

AS & A2 Sociology



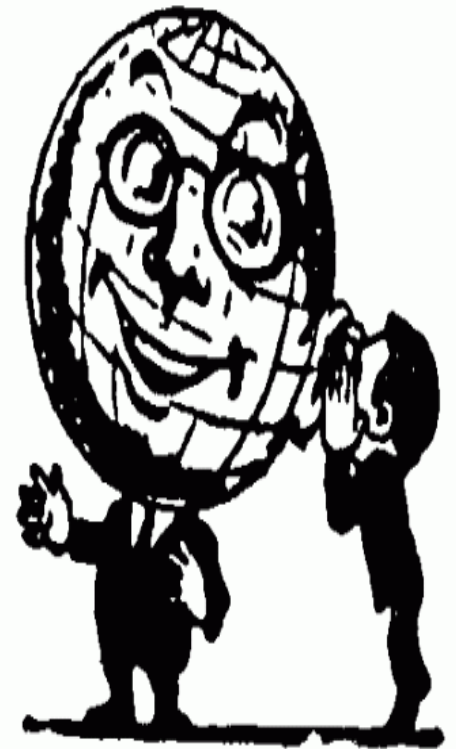
Research Methods

KEYWORDS AND KEY CONCEPTS IN RESEARCH METHODS

Research Methods is all about investigating the methods used by sociologists to collect their data and produce their studies. For this section in the exam you must be able to:

- **DEFINE** keywords, concepts and methodologies used by sociologists.
- **EXPLAIN** how, Practical, Ethical and Theoretical (P.E.T) issues are associated with and affect the research process.
- **EVALUATE** a number of different methodologies used by sociologists, you must be able to define and evaluate (give advantages and disadvantages) of the following methods:

<u>Methodology</u>	<u>Define</u>	<u>Strengths</u> (P.E.T)	<u>Weaknesses</u> (P.E.T)
Laboratory Experiment			
Field Experiment			
Comparative Method			
Research Design			
Questionnaires: • Structured • Unstructured • Semi-Structured			
Random Sampling			
Systematic Sampling			
Quota Sampling			
Snowball Sampling			
Interviews • Structured • Unstructured • Semi-Structured			
Participation Observation			
Covert Participation Observation			
Overt Participation Observation			
Official Statistics			
Historical/Personal Documents			
Pilot Study			
Longitudinal Study			
Case Study			
Data Triangulation			



KEYWORDS AND CONCEPTS: DATA DISTINCTION

Keyword	Definition	Example
Primary Data	Data that sociologists gather for themselves/for their own purpose.	
Secondary Data	Data that is already in existence.	
Qualitative Data	Data that is expressed in words which gives meaning, thoughts, attitudes and motives.	
Quantitative Data	Data that is expressed in numerical form and allows trends and patterns to be observed.	

Quantitative Methods

Official Statistics
Structured Interviews
Experiments
Structured Questionnaires



Qualitative Methods

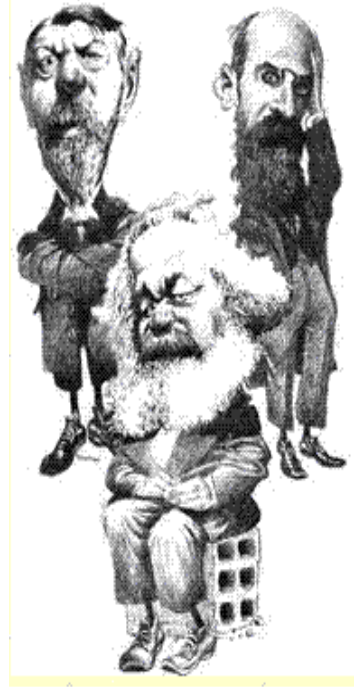
Participant Observation
Historical Documents
Unstructured Questionnaires
Unstructured Interviews
Case Studies
Longitudinal Studies

KEYWORDS AND CONCEPTS: THEORETICAL

DISTINCTION: POSITIVISM AND

INTERPRETIVISM

- **Positivism** is an approach in sociology that believes society can be studied using *similar techniques to natural science*.
- There are causes of things in the **social world** just like there are in the natural world. The causes of these things cause people/mould people's idea and actions - Durkheim called these forces **social facts**. This, according to Durkheim, a positivist, should be the focus of sociology.
- Positivists prefer **quantitative methods** and are likely to undertake large scale research.
- **Interpretivism** argues because people's behaviour is influenced by the interpretations and meanings they give to a social situation the researcher's task is to gain an understanding of these interpretations and meanings.
- Interpretivists prefer **qualitative data** and are likely to undertake small-scale research.
- The key aim of Interpretivist's research is meaning and understanding or what they call **verstehen** - an understanding of behaviour by placing yourself in the position of those being researched, seeing it from their point of view.



EXAM FOCUS 1

- Q1.) Explain what is meant by the term primary data. (2)
- Q2.) Explain what is meant by the term secondary data. (2)
- Q3.) Explain what is meant by the term quantitative data. (2)
- Q4.) Explain what is meant by the term qualitative data. (2)



KEYWORDS AND CONCEPTS: PRACTICAL, THEORETICAL AND ETHICAL ISSUES ASSOCIATED WITH THE RESEARCH PROCESS

Practical Issues	Ethical Issues	Theoretical Issues
Cost Time Access Sample Size Researcher Characteristics	Informed Consent Vulnerable Groups Psychological Harm Anonymity Confidentiality Privacy Disclosure	Validity Reliability Representativeness Positivism Interpretivism
	B.S.A Ethical Guidelines	

FACTORS AFFECTING RESEARCH DESIGN

There are a number of factors that affect the research process, most commonly these factors revolved around: **Practical, Ethical and Theoretical (P.E.T)** limitations.

