I can’t afford things. Like my trainers are messy….and I need new trainers and clothes….I can’t get decent clothes like everyone else does.”
2. A sociologist was interested in how university students from different social classes felt about the debts they were incurring by pursuing higher education. He quoted figures from the National Audit Office (2002) which found that working-class students spent twice a week as much time in paid work to reduce their debts as middle-class students.
3. According to Ernestina Coast (2006), 75% of cohabiting couples say they expect to marry each other.
4. Jonathan Gershuny (2000) used data from the diaries of 3000 parents and suggested that the quality of parenting had significantly improved compared with the past.



No data produced by research is perfect and when considering their limitations, the following concepts need to be considered:

* **Reliability-** data is reliable if another researcher using identical methods would produce the same results. Reliability can be checked when research is replicated.
* **Validity-** this concerns how true the data is, that is, how close the fit is between the data and reality. Data is invalid if does not match reality.
* **Representativeness-** data is representative if the individual’s studies are a typical cross section of the wider population that the researcher is interested in. If it is not, then generalisations about the wider group they represent cannot be made.

Draw it!

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| Reliability | Validity | Representativeness |

**Factors influencing the choice of methods**

A useful way to remember the various influences on the choice of research method and topic is by the word **PET.**

**P - Practical issues:** This is about how easy it is for the researcher to use a particular method. These refer to the practicalities of carrying out certain research for instance how much money is available to the sociologist, how much time have they got available, what personal skills they possess and the subject matter, access to the place or group being studied

**E - Ethical Issues**: These are issues of whether the research will have any harmful consequences, whether participants have given their consent, and whether research is reported accurately and honestly. The British Sociological Association sets out guidelines for the ethical conduct of research (such as Informed consent, Confidentiality, Vulnerable groups, Covert research).

**T -** **Theoretical issues**: This refers to whether the results of research actually give us an accurate understanding of society. Theoretical issues include reliability, validity, theoretical issues, and representativeness.

Theoretical issues also include the methodological perspective behind the sociologist's choice of method, such as whether they are a Marxist, Feminist, or a Interpretivist or Positivist approach.

**Practical issues**

Different methods use up various amounts of resources e.g. the researcher might need to employ people to carry out surveys & input data which is expensive. Participant Observations are cheap but take up lots of time.



Time & Money:



Personal Skills & Characteristics:



Funding Bodies:

Each researcher is different & therefore may be limited in their choices of methods e.g. if they need to blend into a group, / have good obs. Skills / patience / Memory / build a interview rapport etc.

Governments, Businesses, Universities etc may require different types of data & therefore the researcher has limited choices e.g. Governments like to collect Statistical Data to inform Social policy (e.g. questionnaires)



Subject Matter:



Research Opportunity:

If the topic requires opinions, feelings, thoughts on just plain facts and figures will impact on choice of method, e.g. a questionnaire would be difficult for people who can't read or write. Also whether or not the subject is sensitive or difficult to study needs considering.

In some cases research opportunities may occur unexpectedly & therefore effects the researchers time & planning, e.g. may be hard to do structured methods like questionnaires which take time to prepare.

**Ethical issues**

Ethics refers to moral issues of right and wrong. The methods that sociologists use can raise a number of ethical issues.

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| Honesty | Researchers should avoid doing any harm to their participants. They should not encourage criminal or immoral behaviour. |
| Confidentiality | Researchers should seek permission from their research participants or their parents/guardians |
| Avoid harming people | Researcher should avoid deceit and be honest about the purpose of their research |
| Informed consent | Researchers need to protect the identity and privacy of their research participants by ensuring anonymity and confidentiality |
| Duty of care | Researchers should not engage in disreputable activities in the pursuit of their research. They have to ensure their research team are safe and protected. |

**Ethical Issues**

[](http://www.google.com.au/url?sa=i&rct=j&q=&esrc=s&source=images&cd=&cad=rja&uact=8&ved=2ahUKEwjTi_airNDbAhVREVAKHXkIC7EQjRx6BAgBEAU&url=http://www.southeastcakery.com/product/mixnmatch-brownie/&psig=AOvVaw1Qc2yZMSDbEqokcFOQzTCu&ust=1528969078161410)



**Theoretical issues**

Theoretical issues can be split into two main types: the theoretical issues which arise from the research; and the methodological perspective which influences a sociologist’s choice of method. These will be discussed separately:

* **Theoretical issues:**

This refers to questions about whether we can obtain an accurate, truthful picture of society. Our views of these issues will affect the kind of methods we favour using. Draw a picture to represent each below.

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| **Validity**  *"concerned with notions of truth: how far the findings of research actually provide a true, genuine or authentic picture of what is being studied"* | **Reliability:**  *"concerned with replication: whether another researcher using the same method for the same research on the same or similar group would achieve the same results"* | **Representativeness:**  *"if a sample is representative - it will be typical of the wider population, which will allow the findings to be generalised"* |
|  |  |  |

*Complete the missing words, inserting either* ***valid/validity,******representative/representativeness*** *or* ***reliable/reliability***

On this scale, it is apparent that the more people who are studied, the less the researcher becomes personally involved with them. If the researcher thinks personal involvement is important, the price to be paid is that fewer people can be studied. Where the structured survey researcher may claim \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_ and \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_ , the participant observer will claim \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_. The survey enthusiast will point out the dangers of bias and un\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_ in doing participant observation, and stress how the \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_ of a sample can be calculated precisely. The participant-observer may concede all this, but would point out that it is not much use being able to produce the same results over and over again, and to say how \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_ they are, if they are not \_\_\_\_\_\_\_ in the first place. The questionnaire may produce the same statistics whenever it is used, therefore being high in \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_ but this may be just a matter of repeating the same distortions. The survey style of research imposes a structure on that which is being researched rather than allowing the structure to emerge from the data as it is collected. A survey can collect data only about those things which have been included in the questionnaire, and this may omit crucial points. An observation study, on the other hand, can never be repeated in exactly the same way, so there is no way of checking its findings and it is therefore not \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_.

**Methodological perspective: Positivism, Interpretivism and sociological methods**

The main research methods in sociology are influenced by two different theoretical or methodological approaches to the study of society: **Positivism** and **Interpretivism**. They have different assumptions about the nature of society and this influences the type of data and methods they use to investigate society.

Positivism

Positivists believe that, just as there are causes of things in the natural world, so there are external social forces, making up society's social structure, that cause or mould people's ideas and actions. **Durkheim** - a positivist - called these external forces social facts. Positivists believe social institutions create expectations of how individuals should behave and limit their choices and options, with social control making individuals behave in socially approved ways.

Durkheim said the aim of sociology should be the study of social facts, which should be treated like objects from the natural world. Positivists see the process of studying society as a science; they assume that there is an objective factual reality to be discovered. They believe in repeating research, generating statistics, numbers, trends, ratios and comparisons that are high in RELIABILITY and OBJECTIVITY. These findings can then be turned into LAWS just like scientific ones because they believe that society has an effect on the individual, systematically shaping their behaviour. Consequently it is assumed that society can be understood, predicted and controlled. The feelings, emotions and motives of individuals cannot be observed or measured, and therefore should not be studied.

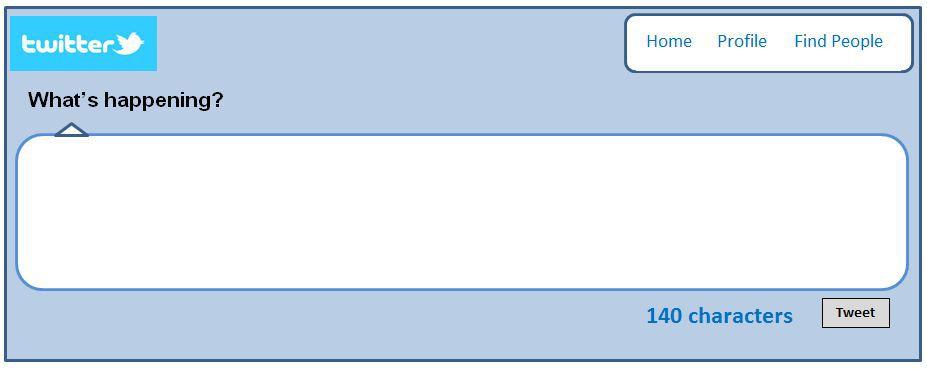
Positivists tend to use **quantitative methods** – the research focuses on measurement and the collection of numerical data (statistics and number crunching) that reflect their belief in a scientific approach.

*Who takes a positivist approach?*

Functionalists and Marxists. They see society as large-scale (macro-level) structure that shapes our behaviour.

The methods positivists prefer include:

* Lab experiments
* the comparative method
* social surveys
* structured questionnaires
* structured interviews
* non-participant observation



What’s positivism?

Interpretivism

Interpretivists (or anti-positivists) believe that, because people's behaviour is influenced by the interpretations and meanings they give to social situations, the researcher's task is to gain an understanding of these interpretations and meanings, and how people see and understand the world around them. They argue that the study of society as a science is not possible as the things in it (people!) are not identical and cannot be treated as the same. To assume that they all behave in a similar manner like pieces of coal or certain chemicals is fundamentally wrong. Humans have emotions and passions which make them individually different. Therefore, there is no such thing as an objective factual reality, instead we each create our own reality through the meanings we construct in our interactions with others. Consequently, a different approach is needed in order to gain a ‘true’ understanding; to discover an individual’s meanings and reasons for behaviour, an in-depth enquiry as to why the individual behaved as they did. This will produce more VALID findings and help sociologists understand how they see the world and understand it. Also, researchers will interpret the findings in different ways so that the conclusions may be subjective. In fact this is unavoidable, claim anti-positivists.

Interpretivists tend to use **qualitative methods** - the research focuses on interpreting meaning and feelings and is expressed in words rather than numbers.

*Who takes an Interpretivist approach?*

Interactionists - they take a micro-level view of society, focusing on small-scale, face-to-face interactions.

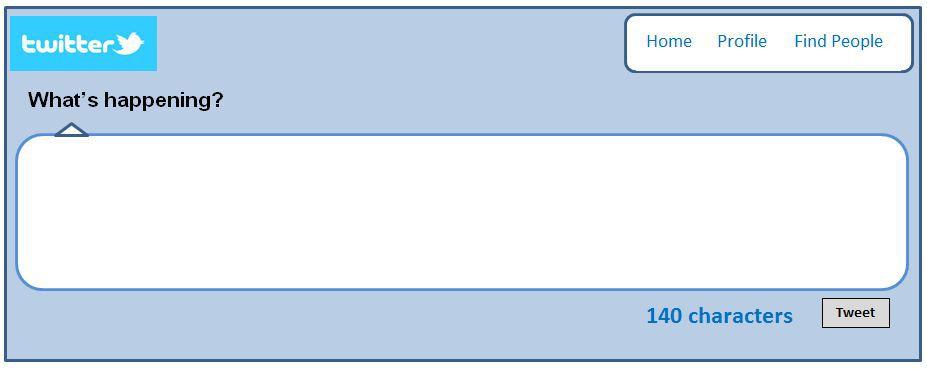
The methods interpretivists prefer include:

* participant (and sometimes) non-participant observation
* informal (unstructured/open-ended) interviews
* open-ended questionnaires
* personal accounts, using personal documents like diaries and letters.

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***EXAM TIP!!!***

When writing an essay on a research method, e.g. lab experiments – include in your introduction what theoretical perspective (positivists /Interpretivists) prefer this choice of method and explain why (the type of data it generates etc.)



What’s interpretivism?

**Homework Task***: Judge whether these are examples of practical, ethical or theoretical issues – explain why. Colour code the boxes below to decide whether they are practical, ethical or theoretical issues.*

\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_

Different methods require different amounts of time and money. The researcher access to resources can be a major factor in determining which methods they employ. A well-known professor will probably have access to more research funds than a young student.

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Special care should be taken where research participants are particularly vulnerable because of their age, disability or mental health. For instance when using students as participants, researchers should have regard for issues of child protection.

\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_

Each sociologist has different skills and this may affect their ability to use different methods.

\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_

Participants should be offered the right to refuse. They should also be told about the relevant aspects of the research so they can make an informed decision. Consent should be gained before the research begins.

Many sociologists argue that qualitative methods such as participant’s observations give us a more valid or truthful account of what it is like to be a member of a group than quantitative methods such as questionnaires.

\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_

Covert research is when the researchers identity and research purpose are hidden from the people being studied. This can create serious ethical issues such as deception and lack of informed consent.

\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_

It may be much harder to study a particular group or subject by one method than be another.

**C:\Users\norria.ST-AIDANS.003\AppData\Local\Microsoft\Windows\Temporary Internet Files\Content.IE5\M0R3I28D\MC900290885[1].wmfRead for homework: Factors influencing the choice of topic**

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The choice of topic is affected by the power of the subjects of the research to resist the investigation. How far such resistance is possible varies according to the research methods employed but, generally speaking, we know more about the poor and the powerless than we do about the rich and powerful.

Generally it is easier to obtain funding for explanatory research that seems to provide guidance to policy-makers than for purely academic research, and for research that is statistically based than for research that is more qualitative in its approach.

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Certain situations may be inaccessible to the researcher which will limit the choice of topics available, e.g. researchers may not easily be able to study criminal behaviours or doctor-patient consultations.

Researchers who depend on grants from organisations will only be able to carry out their enquiry if it is approved by the organisation in question.

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Academic researchers working in higher education have to convince the relevant committees in their institution that the work is important enough for scarce resources to be devoted to it.

**Preparing Research**

Once a sociologist has chosen their research topic and method there are a number of stages they must go through before they can collect their data.

Formulating an Aim and Hypothesis

An aim is a statement that identifies what a sociologist intends to study and hopes to achieve by carrying out the research.