PRACTICAL LIMITATIONS

- **Access to those being studied:** is the group the researcher wants to study easily accessible. If the group are able to be researched in a public place (open setting) this would be easier. However, if the group of study are only accessible in a closed setting e.g. school, hospitals, and religious cults etc. the researcher will have trouble gaining access.
- **Time:** Does the research have a short or long period of time? If only a short period, will this affect the researcher's results?
- **Cost:** How much money does the researcher have? Large-scale research is very expensive and beyond the means of most sociologists, they will therefore require a funding source. However, your funding source will place limits on your research e.g. data and results found.
- **The Researcher:** What values does the researcher hold? Does the researcher want to further their career? Is the researcher under pressure to publish? Is the topic safe for research? Does the researcher have the right personal qualities and social characteristics e.g. age, class, ethnicity, gender? Is the research ethical?



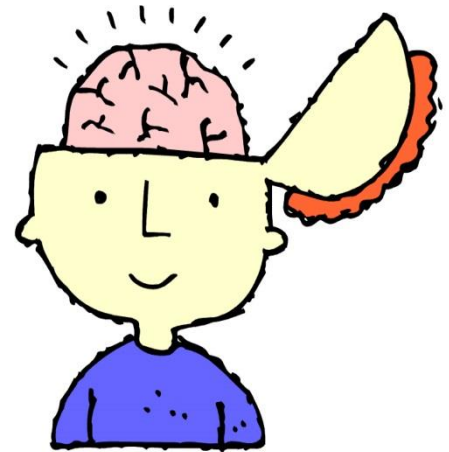
ETHICAL LIMITATIONS

- **Informed Consent:** Research participants should be offered the right to refuse. Additionally, they should also be told about all the relevant aspects of the research so they can make a fully informed decision. Consent should be gained at the beginning of the research and if the research is lengthy, consent should be reviewed periodically.
- **Confidentiality and Privacy:** Researchers should keep the identity of the research participants a secret (they should remain anonymous) to prevent possible negative effects on them. Personal information on them should also be kept private.
- **Effects on Research Participants:** Researchers should be aware of the possible effects of the research on the participant these effects could include: legal issues, social exclusion and psychological damage. Each research participant should be given the **right to withdraw** and be offered a **full debrief** after the research has taken place.
- **Vulnerable Groups:** Particular care should be taken when researching certain vulnerable groups in society e.g. age, disability, physical/mental health.



THEORETICAL ISSUES LIMITATIONS

- Theoretical issues relate to the **Positivist and Interpretivist** dichotomy within sociology.
- The concept of **validity**: does the research offer a *true and authentic picture of the issue/ social phenomena being studied*. Different perspectives argue different methods do this better than others.
- The concept of **reliability**: does the research offer a *chance for replication/repetition*. Different perspectives argue different methods do this better than others.
- The concept of **reliability**: does the research give a *true representation/reflection of the group being studied*. Different perspectives argue different methods do this better than others.
- In turn, this relates to the **theoretical perspective (Functionalism, Marxism, Interactionism)** held by the sociologist.



- This will affect the choice of topic:

Theory	Issues Studied
Functionalism	Likely to focus on aspects of society that show how social institutions contribute to the maintenance of society.
Marxism	Likely to focus on aspects of inequality, conflict and division
Feminism	Likely to focus on issues concerned with gender inequality and patriarchy.

EXAM FOCUS 2

- Q1.) Explain what is meant by the term validity of research. (2)
- Q2.) Explain what is meant by the term representativeness of research. (2)
- Q3.) Explain what is meant by the term reliability of research. (2)
- Q4.) Suggest two factors that may influence a sociologist's choice of research topic. (4)
- Q5.) Suggest two theoretical factors that may influence a sociologist's choice of research topic. (4)
- Q6.) Suggest two ethical factors that may influence a sociologist's choice of research topic.
- Q7.) Suggest two practical factors that may influence a sociologist's choice of research topic.
- Q8.) Examine the extent to which practical issues are the most important influence when selecting research methods and a research topic. (20)
- Q9.) Examine the ethical problems that sociologists may face in conducting their research. (20)
- Q10.) Examine the view that theoretical issues are the most important factor influencing sociologists' choice of research methods. (20)



RESEARCH METHOD: EXPERIMENTS

Defining Experiments: an attempt, within artificial conditions established by an investigator, to test the influence of one or more variable upon others. There are three types: laboratory, field and comparative.



EXPERIMENTAL/LABORATORY EXPERIMENT

- Laboratory experiments are the primary method used in the natural sciences (e.g. Biology, Chemistry and Physics). They are rarely used in Sociology.
- Often used the test a hypothesis (*the statement to be tested by research*) made by the scientist.
- It would be a method favoured by **Positivists** (although even they rarely use it).

Independent Variable: the the variable or factor to be tested/controlled/manipulated in the experiment; the cause.



Dependent Variable: the variable or factor that changes in the experiment as a result of changes in something else; the effect



Laboratory Experiment Advantages	Laboratory Experiment Disadvantages
<p>✓ Theoretical: Positivism: Laboratory experiments have high reliability - they are able to be repeated by other sociologists.</p>	<p>✗ Practical: It impossible to identify and therefore control all the variables that might influence a social situation e.g. achievement. Unless all variable can be isolated and controlled, a laboratory experiment couldn't take place.</p> <p>✗ Practical: Due the nature of laboratory experiments, they are very small-scale, often only involving one or two participants this makes it difficult to investigate large scale phenomena e.g. voting patterns. Additionally, it doesn't allow for generalisations.</p>

Laboratory Experiments Continued...