A hypothesis is more specific; it is a statement expressing a particular theory or explanation which can be tested and either supported or disputed by the research.

Often sociologists will generate their aims and hypotheses on the basis of what research has already been carried out on their topic of choice, they will perform a **literature review** in order to discover this.

Operationalising Concepts

This means creating a working definition of the key ideas we wish to study, they need to be defined in such a way that they can be measured. For example, we could define ‘educational achievement’ as the number of GCSEs someone passes at grade C or above

Carrying out a Pilot Study

A pilot study is a small-scale trial run of a piece of research.

*Why do you think sociologists carry out pilot studies?*

Carry out research

Report writing

Researchers write up a report to present their findings. It contains explicit details of their design and process so that other researchers can replicate it. Reports will differ for positivist and interpretivists.

**Selecting a Sample**

A **research population** refers to all the members of the group the researcher is interested in e.g. all children who currently attend state education. Chances are, there will be a very large number of people, possibly several million, depending on the subject of the research, and there is no way that the researcher is going to be able to deliver a questionnaire to them all, still less interview them face to face. Therefore, a **sample** must be chosen. The main principle of sampling is to choose a small cross-section of the research population, because it is quicker and cheaper, but they also aim to acquire a sample that is **representative** of the population of a whole. That is to say, what is true of the sample should be true of the population e.g. if 55% of the sample are female then 55% of the population should be female as well. There are various ways of selecting such a sample. Many sampling techniques require a **sampling frame** which is a list of all the members of the research population. Common sampling frames include the electoral register or the post-code address file.

**Representative sampling techniques –** my strengths and weaknesses got mixed up. Can you sort them out by adding a ☺ or a ☹

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| **Sampling technique** | **Strengths or weakness?** | **Strength or Weaknesses** |
| ***Random sampling***  Where every member of the population has an equal chance of being selected for the sample. Using a sample frame, the sample can be drawn randomly e.g. taking names out of a hat. | There is no researcher influence and no bias in selection. | There is a chance that the sample obtained may not be truly representative; for e.g. the sample drawn could be all male or all female. |
| ***Systematic sampling***  Using a sample frame, names are selected at fixed points e.g. every tenth name or every twenty-fifth name. | It is not always easy to find a suitable sampling frame (this is a list of potential research participants e.g. criminals). | It is not bias. |
| ***Stratified sampling***  The population can be divided (stratified) on the basis of key variables e.g. stratified into males and females, a 1% sample could then be taken from each group, this would ensure that our sample was representative of the population as a whole. | It is extremely time consuming so depends on how much time and money the researcher has. | It is representative of the target population. |
| ***Quota sampling***  This is similar to stratified sampling but instead of choosing the samples for each category randomly, the researchers go out looking for the right number of people required for each category, e.g. they may have a quota of 500 men and 500 women to find. | It may be bias as the sociologist approaches the participants and asks them to take part. | It is representative of the subgroups that exist in the target population. |
| **Non random sampling (not representative)** | **Strength or weakness?** | **Strength or weakness?** |
| ***Snowball sampling***  The researcher contacts a number of key individuals who are then asked to suggest others who may be willing to participate. | Can produce bias, unrepresentative samples. | Useful for unusual groups (e.g. heroin addicts). |
| ***Opportunity sampling***  This involves choosing from those individuals who are easiest to access, e.g. asking passers-by in the street. | The sociologist can go to the place that she knows will contain the type of person she needs for her research. | Can produce bias, unrepresentative samples. |

The purpose of sampling then, is usually to ensure that the people we include in our study are representative of the research population. However, for both practical and theoretical reasons, not all studies use representative sampling techniques.

**Task***: In the chart below decide whether the reason is practical (P) or theoretical (T) and give an example of each reason.*

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| **Reason for choosing non-representative samples** | **Practical (P) or Theoretical (T)?** |
| The social characteristics of the research population may not be known. It would, thus be impossible to create an exact cross-section. |  |
| Interpretivists are less concerned with making generalisations from a representative sample, because they think it is more important to gain valid data than to discover general laws of behaviour. |  |
| Potential respondents may refuse to participate in the survey. |  |
| It may be impossible to find or create a sampling frame. |  |



**Eye on the Exam…**

1. Outline two reasons why it may not be possible to create a representative sample (4 marks)

(AS only)

1. Evaluate two factors affecting sociologists' choice of research methods (10 marks) *(practical / ethical / theoretical)*

**Primary Sources: Social Surveys**

Social surveys are one of the most common methods used by sociologists; they involve gathering information by asking people about their behavior, attitudes, opinions etc.

There are two types of social survey:

* **Questionnaires**
* **Interviews**

The questions asked during a survey can be of two types:

**Open-ended questions**

**Closed-ended questions**

The respondent must choose from a limited range of possible answers that the researcher has decided upon in advance. These may include multiple choice questions or the respondent may have to select a point on an attitude scale.

These questions are phrased in such a way as to allow the respondent to give whatever answer they wish, in their own words and without any pre-selected choices being offered by the researcher.

**e.g. e.g.**

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| **Advantages and disadvantages** | **Open or closed?** |
| ☺Allows researcher to collect rich in detail answers |  |
| ☺Allows researcher to collect quantitative data |  |
| ☺Positivists prefer these questions |  |
| ☺Interpretivists prefer these questions |  |
| 🗶the researcher may not anticipate the complete range of responses; |  |
| 🗶discourages respondents from reflecting on the question; |  |
| 🗶resultant data is lower in validity; |  |
| 🗶less suitable for finding out reasons/ causes/ feelings etc; |  |
| 🗶researcher is imposing their own views. |  |

**Questionnaires**

Introduction - who likes Questionnaires and why?

**Positivists** favour questionnaires because they achieve their main goals of reliability, generalisability and representativeness:

* Standardised questions and answers produce reliable data because other researchers can replicate the questionnaire
* Pre-coded responses allow us to produce quantitative data, identify and measure behaviour patterns, and establish cause-and-effect relationships
* Questionnaires are often large-scale and this more representative

**Interpretivists** reject questionnaires because they impose the researcher's framework of ideas on respondents. This tells us little about the meanings held by individuals. They fail to achieve their goals of validity. However, open-ended questionnaires can produce more valid responses.

Questionnaires ask respondents to provide answers to pre-set questions that can be open or closed-ended. The questions should be clear and unambiguous, they must not be upsetting or **lead** the participants in anyway (this means directing the participant in a particular way).

**Experiences of Education Questionnaire**

1. Name ……………………………………………………………..
2. Address ……………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………
3. What age group do you belong to?

<20 20-30 30-40 >40

1. What sex are you?

M F

1. How many pupils were on roll while you were there?

\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_

1. What qualifications do you have?

\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_

1. How much did you enjoy your time at school?

Not at all l l l l l l A lot

1. What were your favourite subjects?

\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_

1. Did you feel like your parents supported you enough at school?

Yes No

1. Were your educational choices influenced by your peer group?

Yes No

1. Why do you think girls do better than boys at school?

\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_

1. Do you feel lucky to have had the opportunity of an education when there are thousands of people in the world who don’t even get to go to primary school

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| **Advantages – code as P, E or T** | **Disadvantages - code as P, E or T** |
| 1. Questionnaires can be distributed to large representative samples, including nationally 2. A quick low cost and consumer friendly method because it is not time consuming 3. Little contact between researcher and respondents so there are fewer ethical issues 4. Anonymity and confidentiality can be ensured   **Positivists like questionnaire because…**   1. it is easy to quantify data and look for patterns and correlations 2. the method is scientific – standardized, reliable and objective | 1. Response rates can be low (e.g. postal returns) 2. Respondents may misinterpret some questions or the wrong person may complete it   **Interpretivists dislike questionnaires because…**   1. The responses may be invalid if respondents are economical with the truth 2. Responses may be distorted by a desire to please the researcher or to seem respectable 3. There is often a gap between what people say they do and what they actually do 4. The choice of closed questions limits and reduces validity |

Questionnaires can be distributed in different ways, can you think of any advantages and disadvantages of these different means of distribution?

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| Type | Advantages | Disadvantages |
| face to face  Face to face |  |  |
| postbox  By post |  |  |
| telephone  Over the telephone |  |  |
| computer  Over the internet |  |  |

**Conclusion?**

**Evaluate the problems of using self-completion web-based structured questionnaires in sociological research (20 marks)**

Introduction: *(who prefers this type of method and why?)*

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| **A01: the problem** | **A02: explain the point** |
| **A02: Back it up with evidence** | **A03: Evaluation**  Evaluate the problem (e.g. providing strengths) |

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| **A01: the problem** | **A02: explain the point** |
| **A02: Back it up with evidence** | **A03: Evaluation**  Evaluate the problem (e.g. providing strengths) |

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| **A01: the problem** | **A02: explain the point** |
| **A02: Back it up with evidence** | **A03: Evaluation**  Evaluate the problem (e.g. providing strengths) |

Conclusion:

**Interviews**

Another type of method is the use of interviews. Although both written questionnaires and interviews gather data by asking people questions, the obvious difference is that interviews involve a social interaction between the interviewer and interviewee, whereas with written questionnaires the respondent usually answers the questions without the involvement of the researcher.

**Introduction**

Positivists favour **…………………………….**interviews because they achieve the main positivist goals of **……………………………..** and representativeness. **……………………………….** questions and answers produce reliable data because other researchers can replicate the interview. Pre-coded responses allow us to produce **…………………………………….** data, identify and measure behaviour patterns, and establish cause-and-effect relationships. Interpretivists reject structured interviews because they impose the researcher’s **………………………………………** of ideas on interviewees.

Interpretivists favour **…………………………………** interviews because they achieve the main interpretivist goal of **……………………………………..**. Absence of a pre-set structure means interviewees can discuss what is important to them.  **…………………………….** questions allow interviewees to express themselves in their own words, thereby producing **qualitative** data that gives us an insight into their **………………………..**. Positivists reject unstructured interviews because each one is unique and cannot be **…………………….**.

Validity Structured Quantitative Standardized Qualitative framework Unstructured Replicated Open ended reliability meanings

Sociologists use different types of interviews in their research:

* Structured interviews
* Unstructured interviews
* Semi-structured interviews
* Group interviews

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| **Type of interview** | **Advantages/disadvantages** | **Examples (fill in you go)** |
| **Structured interview**  The interviewer is given strict instructions on how to ask the questions. Each question is standardized, asking each interviewee the same questions, word for word, the same tone etc. Even the ‘prompts’ (extra help given to the respondent by the interviewer) are planned in advance. This type of interview is likely to be composed of closed questions and fixed choice responses. The interviewer remains objective and maintains distance between themselves and their respondents. |  | Young and Willmott (family unit) used structured interviews to research the extended family in East London. Interviewed 933 people so had to be carried out by employed interviewers. They were formal and standardized, questions were precise and factual, with a limited range of alternative answers on straightforward topics such as age, job, religion, birthplace, etc. Interview circled the appropriate code number opposite the answer or wrote short replies. Interview were 10-30 mins depending on the number of relatives the interviewee had. We will study this more later in the course, |
| **Unstructured interview:**  More like a guided conversation; the interviewer only has a list of headings as guides for questioning. The interviewer has complete freedom to vary the questions, their wording, pursuing whatever line of questioning seems appropriate at the time. Many questions will follow from what the respondent has said. Every effort is made to build a ‘rapport’ – a relationship of trust and understanding, a relaxed atmosphere – and to get the P to speak honestly. They are also known as in-depth interviews as they go deep into the thoughts and experiences of the P by asking open-ended qustions. |  | Feminist Ann Oakley for example, has argued that interviews work best when there is a relationship of trust between researcher and interviewee.  This can mean that the researcher sympathises with or even takes the side of, the interviewee.  Oakley (and more recently, other feminists) has argued that this is not necessarily a bad thing. It can give deeper insight into why people act as they do and enable the researcher to understand how meaning is constructed.  Researchers taking this view would in fact argue that the interview provides more, not less, validity. |
| **Type of interview** | **Advantages/disadvantages** | **Examples (fill in you go)** |
| **Semi-structured interview:**  Lie in between structured and unstructured interviews. Each interview has a fixed set of questions, but the interviewer can also probe for more questions. The interviewer is free to ask follow-up questions when necessary. |  | For example, the information and explanations which an interviewee may give can be significantly affected by factors such as the race, gender, age and social class of the interviewer.  This form of distortion is called ‘interviewer effect’.  A well known example comes from research conducting by American researcher William Labov in the 1960s; Labov found that young black respondents were far more likely to speak freely when interviewed by a black researcher in an informal setting, whereas when interviewed by a white researcher in a more formal setting, their responses were much briefer and less open.  Clearly, the possibility of interviewer effect means that the validity of interviews can be challenged. |
| **Group interviews:**  Interviews with a group of interviewees being interviewed together – usually between 8 and 10 people. In some group interviews, the respondents answer their questions in turn. In others, known as ‘focus groups’, respondents are encouraged to talk to each other. They are guided rather than led by the interviewer are a type of group interview, whose job is to manage the group dynamics by establishing trust and rapport in what people hopefully interpret as a secure, comfortable and confident environment. | The interviewer can observe social interaction  They encourage deeper thoughts about issues and therefore respondents provide more in-depth answers.  Closer to a ‘real life’ situation | Respondents may be influenced by a desire to conform to the views of the others – reducing the validity of the findings.  Dominant members of a group can sway the opinions of others. |

**Further Evaluation of Interviews:**

However, the interview as a *'social interaction'* can pose a number of difficulties; the danger is that the interviewee may be responding not to the questions themselves but the social situation in which they are asked. This can affect the validity (interviewees may not tell the truth) and reliability (interviewees may respond differently depending on the researcher and the setting) of interviews.