Laboratory Experiment Disadvantages

- X Practical:** If a laboratory experiment is taking place it will usually mean the researcher is watching the participants, when being watched people may behave differently, second guessing what the researcher wants to see; their behaviour may change. This effect is termed the 'Hawthorne Effect' (Mayo, 1927).
- X Ethical:** The laboratory experiment may cause the participants harm, especially if certain equipment is used or images/videos are shown e.g. Milgram's Obedience Experiment.
- X Ethical:** The laboratory experiment often involved a high level of deception.
- X Theoretical:** Interpretivists will reject the use of laboratory experiments as humans are very different to chemicals, human behaviour cannot be explained by understanding certain cause and effects, we have free will, choice and consciousness.
- X Theoretical:** Laboratory experiment will only provide data which is **quantitative**; this does not provide meaning or understanding behind behaviour.

EXAM FOCUS 3

- Q1.) Explain what is meant by the term laboratory experiment. (2)
- Q2.) Explain what is meant by the term field experiment. (2)
- Q3.) Explain what is meant by the term hypothesis. (2)
- Q4.) Explain what is meant by the Hawthorne Effect. (2)
- Q5.) Suggest one advantage and one disadvantage of using laboratory experiments in sociological research. (4)
- Q6.) Explain the difference between the 'dependent' variable and the 'independent' variable in sociological experiments. (4)
- Q7.) Examine the problems some sociologists may face when using experiments in their research. (20)
- Q8.) Examine the problems that some sociologists may face when using different kinds of experiments in their research. (20)
- Q9.) Examine the ethical problems that sociologists may face in conducting their research. (20)



FIELD EXPERIMENTS

Defining Field Experiment: an experiment which is conducted in the real world, within a pre-created or real-life situation.



- Field experiments have two key features which distinguish them from laboratory experiment: **take place in natural surroundings and involve a high level of deception.**
- They allow the researcher to manipulate (control) variable within a situation to see what affect it has on the participants e.g. teacher's expectations concerning pupils (**Rosenthal and Jacobson, 1968**).

Field Experiment Advantages	Field Experiment Disadvantages
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ Theoretical: The research is conducted within a real-life/natural setting; this makes it more natural and realistic, increasing the validity of the data when compared to laboratory experiment. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> X Theoretical: Due to the real-life setting the researcher is less able to control variables within the situation.
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> X Ethical: Field experiments involve deception meaning the participants do not give their full informed consent, if they were told the 'real' reason of the research it may affect the participant's actions.
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> X Practical: Field experiments can only be used in a very limited number of settings therefore are not useful for investigating a large proportion of social life.

THE COMPARATIVE METHOD

Defining Comparative Method: a thought-experiment carried out by a sociologist in which they compare data sets from different societies, groups or time periods to identify the casual effects of a social event/behaviour.



- The comparative method is only conducted in the mind of the sociologist; it does not experimentation on real people.
- The sociologist identifies two groups of people that are alike in all but the variable to be tested. The sociologist compares the two groups and sees if the variable has an effect.

- Durkheim used this method to investigate suicide, the variable in his study was **religion**, he therefore **compared** suicide rates between Catholic Christians and Protestant Christians.

Comparative Method Advantages	Comparative Method Disadvantages
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ Practical: It can be used to study events in the past. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> X Theoretical: Little control over variables, no way to be certain of a cause and effect relationship as official statistics don't tell everything.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ Ethical: It has no ethical issues; there is no harm or deception. 	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ Theoretical: The research is conducted using figures from a real-life/natural setting; this makes it more natural and realistic, increasing the validity of the data when compared to laboratory experiments. 	

SOCIAL SURVEY/QUESTIONNAIRES

WHAT IS A SOCIAL SURVEY/QUESTIONNAIRE?

Defining Social Survey/Questionnaires: *a list of pre-set questions to which respondents are asked to supply an answer.* There are a number of different types of questionnaire; each questionnaire varies on its completion method and delivery method



QUESTIONNAIRE DESIGN

Great care must be taken when designing a questionnaire and many factors must be considered, these factors include:

- **Simplicity:** The questionnaire should be kept **simple**. It should be as **short** as possible, with the number of questions kept to a minimum. The questionnaire should be **clearly laid out** and the **printing** should be good quality. The researcher must also ensure they provide clear **instructions** on how to fill out the questionnaire.
- **Language:** The questions must be **simple**, either with a 'yes'/'no' response or a short answer box. The questionnaire must be phrased neutrally to avoid **leading questions**. The language used on the questionnaire must be **every-day, non-technical language**

(where/if possible). When a sociological concept is used, it is important it is operationalised: *defined in such a way that they can be studied/measured.*

PRE-CODED/CLOSED/STRUCTURED QUESTIONNAIRES

Defining Pre-Coded/Closed Questionnaires: highly structured questionnaires with a number of pre-set/closed questions which are to be answered using listed or multiple-choice responses.



Advantages Pre-Coded/Closed Questionnaires	Pre-Coded/Closed Questionnaires Disadvantages
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ Practical: They are very quick to complete and fairly cheap to produce therefore you can have a large sample size. This ensures the data is representative. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✗ Practical: For some, the language of the questionnaire may be difficult to understand e.g. they may need words/concepts explaining.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ Practical: There is no need to recruit/train specialised interviewers as respondents complete the questionnaire by themselves. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✗ Practical: If you offer incentives to increase response-rate, this will increase the cost. Additionally, the larger the sample size the greater the cost, the UK Census costs £480 million.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ Ethical: Few ethical issues associated, as by filling the questionnaire out, you are gaining informed consent from the respondent. 	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ Ethical: Easy to keep data confidential, secure and anonymous. 	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ Theoretical: The data which is produced is often standardized, easily classifiable and easy to analyse. Often it produces quantifiable, statistical data 	

Pre-Coded/Closed Questionnaires Continued...