**Status and power inequalities**

Generally speaking the interviewer is in a position of power over the interviewee; this may reduce the validity of any answers given. Gender and ethnic differences in power and status could heighten this difference, if for example the interviewer is a white male and the interviewee is a female from an ethnic minority. If however, a woman wants to interview a man then this could result in the man trying to assert his power by manipulating the interview for his own ends or even using it as an opportunity to ‘woo’ the woman, as McKee and O’Brien (1983) found when they tried to interview fathers.

**Interviewer bias**

The interviewer may ask leading questions; (e.g. “wouldn’t you agree that…) – more of an issue in unstructured interviews. Interviewers may influence the respondent’s answers by their facial expression, body language, or tone of voice. The interviewer may form expectations about the interviewee on the basis of their age, class, personality, etc. i.e. – the interviewer may stereotype or label them as a certain ‘type’.

**Artificiality**

Interviews are not like normal conversations; even unstructured interviews are ‘artificial’ in that one side takes the initiative and asks the questions while the other person simply responds. It could therefore be questioned whether any information gained under such conditions is valid.

**Social desirability**

People generally want to seek the approval of others, interviewees therefore may wish to appear socially desirable and so provide answers that present themselves in a favourable light rather than always telling the truth.

**Ethical issues**

Interviewees may feel under pressure to answer questions or give particular answers, it is therefore important that they are made clear of their right to withdraw or to not answer a question if they wish not to. Confidentiality should also be guaranteed.

**Cultural differences**

If the interviewer comes from a different culture or subculture to the interviewee then there may be misunderstandings over the meaning of words or phrases. It may also mean that interviewers are unable to tell when they are being lied to or misinterpret body language. Cultural differences could also make it difficult to establish rapport with an interviewee as the interviewer may unknowingly ask questions of a sensitive/personal nature.

Improving the validity of interviews (certain techniques to be used)

* Ask questions rapidly to reduce the chance of them making up answers or telling lies
* Cultural differences can be overcome by ensuring that the interviewers and interviewees are ethnically and language matched
* The researcher can ‘play dumb’ or display disbelief as a way of extracting sensitive information from respondents that they might not have otherwise revealed



**Eye on the Exam…**

* 1. **Outline two problems of using unstructured interviews in sociological research (4 marks) (AS only)**
  2. **Outline two reasons why sociologists may choose to use group interviews (4 marks) (AS only)**
  3. **Evaluate the difficulties that sociologists sometimes face when using structured interviews (20 marks) (practice only)**

Q.3. Spend about 30 minutes on this question. Focus on structured interviews and avoid drifting into unstructured interviews. Discuss **PET** – practical, ethical and theoretical disadvantages of using this type of method, e.g. practical (take longer than questionnaires and the costs of training the interviewers); ethical (problems in face-to-face interaction such as feeling pressurised); theoretical (issues of validity). Include how closed-questions can cause problems such as limited opportunities to clarify questions, inability to explore new areas of interest. Use concepts such as validity, rapport, interviewer bias, power and status inequalities and social desirability bias. In your introduction – introduce what theoretical perspective prefers these methods and why (positivists). You can discuss how interpretivists see structured interviews as having difficulties. Evaluate the difficulties as you go rather than list all at the end. Include possible advantages of using these methods. For example, evaluate the problem of using a closed-question by arguing that the benefit is that they generate easily quantifiable data.



**A-LEVEL ONLY….**

**Item A:** Sociologists use different forms of interviews in their research. Structured interviews, preferred by positivists, are similar to questionnaires with fixed questions and a standardised style of delivery. Unstructured and group interviews are more like guided conversations and are favoured by interpretivists and feminist researchers.

Whiverever form of interview is used, face-to-face research encounters and this generates problems as well as benefits for the researcher.

**Applying material from Item A and your knowledge, evaluate the usefulness of different types of interviews in sociological research (20 marks)**

Examiner’s Advice:

Aim to spend 30 mintutes on this question. Be clear about the different types of interviews used by sociologists. Refer to structured, unstructured and group interviews. Relate the perceived strengths and limitations of different forms of interviews to key PET concepts such as practical, ethical and theorectical issues (validity, reliability and representativeness). In your introduction, use the debate between positivism and interpretivism as a context for your answer. Explain why interpretivists and feminists see unstructured and group interviews as useful – for example in giving interviewees more control over the interview. Explain why positivists value strcutured interviews for their greater reliability and representativeness. Evaluate the strenghts and limitations of each form of interview. Use concepts such as quantitative and qualitative data, generalisation, sociologiy as a science, values in research, interviewer bias, artificiality, social desirability bias, objectivity and subjectivity. Use studies such as Labov, Oakley, and Young and Wilmott, and develop points noted in Item A.

**Observations**

Introduction - who likes Observations and why?

**Positivists** favour *structured non-participant observation* because it achieves their main goals of reliability, generalisability and representativeness:

Interpretivists reject structured observation because it imposes the researcher’s view of reality on those being observed, resulting in invalid data.

**Interpretivists** favour *unstructured participant* *observation* because it achieves their main goal of validity:

Positivists reject participant observation because its lack of structure means it cannot be replicated or results quantified.

Examples of observations:

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| Laud Humphries (1975)  Image result for binoculars transparent background | Mirza and Reay (2000)  Image result for book transparent background |
| Flowers (1998)  Image result for flower transparent background | Lyng (1990) Image result for motor bike transparent background |

Observational studies can differ along two main dimensions; from reading the above studies can you think what these might be?

**Participant Observation**

This type of observation involves the researcher actually taking part in an event or the everyday life of the group while observing it. Carrying out a participant observation study raises a number of difficulties; practical, ethical and theoretical, surrounding the researcher’s ability to get in, stay in, and get out…

Can you think what these might be?

**Getting in**

**Staying in**

**Going native…**

**Getting out**

‘Getting the seat of your pants (trousers) dirty’ John Hughes 1976.

Imagine you have been given a grant to go and study a group of people. Try to answer the following questions about how you would go about performing the study.

Who would you study?

How would you join the group?

Would it be dangerous?

How would you make sure you tried to observe what was going on fairly?

What kind of questions would you ask?

What would you do if people reliased that you where a sociologist?

What line would be too far in this study for you?

How would you make sure you didn’t go native?

Would you tell them what you were doing when you left?

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| Participant observation is… | |
| Advantages | Disadvantages |
| Non-participant observation is… | |
| Advantages | Disadvantages |
| Overt observation is… | |
| Advantages | Disadvantages |
| Covert observation is… | |
| Advantages | Disadvantages |

**Observations also have a number of other general weaknesses:**

• Observations tend to involve studying small groups of people, consequently the samples are often very biased and the representativeness of the results is limited. Therefore while it may be argued that the technique enables a researcher to gain a valid understanding of behaviour being studied it could be questioned whether this is valid for the wider population.

• Observations are hard to repeat, partly because so much depends on the personal skills and characteristics of the researcher and partly because the data produced is usually qualitative. Consequently the reliability of the results is limited and it is difficult to make comparisons with other studies.