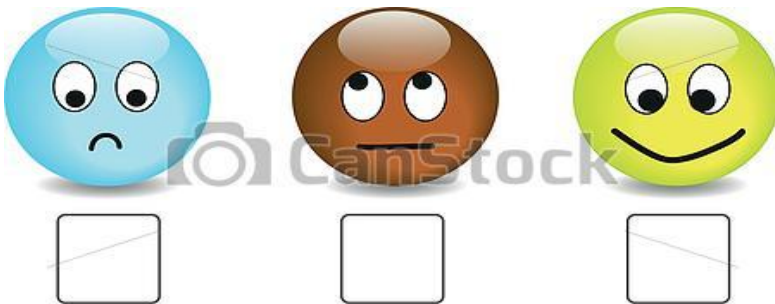
Advantages Pre-Coded/Closed Questionnaires	Pre-Coded/Closed Questionnaires Disadvantages
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ Theoretical: They produce data which is reliable - the research can be repeated fairly easily by another researcher. Furthermore, they allow comparisons as the research can be repeated and compared overtime and across different societies. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✗ Theoretical: Depending on its methods of delivery, the response rate maybe fairly low. The lower the number of responses, the less the data is representative.

OPEN-ENDED/OPEN/UNSTRUCTURED QUESTIONNAIRES

Defining Open-ended/Open Questionnaires: questionnaires that are structured, with pre-set questions but allow the respondent the freedom to answer the question as they wish, either in writing or orally.



Advantages	Disadvantages
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ Practical: If carried out with a researcher presented, language/concepts can be explained. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✗ Practical: Compared to closed questionnaires there is a high cost and time involvement.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ Ethical: Few ethical issues associated, as by filling the questionnaire out, you are gaining informed consent from the respondent. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✗ Practical: If conducted with an interviewer, may suffer from the social-desirability effect.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ Theoretical: They overcome the validity problem posed by closed questionnaires. As they allow the respondent to answer in their own words. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✗ Theoretical: The data produced is difficult to analyse, it is often vast in volume and qualitative. Also, some answers may be misunderstood by the researcher e.g. handwriting.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ Theoretical: They provide data which gives depth and meaning (verstehen). They allow the researcher to understand the meaning behind an action or opinion. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✗ Theoretical: If conducted with an interviewer, the sample-size maybe limited Therefore the data may not be representative.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ Theoretical: Allows for different/new ideas to be generated, creating new research opportunities for sociologists. 	



POSTAL/ONLINE/SELF-COMPLETION QUESTIONNAIRES

Defining Postal/Mail/Online/Self-Completion Questionnaires: questionnaires which are left, posted, emailed to the respondent who completes them in their own times by themselves.



Advantages	Disadvantages
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ Practical/Ethical: They are very quick to complete and fairly cheap to produce therefore you can have a large sample size. This could lead to the data being representative. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✗ Practical: Often there are issues surrounding response-rate. The research will either receive a low-response rate or the sample may be unrepresentative.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ Practical: As they are self-completed they allow the researcher to conduct research on topics which may cause embarrassment e.g. sexual activity or criminal behaviour. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✗ Practical: People may not understand the question being asked/be dishonest in their answers this means their responses may not be valid.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ Practical: People can reply at leisure, this may make results more precise/accurate. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✗ Practical: The researcher doesn't know if the correct person is completing the questionnaire.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ Ethical: Few ethical issues associated, as by filling the questionnaire out, you are gaining informed consent from the respondent. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✗ Theoretical: Depends if questionnaire is closed/open - apply strengths above to if either one.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ Theoretical: Depends if questionnaire is closed/open - apply strengths above to if either one. 	

CHALLENGE: In your exam you could be asked about **semi-structured questionnaires**. What do you think these are? What do you think are their strengths? What do you think are their weaknesses?



EXAM FOCUS 4

- Q1.) Explain what is meant by the term questionnaire. (2)
- Q2.) Explain what is meant by the term operationalisation of sociological concepts. (2)
- Q3.) Suggest one advantage and one disadvantage of using closed questionnaires in sociological research. (4)
- Q4.) Examine the problems some sociologists find with using postal questionnaires in their research. (20)



SAMPLING TECHNIQUES

Although sociologists would like to question/interview everybody in the population this is obviously very impractical, it would take a huge amount of time and money, they therefore conduct research using a sample.

Defining Sample: a group/individuals selected from a wider population to take part in research.



Defining Sampling Frame: a list of a population/research population which is used to select individuals to study e.g. electoral role, school registers.



Sampling Technique	Explanation	Advantage	Disadvantage
Random Sampling	A sample in which everybody in the population has an equal chance of being selected e.g. by using a computer generated programme.	☺: Practical: It is quick and easy to select your sample.	☹: Theoretical: Because it is completely random, the researcher has no control and it could lead to a very unrepresentative sample e.g. all males or females.

Systematic Sampling	A sample is selected by selecting every nth (e.g. 10 th) person from a list.	☺: Practical: It is quick and easy to select your sample.	⊗: Theoretical: Could be a very unrepresentative sample e.g. every 10 th person could be male.
Stratified Random Sampling	A sample is selected by subdividing the sample frame into a smaller sample frame using various characteristics e.g. age and gender. The sample is then randomly chosen from each group list then combined to make final sample.	☺: Theoretical: Representative when compared to other methods looked at previously.	⊗: Practical: Need detailed information in the sample frame.
Quota Sampling	A sample is selected by selecting a certain amount of people who fit into certain categories e.g. aged 60 and male.	☺: Practical: Useful in conducting research on a specific group of people.	⊗: Practical: Need detailed information in the sample frame.
Snowball Sampling	A sample is selected by the researcher identifying one or two people with certain characteristics e.g. gang members and then asking them to introduce them to others.	☺: Practical: Allow the researcher to investigate areas of society which is difficult to access e.g. criminals	⊗: Practical/Ethical: May be biased and very small-scale and therefore unrepresentative.



EXAM FOCUS 5

- Q1.) Explain what is meant by the term sampling. (2)
- Q2.) Explain what is meant by the term sample frame. (2)
- Q3.) Explain the difference between a sampling frame and a sample. (4)
- Q4.) Identify two sampling techniques used by sociologists in their research. (4)



INTERVIEWS

The definition of an interview depends upon its method of **delivery and structure**.

STRUCTURED/FORMAL INTERVIEWS

Defining Structured/Formal Interview: interviews where the interviewer asks the respondent closed questions, in the same pattern and does not probe the response. They are very much like a self-completed questionnaire, just with an interviewer.



Defining Interview Schedule: a list of questions to be asked in an interview.



Advantages of Structured/Formal Interviews	Disadvantages of Structured/Formal Interviews
<p>✓ Practical/Theoretical: They overcome some of the shortcomings of self-completed questionnaires; they increase the response rate, therefore they become more representative and</p>	<p>✗ Practical/Theoretical: As an interviewer is involved the method can be seen to be time consuming and costly (when compared to self-completed questionnaires). These factors may</p>

<p>they also allow somebody to explain the question e.g. words and concepts not understood.</p>	<p>result in a smaller sample size, leading to the research being less representative.</p>
<p>✓ Ethical: Few ethical issues associated, as by conducting the interview, you are gaining informed consent from the respondent.</p>	<p>✗ Theoretical: As this method uses an interview schedule it will limit the answers/become inflexible given by the respondent. Only basic factual questions can be asked e.g. age, sex. This method lacks depth and verstehen. This may result in the method lacking validity because the answers don't reflect the respondents concerns.</p>
<p>✓ Theoretical: They produce data which is reliable - the research can be repeated fairly easily by another researcher. Furthermore, they allow comparisons as the research can be repeated and compared overtime and across different societies.</p>	<p>✗ The interviewer could create interviewer bias. This may cause the answers to become invalid.</p>

<p>Advantages Structured/Formal Interviews</p>
<p>✓ Theoretical: The data which is produced is often standardized, easily classifiable and easy to analyse. Often it produces quantifiable, statistical data.</p>

UNSTRUCTURED/INFORMAL INTERVIEWS

Defining Unstructured/Informal Interview: interviews where the interviewer although has topics in mind to cover, does not have a list of pre-set questions e.g. focus groups.



Unstructured/Informal Interviews Advantages	Unstructured/Informal Interviews Disadvantages
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ Practical: It overcomes issues of misunderstanding and poor literacy skills - the respondent's answers are either scribed or recorded. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✗ Practical/Theoretical: These interviews are costly and take an enormous amount of time, to both conduct and analyse. This means the sample size will be smaller, leading to issues of representativeness.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ Ethical: Few ethical issues associated, as by conducting the interview, you are gaining informed consent from the respondent. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✗ Practical: If the interview is carried out in a group setting or focus group, the respondents may face peer pressure and the social desirability effect.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ Theoretical: As the interview has only limited structure it allows for a greater flexibility. It offers greater opportunity for the respondent to offer feedback. This could assist in building a rapport with the interviewee, giving the data a greater validity - likely to be honest. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✗ Theoretical: There are issues surrounding replication, as U/I rely on the personality and personal skills of the researcher they are difficult to repeat and gather the same data.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ Theoretical: It allows ideas to develop over the course of the interview, directions can change and new hypothesis can be formed - the whole nature of the research could change! 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✗ Theoretical: The nature of U/I causes them to perhaps create interviewer bias.

CHALLENGE: In your exam you could be asked about semi-structured interviews. What do you think these are? What do you think are their strengths? What do you think are their weaknesses?



EXAM FOCUS 6

Q1.) Explain what is meant by the term interview. (2)

Q2.) Suggest two disadvantages that sociologists might find when using structured interviews. (4)

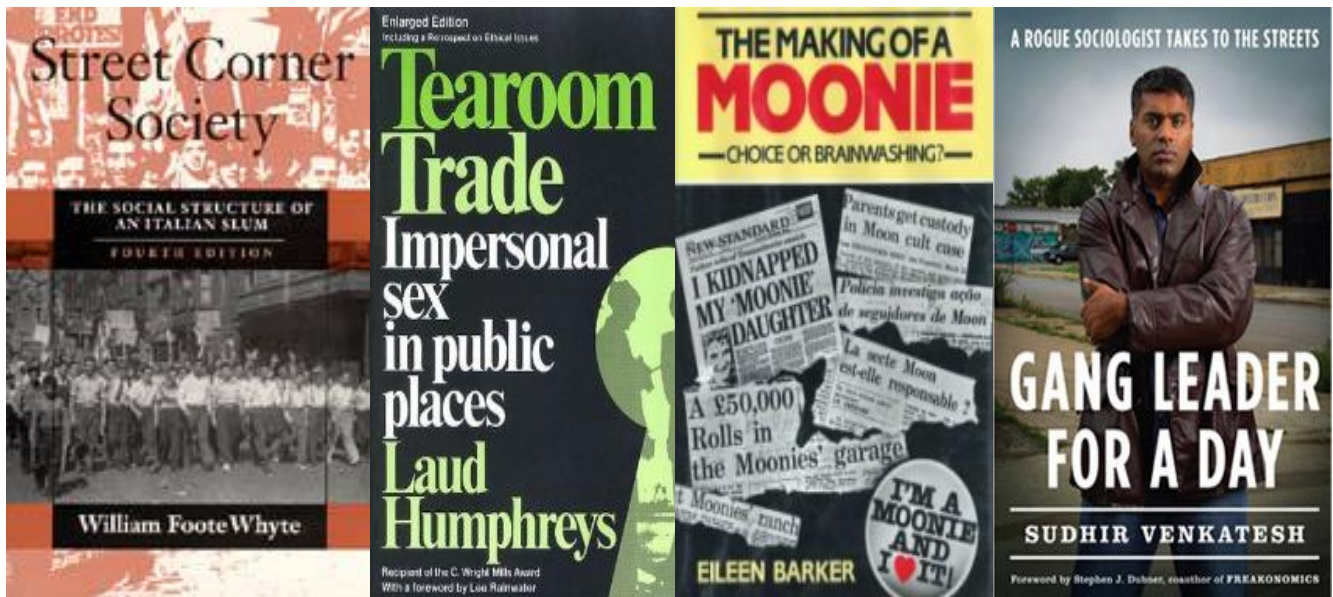
Q3.) Suggest two disadvantages that sociologists may find when using unstructured interviews. (4)