****

**Eye on the Exam…**

**Evaluate the advantages that some sociologists see in using participant observation in their research (20 marks)**

Spend about 30 minutes on this question. It asks you to focus on participant observation, so avoid drifting into non-participant observation. Focus on evaluating the advantages of participant observation, e.g. rapport, sensitivity, insight, opening up a new topic, accessing difficult to study social groups etc. This question does not specify covert or overt, so make sure you draw out the advantages of each. Explain how overt avoids the ethical problems of being covert while covert has strengths of avoiding the Hawthorne Effect. Explain why interpretivists see participant observation as having many advantages. Evaluate the advantages as you go through each one rather than list them all at the end. Include possible criticisms of limitations to participant observation as part of your evaluation. For example, evaluate validity by arguing that the data may reflect the observer’s own biases rather than reality.



**A-LEVEL ONLY….**

**Outline and explain two practical problems of covert observation (10 marks)**

Examiner’s Advice:

Aim to spend 15 mintutes on this question. Divide your time fairly equally between each problem. Don’t write a separate introduction, just go straight into your first problem. Focus on practical problems e.g. making contact with the group, gaining entry, cover role, leaving the group. You can refer to participant observation, non-participant observation, or both.

**Experiments: Lab**

A **laboratory experiment** takes place in a controlled setting where the researcher manipulates an **independent variable** (the *cause*) to see if it changes the **dependent variable** (the *effect*). There are usually two groups; the **experimental group** (which experiences the IV) and the **control group** (which doesn’t experience the IV). All other variables will be held the same for both conditions.

|  |
| --- |
| **Starter:** What is the aim of the ‘piano stairs’ experiment?  What did they change/Control?  What did they find? (Can you use a statistic?)  Can you think of any problems with these findings? |

[](http://www.google.com.au/url?sa=i&rct=j&q=&esrc=s&source=images&cd=&cad=rja&uact=8&ved=2ahUKEwjTi_airNDbAhVREVAKHXkIC7EQjRx6BAgBEAU&url=http://www.southeastcakery.com/product/mixnmatch-brownie/&psig=AOvVaw1Qc2yZMSDbEqokcFOQzTCu&ust=1528969078161410)

**Introduction – Theoretical issues: Mix and match… Which perspective would have which view?**

**Positivists** 1 or 2 **Interpretivists** 1 or 2

**1.** would appear to favour the use of laboratory experiments as they achieve their goals of reliability, objectivity and the establishment of laws of behaviour (cause and effect). However, control of all variables isn’t always possible or ethical and the small sample sizes limit the extent to which generalisations can be made.

**2.** criticise the laboratory experiment for being artificial and lacking validity, no attempt is made to understand the meaning of behaviours.

**Advantages**

* *How might the high*

*level of control be considered a strength?*

* The laboratory experiment is a very detached method; the researcher merely manipulates the variables and records the results, **objectivity** is therefore high.

**Practical issues**

* Society is complex, it would be impossible to identify, let alone control, variables.
* Only small-scale samples can be used.
* Lab experiments can’t be used to study the past

**Ethical issues**

* **Deception** - It may be necessary to mislead Participants as to the true nature of the study; however, this is unethical as it means that **informed consent** cannot be given. Milgram (1964) lied to his p’s, telling them it was an experiment on learning – when it was actually a test of obedience to authority figures.

***When might it be right to deceive people within a study? Give an example:***

* **Protection from harm** - Experiments may also cause the Participants harm if they are put in a stressful situation. Milgram’s (1964) experiment caused severe psychological harm when they were asked to administer potentially lethal shocks to another participant. They were observed to “sweat, stutter, tremble, groan, bite their lips…”. Milgram however, argues this experiment was justified ethically because they alert us to the dangers of blindly obeying authority.

**Can it ever be ok to harm someone for the greater good of a study? What do YOU think is going too far and why?**

**The Hawthorne Effect**

People may change their behaviour if they know they are being studied and so behave unnaturally. This is known as the Hawthorne effect as it was first observed during a study at Hawthorne Works in Chicago in the 1920s. Mayo (1927) wanted to see what factors might improve productivity but they found that whatever factor was altered, for better or worse, productivity increased. Workers weren’t responding to the variables but simply to the fact that they were being studied.

**Draw 2 or 3 pictures to help you remember this study:**

**Free will**

* **Interactionists** would argue that humans have free will, that behaviour cannot be explained in terms of cause and effect relationships rather it can only be understood in terms of the choices people freely make. Consequently the laboratory experiment is not appropriate for studying human beings.

**Think of an argument that goes against this view:**

**Experiments: Field**

These take place in natural settings rather than a controlled laboratory, e.g. in a school or the p’s workplace. The researcher will still manipulate one or more variables to study their effect but p’s may be unaware they are taking part in the research.

**Introduction – Theoretical issues:**

* **Interpretivists** favour the use of naturalistic field experiments as it has high validity and provides us with a more accurate picture of reality.
* **Positivists** reject this method as it is more difficult to manipulate and control the variables, therefore making it more difficult to replicate (reliability) and determine cause-and-effect relationships.

**Advantages**

**Research**

**Rosenhan (1973) *‘On being sane in insane places’***

**Disadvantages**

**Experiments: Comparative Method**

This avoids the needs to actually experiment on people (it’s a ‘thought experiment’), the researcher identifies two groups that are alike in all major respects apart from the variable the researcher is interested in, they then compare the two groups to see if this variable is related to any other differences.

Who prefers these methods and why?

**Outline Emile Durkheim’s classic example of the comparative method**

Emile Durkheim did a study about suicide rates - he compared the suicide rates between Catholics and Protestants, and found that there was less suicides amongst Catholics, and also that less women committed suicide than men.

Extension – find out more about this…

**Disadvantages**

* Difficulty of operationalising variables
* The method usually relies on the use of official statistics which interpretivists argue is socially constructed.

**Advantages**

* Practical uses - Quick, cheap and easily accessible
* Used to establish correlations between variables, Durkheim used this method to establish a link between the level of social interrogation and rates of suicide

**TASK:** *Complete the questions to check your understanding of experiments*

1. Do you think there are any ethical issues involved in field experiments? Explain your answer
2. Do you think there are any ethical issues involved with comparative method? Explain your answer
3. Name one disadvantage of lab experiments and explain why this may lead to them not being used in sociology
4. What is the Hawthorne Effect? In which type of experiment is it mostly a problem in and which type avoids this?
5. A disadvantage of a lab experiment is that they cannot be used to study the past. Is this a practical or ethical problem?
6. What type of sociologists favour comparative method and why?
7. What is reliability and what experiments are seen as reliable?
8. Name the two variables involved in an experiment?

Item B16

Experiments are favoured by positivists as a method of research. By controlling variables, sociologists are able to repeat experiments again and again producing reliable data. Experiments collect valid data as variables can be manipulated allowing sociologists to collect specific data. Behaviour can be objectively investigated without bias from the sociologist, resulting in data that is easily quantifiable. This has limitations as well as benefits for the sociologist.