Q4.) Examine the advantages for sociologists in using unstructured interviews in their research. (20)



CLASSIC PARTICIPANT OBSERVATION STUDIES

Keyword	Definition
Non-Participant Observation	The researcher observes the group without taking part.
Participant Observation	The researcher actively participates/takes part in the everyday life of the group whilst researching.
Overt Observation	The researcher makes their intentions and reasons for the research clear and is open about what they are doing.
Covert Observation	The researcher does not make their intentions and reasons for the research clear, it is carried out undercover. The real reason for the research is hidden and the researcher's true identity is often concealed.



EVALUATING PARTICIPANT OBSERVATION

Advantages of Participant Observation	Disadvantages of Participant Observation
<p>✓ Practical: Allows the researcher flexibility, it enables them to develop new questions to be asked and new hypothesis to be tested: e.g. Whyte (1955): "as I sat and listened I learned the answers to questions that I would not even have had the sense to ask if I had been getting my information solely from interview."</p>	<p>✗ Practical: If a group of people are being watched/overt observation is used they may change their behaviour simply because they know they are being studied, this is called the Hawthorne Effect.</p>
<p>✓ Practical: Allows the study of some social areas of social life e.g. criminal gangs which would otherwise be inaccessible.</p>	<p>✗ Practical: Participant observation is very expensive and time consuming; it therefore takes a large amount time and money, e.g. Barker's Moonies study took 6 years.</p>
<p>✓ Theoretical: The researcher is able to build up a relationship with the participant and witness their behaviour first-hand, it can therefore be suggested the data is extremely valid; this is especially true of non-participant observation.</p>	<p>✗ Ethical Researching some areas of social life may put the research in danger and may in some cases lead to them actively and willingly participating within the culture/group they are studying - 'the going native effect'</p>
<p>✓ Theoretical: The data gained from the research is very in-depth; it allows the researcher to understand and gain meaning (verstehen) behind actions.</p>	<p>✗ Theoretical: Positivists suggest there are problems with the data's reliability and validity e.g. there is no way to repeat or check the findings of the research, it is probable that no two events will happen in the same way, under the same conditions and at the same time ever again.</p>
	<p>✗ Theoretical: The often small sample size means the data is less representative, meaning it is difficult to make generalisations.</p>

EVALUATING COVERT PARTICIPANT OBSERVATION

Advantages of Covert Participant Observation	Disadvantages of Covert Participant Observation
<p>✓ Practical: Reduces the risk of altering people's behaviour and sometimes (especially if the activity is criminal/secretive) the only way to research an activity e.g. Humphreys (1970): "there is only one way to watch highly discreditable behaviour and that is to pretend to be in the same boat with those engaging in it."</p>	<p>✗ Practical: Requires the researcher to keep 'up an act' and also requires extensive and detail knowledge of the group's activity e.g. a gang's way of life/dos and do nots.</p>
<p>✓ Theoretical: The data gained from the research is very in-depth; it allows the researcher to understand and gain meaning (verstehen) behind actions.</p>	<p>✗ Practical: You must rely on memory in order to record your findings e.g. Ditton (1977) had to record his notes/observations in the toilet.</p> <p>✗ Ethical: The researcher must deceive people - they never gain informed consent for the true reason of their research.</p> <p>✗ Ethical: the researcher may have to involve themselves in activities which are distasteful, immoral or sometimes illegal. Additionally, the researcher may witness acts which they cannot record to the police.</p> <p>✗ Theoretical: Positivists suggest there are problems with the data's reliability and validity e.g. there is no way to repeat or check the findings of the research, it is probable that no two events will happen in the same way, under the same conditions and at the same time ever again.</p>



EVALUATING OVERT PARTICIPANT OBSERVATION

Advantages of Overt Participant Observation	Disadvantages of Overt Participant Observation
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ Practical: Allows the researcher to openly take notes and record information and events that they see. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✗ Practical/Theoretical: Hawthorne Effect: if people are being watched they may behave in a certain way, the way you want them to behave. This may affect the validity of the data.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ Ethical: When compared to covert PO, it avoids the problem of deceit and it allows the researcher to gain informed consent from those they are studying. Similarly, it reduces the likelihood of them being directly involved with criminal or immoral activities. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✗ Practical: The group being observed may only let the researcher see a limited amount of events, although this maybe beneficial (ethically) it means the researcher does not gain a true and accurate reflection.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ Theoretical: Due to the openness of the researcher it allows them check/validate information, they can ask questions about events/get meanings for actions (verstehen). This will increase the validity of the data. Often this is done by using another method (data triangulation/methodological pluralism). 	

The issues involved with Participation Observation can be characterised as: “**getting in, staying in and getting out.**”

NON-PARTICIPANT OBSERVATION

Defining Non-Participant Observation: this is a method where the research simply observes behaviour e.g. in the background or through one-way glass but does not actively involve themselves with events.



Advantages Non- Participant Observation	Disadvantages of Non- Participant Observation
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ Practical/Theoretical: Compared to PO methods it reduces the risk of the Hawthorne Effect. If people do not know they are being watched, they will not change the way they behave. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✗ Theoretical: Depending on the method, non P-O can be highly structured and used to produce quantitative data or qualitative data - whatever data produced the researcher will not be able to gain meaning/understanding of why events are happening, this is reduce the validity of the data.

Non- Participant Observation Continued...

Disadvantages of Non- Participant Observation

X Ethical: If people don't know they are being observed they are being **deceived** and the researcher has not gained **informed consent** - however, by doing so they run the risk of altering behaviour.

EXAM FOCUS 7

Q1.) Explain what is meant by the term participant observation. (2)

Q2.) Suggest two problems of covert participant observation. (4)

Q3.) Suggest two problems that researchers may face when actively participating in the group they are studying. (4)

Q4.) Examine the advantages for sociologists in using participant observation in their research. (20).



OFFICIAL STATISTICS (SECONDARY SOURCES)

Defining Official Statistics: quantitative data gathered by the government or other official bodies e.g. the Census or Social Trends Survey.



Advantages Official Statistics	Disadvantages Official Statistics
<p>✓ Practical: They are a free source of huge amounts of quantitative data on a variety of different issues. This saves the sociologist time and money during their research.</p>	<p>X Practical: Because they are a source of secondary data, they are produced by somebody else, therefore they may gather information for the researcher's specific topic. Additionally different groups/organisation operationalise concepts differently, the state's version may not fit with the researcher's.</p>
<p>✓ Practical: Because they are collected at regular intervals e.g. Census every 10 years, they allow the sociologist to spot trends and patterns and show a cause and effect relationship e.g. the divorce rate increasing because of legislation changes.</p>	<p>X Theoretical: Some sociologists raise questions over the validity of official statistics, as some suggest they do not give a true picture of what they are representing - Interpretivists would argue they are socially constructed.</p>

✓ **Ethical:** Because official statistics are in the public domain they have very few, if any ethical issues associated with their use.

✗ **Theoretical:** Official statistics give data which is quantitative, **Interpretivists** would argue this data does not give depth and meaning behind social phenomena.

Advantages Official Statistics

✓ **Theoretical:** Because official statistics are collected by government organisation using a number of set and standardised procedures they are seen as a very **reliable source of data**

✓ **Theoretical:** Because they usually cover a very wide range of people so have a **large sample size**, they can be seen as being **representative**.

EXAM FOCUS 8

Q1.) Explain what is meant by the term official statistics. (2)

Q2.) Suggest two advantages of using official statistics in sociological research. (4)

Q3.) Suggest two problems of using official statistics in sociological research. (4)

Q4.) Examine the disadvantages some sociologists may find when using official statistics in their research. (20).

Q5.) Examine the advantages for sociologists of using official statistics in their research. (20)



DOCUMENTS (SECONDARY SOURCES)

The term 'document' has a wide meaning in research methods, not only does it mean written sources of information e.g. reports, newspapers, dairies it can also mean pictures, paintings, photos, TV, film, radio and other media output.

Public Documents

Public documents are those produced by organisations e.g. governments, schools, hospitals, official reports etc.

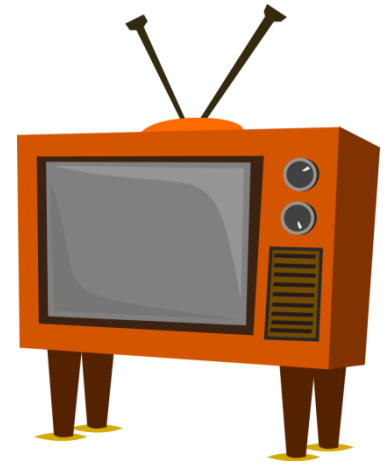
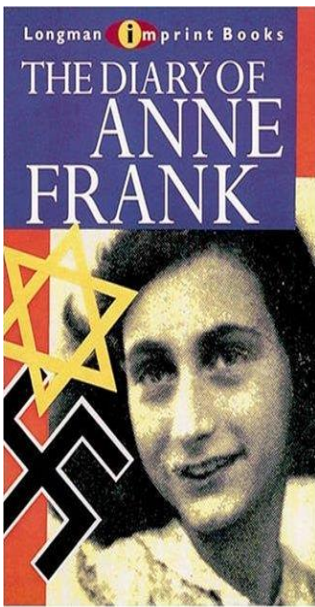


Personal/Private Documents

Personal/private documents are items such as letters, dairies, photo albums, home movies and autobiographies that offer a first person account of social events/ person experiences

- When using documents in research **Scott (1990)** argues there are **four principles** which can be applied to evaluate their use: **authenticity, credibility, representative and meaning.**