**Item B16**

Applying the material from Item B16 and your own knowledge, evaluate the usefulness of experiments in sociological research (20 marks)

Introduction: *(who prefers this type of method and why?)*

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| **Point (AO1):** | **Explain (AO2)** |
| **Evidence (AO2)** | **Evaluation (AO3)** |

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| **Point (AO1)** | **Explain (AO2)**  . |
| **Evidence (AO2)** | **Evaluation (AO3)** |

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| **Point (AO1)** | **Explain (AO2)** |
| **Evidence (AO2)** | **Evaluation (AO3)** |

Conclusion:

**Official Statistics (secondary source)**

|  |
| --- |
| *Starter: Name as many official statistics you can think of. E.g. Marriage certificates* |

*What are official statistics?*

Official statistics are quantitative data collected by government bodies. They come from two main sources - the day-to-day activities of government departments, and official surveys like the Census. We can distinguish between:

* **'Hard' statistics** - simple counts that register events such as births and deaths. These are not easily manipulated
* **'Soft' statistics** - these are more easily manipulated, e.g. crime statistics.

**Why do you think crime statistics are easily manipulated? Give an example?**

Introduction - who likes Official statistics and why?

**Write an answer for yourself before looking further down the page…**

**Positivists** favour official statistics as objective social facts that achieve the main positivists goals of reliability, generalisability and representativeness.

* They provide reliable data because their standardized categories and collection techniques are easily replicated
* Because they are collected at regular intervals, they show trends in behaviour over time.
* They produce quantitative data, allowing us to identify and measure behaviour patterns and establish cause-and-effect relationships
* They are usually large scale and therefore very representative.

**Interpretivists** reject official statistics, particularly 'soft' ones, as social constructs and not social facts. They fail to achieve the main Interpretivists goal of validity.

**TASK**: Decide whether the points below are strengths or weakness of official statistics and whether they are practical or theoretical issues

|  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
|  | Strength or weakness? | Practical or theoretical? | Elaborate |
| They are a free source of huge amounts of data |  |  |  |
| They save time and money |  |  |  |
| They are generally a reliable source of information - complied in a standardised way by trained staff, following set procedures |  |  |  |
| They allows for comparisons between groups such as gender and ethnicity |  |  |  |
| Official statistics are collected at regular intervals therefore show trends and patterns over time- able to see case and effect relationships, e.g. compare divorce rates over time |  |  |  |
| The government collect stats for its own purposes and not for the benefit of sociologists, so there may be no statistics on the topic we are interested in, e.g. Durkheim found no stats on religion and suicide rates |  |  |  |
| Data collected is from a large sample size making it representative |  |  |  |
| The definitions used by the state may be different from those sociologists would use e.g. they may define 'poverty' differently |  |  |  |
| If definitions change over time, this can make comparisons difficult, e.g. the official definition of unemployment changed over 30 times between 1980-1990 - so the unemployment statistics are not comparing like for like. |  |  |  |
| Data is not always representative for example from the British crime survey as they are only based on a certain sample of people |  |  |  |
| They are not always reliable as some people may make errors when completing them |  |  |  |
| The validity of the data collected is often questioned |  |  |  |
| Positivists positively rate the use of statistics |  |  |  |
| Interpretivists say official statistics lack validity |  |  |  |

**Eye on the Exam: Plan out the answer to this question…**

Outline and explain two advantages of using official statistics in sociological research (10 marks)

**Paragraph 1**

A01 – identify the advantage

A02 – explain what this means in the context of the question (cite research if you can)

**Paragraph 2**

A01 – identify the advantage

A02 – explain what this means in the context of the question (cite research if you can)

[](http://www.google.co.uk/url?sa=i&rct=j&q=&esrc=s&source=images&cd=&cad=rja&uact=8&ved=0CAcQjRxqFQoTCLvmoY752sYCFaWn2wodhoABaQ&url=http://www.nacpatients.org.uk/content/write-your-own-personal-diaries-blogs&ei=8SulVfupKaXP7gaGgYbIBg&psig=AFQjCNHbu7zsYCxTHcTrOcjBcnO1HBsZXA&ust=1436974436713655)*C:\Users\norria.ST-AIDANS.000\AppData\Local\Microsoft\Windows\Temporary Internet Files\Content.IE5\HZSGLR61\MC900088622[1].wmfC:\Users\norria.ST-AIDANS.000\AppData\Local\Microsoft\Windows\Temporary Internet Files\Content.IE5\HZSGLR61\MC900088622[1].wmfC:\Users\norria.ST-AIDANS.000\AppData\Local\Microsoft\Windows\Temporary Internet Files\Content.IE5\HZSGLR61\MC900088622[1].wmf***Documents**

*What are documents?*

Documents are secondary source data created by individuals, groups and organizations, that sociologists may find useful in their research. We can distinguish between:

* **Personal documents** - first person accounts such as letters, diaries, memoirs, autobiographies, notes and photo collections - e.g. William Thomas and Florian Znaniecki (1919) - looked at 764 letters to investigate people's interpretations and experience of migration from Poland to the USA in the early 20th century.
* **Public documents** - such as reports from governments, charities and businesses, e.g. Ofsted reports of school inspections; or the official reports of public enquiries such as the Black Report (1980) into inequalities in health, which has become a major source of information for sociologists.

**Do you think that it is right to read diaries, letters etc from people? How long after they have died (if they don’t give you permission) do you think you should have to wait to be able to read these Documents?**

Introduction - who likes Documents and why? **(Give an example or two for each in the space below)**

**Interpretivists** tend to favour documents because they achieve the main Interpretivist goal of validity:

* They are not usually written with research in mind and is an authentic statement of the author's views
* They provide qualitative data that gives us insight into the author's world-view and meanings.

**Positivists** tend to reject documents because they fail to achieve the main positivist goals of reliability, generalisability and representativeness:

* They are often unstandardised and unreliable; for example, every person's diary is unique. This makes it hard to draw generalisations from them
* They are often unrepresentative; for example, only literate groups can write diaries or letters
* Researchers can impose their own meanings on them - subjective.

However, positivists do sometimes carry out content analysis on documents to produce quantitative data from them.

**What are the +/- of using Documents (you can use p30 to help)**

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| Advantages (+) | Disadvantages (-) |
|  |  |

Historical documents

Historical documents are simply a personal or public document created in the past. If we want to study the past, historical documents are usually the only source of information (especially is there are no longer any survivors whom we could question). However, there may be problems interpreting historical documents e.g. because the meaning of words changes over time. Some historical documents may be lost or destroyed, giving an incomplete and unrepresentative picture of the past.

*Assessing the usefulness of documents:*

**John Scott (1990)** suggests four tests of any document:

TASK - complete the following using the photocopy entitled historical document

* **Authenticity** -
* **Credibility** -
* **Representativeness** -
* **Meaning** -

**Content analysis**

Content analysis is a method for dealing systematically with the contents of documents. It is best known for its use in analyzing documents produced by the mass media, such as television news bulletins or advertisements. This is a method of systematically analyzing the content of documents to find out how often and in what ways different type of people or events occur. The researcher would decide on the categories that they are going to use, they would then examine the document for incidences of these categories and count / tally up how many times each category occurs. Consequently, this method is a way of turning rich qualitative data into …………………………………………. data.