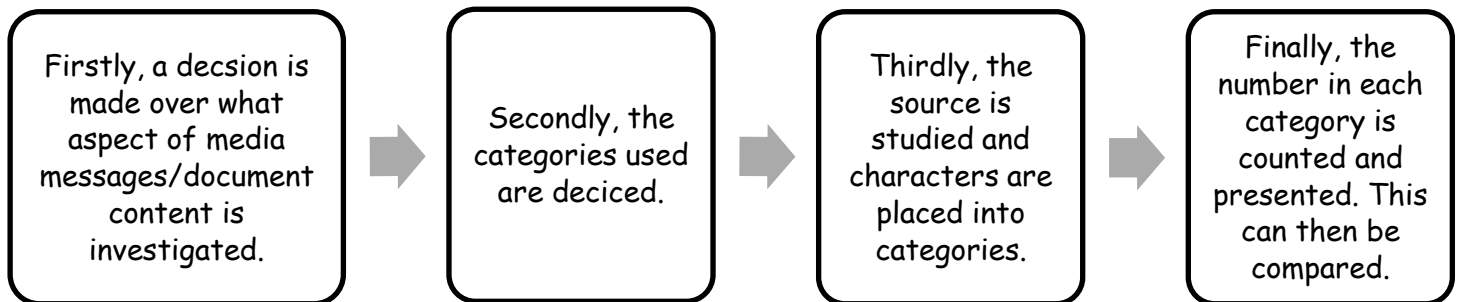
Advantages of Documents	Disadvantages of Documents
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ Practical: Documents are sometimes the only sources of data available for investigating the past/certain events. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✗ Practical: When using documents sociologists must consider whether the document is authentic, accurate, credible and sincere. This is particularly the case for personal documents
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ Practical: Official state documents/reports are easy to access, quick and often cost very little if anything e.g. access to Ofsted reports is free. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✗ Practical: Although public documents are readily available gaining access to personal documents e.g. dairies and films maybe difficult. Similarly, understanding the document may also cause problems e.g. language, writing etc.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ Ethical: If the document is freely available in the public domain there are very few, if any ethical issues associated with their use. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✗ Theoretical: Due to the nature of documents, especially personal documents some sociologists raise questions over their representativeness - is it typical of the time period? Is it solely one person's from one social position view? Have they included all the information or been selective about events?
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ Theoretical: Documents, give a rich, detailed and meaningful source of qualitative data to investigate social phenomena. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✗ Theoretical: Positivists would reject the use of public and personal/private documents due to their qualitative nature.



Defining Content Analysis: the analysis of documents by quantifying material within them.



Content analysis is a research method that produces **primary quantitative data from the study of secondary qualitative data**. The sociologist **Gill (1988)** describes how content analysis works:



Advantages of Content Analysis	Disadvantages of Content Analysis
✓ Practical: Analysing content is something which can be done relatively cheaply .	✗ Practical: If the researcher is investigating something in a series of books or number of films it could potentially be quite time consuming .
✓ Practical: The material to investigate is easily available e.g. newspapers, films, books.	✗ Theoretical: The categories used could be very subjective , what is significant to one person, maybe missed by another. Interpretations may differ between sociologists.
✓ Ethical: As the content is in the public domain, there are no ethical issues with the method.	✗ Theoretical: Interpretivists will argue simply counting the number of something will not give the event meaning .
✓ Theoretical: Because the method produces quantitative data the method is reliable , it can be repeated by others and should give the same results.	
✓ Theoretical: Because the method produces quantitative data , Positivist sociologists will see the method as objective and scientific .	

Defining Pilot Study: a study carried out prior to the main study, to test aspects of the research design.



PILOT STUDY

Advantages of Pilot Study	Disadvantages of Pilot Study
✓ Practical: Allows the researcher a 'test run' at their research, it is particularly useful in testing questionnaires before sending to a large sample.	✗ Practical: Completing a pilot study, then the actual research will be very time consuming and could be quite costly .
✓ Practical: It gives the researcher an opportunity to train the interviewer e.g. explaining concepts clearly.	
✓ Practical: May help the sociologist gain funding if the results of the pilot study give useful data.	

LONGITUDINAL STUDIES

Defining Longitudinal Study: the surveying of a group of research participants at intervals over an extended period of time.



✓ Theoretical: They give in-depth, qualitative data that allow the researcher to gain a picture overtime of certain events/groups.	✗ Practical: If your sample size is large, it may be difficult to keep track of them, therefore members of your sample will be lost - this is known as attrition .
✓ Theoretical: They allow a comparison to be made overtime therefore allow causes of certain processes to be found.	✗ Practical: Studying a large group overtime will be time consuming and costly . Additionally, large amounts of data will be produced which will be difficult to analyse .
✓ Ethical: By the participants agreeing to take part in the study, the researcher is gaining informed consent .	✗ Practical: Hawthorne Effect: Because the group are being watched over a long period of time, it may change/alter their typical behaviour.

CASE STUDY

Defining Case Study: the detailed examination of a single case or example.



Advantages of Case Study	Disadvantages of Case Study
✓ Practical: By focusing solely upon on individual or group it allows the researcher to focus upon exceptional cases/individuals .	✗ Practical: May take a long time to produce and as a result be costly.
✓ Ethical: By the participant(s) agreeing to take part in the study, the researcher is gaining informed consent .	✗ Theoretical: As the case study only focuses upon one person or small group of people it is highly unrepresentative .
✓ Theoretical: They give in-depth, qualitative data that allows the researcher to gain an insight into a particular group or person.	✗ Theoretical: As the case study only focuses upon one person or small group of people it is difficult to ensure the data is reliable and valid .
✓ Theoretical: They add a meaning and reasoning behind factors which make up a quantitative report.	

EXAM FOCUS 9

Q1.) Suggest two advantages of using personal documents in sociological research. (4)

Q2.) Suggest two disadvantages of using media reports in sociological research. (4)

Q3.) Suggest two problems of using personal documents in sociological research. (4)



DATA TRIANGULATION

Defining Triangulation: combining different research methods or types of data e.g. quantitative and qualitative methods.



Advantages of Triangulation

- ✓ **Practical, Ethical and Theoretical:** By using a number of different methods, the shortcomings of one, are overcome by another.

Disadvantages of Triangulation

- ✗ **Practical:** Using a number of different methods will require the sociologist to have a number of **different skills, money and time.**

EXAM FOCUS 10

- Q1.) Explain what is meant by the term longitudinal study. (2)
- Q2.) Explain what is meant by the term triangulation. (2)
- Q3.) Explain what is meant by the term pilot study. (2)
- Q4.) Suggest two reasons why sociologists sometimes use a pilot study as part of their research. (4)