**INDEPENDENT TASK: Find yourself a magazine, newspaper or TV episode. Pick something simple and count how many times that thing is referred to in one section (20 mins or the first 3 pages of the paper).**

**For example see how many times men or women are mentioned in that section. What does that tell you about the newspaper? The Writer? Society as a whole?**

Research**:**

**Ross Gill (1988)** states how content analysis works. Imagine we want to analyse how many female characters are portrayed as being in paid employment:

* First we decide on categories we are going to use such as employee, full-time housewife
* Next, we study the source (e.g. television broadcast, magazine article) and place the characters in it into the categories we have decided upon
* We can then count/tally up the number of times we see this behaviour and then use this data to draw meaningful conclusions to compare how often women are portrayed as full-time housewives rather than employees.

[](http://www.google.co.uk/url?sa=i&rct=j&q=&esrc=s&source=images&cd=&cad=rja&uact=8&ved=0CAcQjRxqFQoTCM3a5bv22sYCFaUI2wod_NAC-Q&url=http://www.livechat-software.org/tour-als-advantages/&ei=KymlVY2ZNKWR7Ab8oYvIDw&psig=AFQjCNGb8WcjnLRNr_PmM3pkWkL4JlNztg&ust=1436973733513019)We may then go on to compare the results of our content analysis with official statistics for female employment to see if the media was presenting a false stereotype of women.

Content analysis has several **advantages**:

* It is cheap
* Once the categories have been established, content analysis is a relatively quick method
* It is usually easy to find sources of material in the form of newspapers, television broadcasts and so on
* So long as the documents still exist, it is easy for other researchers to repeat the research in order to check the reliability of the findings
* Positivists see it as a useful source of objective, quantitative, scientific data

[](http://www.google.co.uk/url?sa=i&rct=j&q=&esrc=s&source=images&cd=&cad=rja&uact=8&ved=0CAcQjRxqFQoTCPGlvdf22sYCFUYr2wodetAFpA&url=http://e-commerce2012spring.blogspot.com/2012/03/advantages-and-disadvantages-of-e.html&ei=ZSmlVbHfN8bW7Ab6oJegCg&psig=AFQjCNECxouvSzIxk6Mz5AuV_0Kl68PtMA&ust=1436973789712179)

However, content analysis also has several **disadvantages**:

* Interpretivists argue that simply counting up the number of times something appears in a document tells us nothing about the meaning - lowering the validity of the data.
* It could be argued that the process is still subjective as the researcher decides which categories to use and also decides which examples fit in to which category.

**Do you think that content analysis is a worth while task and why?**

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**Eye on the Exam:**

***C:\Users\norria.ST-AIDANS.000\AppData\Local\Microsoft\Windows\Temporary Internet Files\Content.IE5\HZSGLR61\MC900088622[1].wmfC:\Users\norria.ST-AIDANS.000\AppData\Local\Microsoft\Windows\Temporary Internet Files\Content.IE5\HZSGLR61\MC900088622[1].wmfC:\Users\norria.ST-AIDANS.000\AppData\Local\Microsoft\Windows\Temporary Internet Files\Content.IE5\HZSGLR61\MC900088622[1].wmf*Item A:** As well as their own primary data, sociologists use data which has been gathered by others. These secondary sources can be very useful. For example, the scale of data collected by governments in the form of official statistics is far beyond the resources of any sociologist. There are also some issues, such as suicide or historical events, which would be very difficult to investigate without having access to the personal or public documents left behind by those involved.

Positivist and interpretivist researchers tend to favour different forms of secondary data. Positivists prefer quantitative data, while interpretivists favour qualitative data.

**Applying material from Item A and your knowledge, evaluate the usefulness of different kinds of secondary data in sociological research (20 marks)**

**Conclusion: Triangulation / Methodological Pluralism**

[](http://www.google.co.uk/url?sa=i&rct=j&q=&esrc=s&source=images&cd=&cad=rja&uact=8&ved=0CAcQjRxqFQoTCM3a5bv22sYCFaUI2wod_NAC-Q&url=http://www.livechat-software.org/tour-als-advantages/&ei=KymlVY2ZNKWR7Ab8oYvIDw&psig=AFQjCNGb8WcjnLRNr_PmM3pkWkL4JlNztg&ust=1436973733513019)

**Very important exam tip!!!**

Triangulation and methodological pluralism are useful for concluding discussions about any single method. Point out that each method can be complimented with other methods that provide different types of data. You can argue that each research method is useful for certain types of study but research is usually strengthened by the use of more than one method

**Methodological pluralism**

As we have seen, positivists tend to pursue methods which generate quantitative data, whereas interpretivists prefer methods which generate qualitative data. In the real world of practical research, most sociologists will use a range of methods to collect different kinds of data, regardless of whether they are quantitative or qualitative. They will use whatever methods seem best suited and most practical for producing the fullest possible data to understand the subject being studied. This use of a variety of methods to generate a mixture of qualitative and quantitative data is known as methodological pluralism, and is very useful for increasing sociological understanding of social life. For example, if a researcher carried out a lab experiment which produces quantitative data – a sociologist could take a methodological pluralism approach where they could carry out an unstructured interview (qualitative data).

**Triangulation:**

Triangulation refers to the use of two or more different methods or sources of data (primary / secondary) so that they complement each other, the strengths of one countering the weaknesses of the other and vice versa; e.g. using a participant observation (primary source) and official statistics (secondary source) to examine the rates of truancy in schools for working-class boys. This is used to check the **reliability** and **validity** of the research method – whether the results generated from this method are reliable and valid.

**A combination of both?**

Methodological pluralism and Triangulation frequently go hand in hand, because the use of several methods producing different types of data (methodological pluralism) not only gives a fuller picture of what is being explained but, *at the same time*, is a valuable approach for checking the reliability and validity of the research findings (triangulation).

Examples of these two approaches are considered below:

* A study of motherhood, *The Changing Faces of Motherhood*, by the Social Issues Research Centre in 2011, employed four research methods: a review of data and official statistics from the 1930s to 2011, qualitative research through focus groups with mothers of different ages, interviews, and an online quantitative survey of 1,000 mothers.
* **Cecile Wright (1992)** used the following four combinations of methods to investigate racism in primary schools: Classroom observation to see how teachers actually behaved; an examination of documents about test resulted to examine the effects of racism; Interviews with Headteacher to investigate school policies; and informal interviews with teachers to uncover unobservable attitudes.

**Research Methods – WORD SEARCH!**

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Case Study, Correlation, Demand Characteristics, Field Experiment, Interview, Laboratory Experiment, Observation, Opportunity Sample, Opportunity Sample, Reliability, Stratified Sample, Validity