

GCSE SOCIOLOGY

Research Methods



NAME

TEACHER

LEARNING OBJECTIVES

- To understand the research process
- To be able to identify and define a range of research methods
- To be able to identify a range of sampling methods
- To be able to identify a range of ethical issues
- To be able to evaluate the strengths and limitations of research methods using the ideas of reliability, representativeness and validity
- To be able to relate your knowledge of research methods to small scale studies

Collecting Data

What different types of data are there?

- ❑ **Primary data** is gathered 'first hand' by the sociologist, perhaps by asking people questions or watching them behave.
- ❑ **Secondary data** is data which has been collected by somebody else and published or written down, for example, government statistics or newspaper articles.

The form data takes can also differ.

- ❑ Some appears as numbers or statistics and is called **quantitative data** – it is based on **quantity** of information
- ❑ Other data takes a written form and provides a more personal account of the social world. This is known as **qualitative data** – it is based on **quality** of information

In questionnaires, **closed questions** are often used. Closed questions are ones which have fixed responses available (i.e. yes/no for example).

Unstructured interviews use **open questions**, which mean that the participant has more freedom over how they choose to respond.

THINK ABOUT IT: Write an example of...

A closed question:

An open question:

The collection of data to answer questions about society and the way people behave is achieved by using **research methods**. We use **sampling methods** to select the people we will use our research methods on.

What research methods are there?

The most common methods of sociological data collection are:

- ✓ **Questionnaires** - simply lists of questions. The respondent (the person answering) writes the answers themselves, a process known as self-completion.
- ✓ **Interviews** - questions asked and answers given verbally.
- ✓ **Observation** - People's behaviour is watched. In participant observation the researcher, to some extent joins in. In non-participant observation they just watch.
- ✓ **The analysis of secondary data** - examining already existing material such as **official statistics** or historical **documents**.

Whether quantitative or qualitative data, or a combination of both, is collected will depend on the way the method is used by the sociologist, as the table below shows

	Quantitative	Qualitative
Questionnaires	Closed questions give the respondent a fixed number of choices e.g. Yes/No.	Open questions leave respondents with a space in which to write their answers.
Interview	In structured or formal interviews the interviewer asks closed questions which have a fixed number of possible answers.	In unstructured or informal interviews questions are phrased in such a way as to encourage the respondent to talk at length.
Observation	Structured observation usually involves an 'observation schedule' so the observer can note the number of times certain events occur.	In participant observation the observer aims to understand behaviour by joining in and ' feeling ' what it is like at first hand.
Secondary data	The analysis of official or non-official statistics for example on crime, educational achievement, poverty.	The use of documents such as letters, diaries, novels, mass media .

How can sociological research be evaluated?

A key skill for sociology students is the ability to assess, or evaluate data, both sociological and non-sociological. Three terms are particularly helpful in developing this skill:

1. Representativeness

It is not usually possible for a researcher to collect data from every person in the population they are concerned with so they have to select a smaller number to represent the whole population. This process is known as **sampling**. The representativeness of data will depend on how successfully a sample is chosen. **Does it contain the same proportion of the different ages, sexes and social classes as the population the sociologist is interested in** for example? Also, in general, the larger a sample the more representative it is likely to be. How accurate is a newspaper article based on an interview with one person for example?



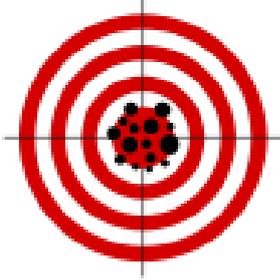
Think About it: Activity

E.g. 1: In a study of a variety of multi-racial schools throughout London, **SMITH & TOMLINSON** found that schools of similar ethnic minority intakes were obtaining quite different results with their pupils in official examination results. They concluded from this that schools can play a significant role themselves in the achievement/underachievement of ethnic minority pupils.

E.g. 2: Using participant observation techniques in a primary school, **CECILE WRIGHT** found that teachers held negative stereotypes of black pupils as "disruptive" and Asians as "little able to understand English"

Which piece of research do you think is least representative? Explain why.

2. Reliability



If a method of collecting data is reliable it means that **anybody else using this method or the same person using it at a different time, would come up with the same results.** When asking questions, for instance, it is important that every respondent has understood the questions in the same way and that their responses have been collected in exactly the same way. This allows answers to be compared accurately.

Think About it: Activity

E.g. 1: Simon - an A Level Sociology student - decided to collect some simple quantitative information from a large sample of students throughout Britain by postal questionnaire regarding the relationship between their A Level results and how many times per week they went out. He found that students who stay in during the week and maintain a sensible balance between socialising and their studies achieved better results.

E.g. 2: Willis, in his research on working class lads, used PO and in-depth interviews in a school in the midlands. After initial observations as a tuck-shop worker, he focused on 12 particular lads and found strong evidence of an anti-school subculture in their behaviour. He made insights such as the fact that these lads referred to the children who paid attention in class as "earoles". This, he argued, provided strong evidence for their anti-school attitudes. He also observed acts of vandalism and petty crimes by these lads and concluded that their rejection of school made sense since they had little hope of coming top of the class and school had little relevance for their future roles as manual workers.

Which piece of research do you think has most reliability? Explain why

3. Validity

Valid data is data which is **a true picture of what is being studied**. Validity is difficult to achieve, particularly on a sensitive or personal issue. People may not be entirely truthful in what they tell you or they may not even be aware of aspects of their behaviour.



Think About it: Activity

E.g. 1: Imagine you wish to research into whether racial stereotyping occurs within schools. You research this by sending a questionnaire to a large sample of teachers around Britain from a variety of different types of schools, asking such questions as whether or not they treat pupils differently on the basis of their ethnicity. From your research you conclude that 98% of teachers do not employ any form of racial stereotyping.

E.g. 2: Using participant observation techniques in a primary school, **CECILE WRIGHT** found that teachers held negative stereotypes of black pupils as "disruptive" and Asians as "little able to understand English"

Which piece of research do you think has least validity? Explain why.

Most sociologists attempt to collect data that is representative, reliable and valid. **However, in practice this is extremely difficult.**

Those collecting **quantitative** data tend to focus on **representativeness** and **reliability** whilst those collecting **qualitative** data aim more for **validity**.

For this reason there is a process called **triangulation**. This is where a researcher uses several methods to try and increase reliability, representativeness and validity of their study. For example they may take a quantitative method such as

questionnaires and then based on the results use a qualitative method such as unstructured interviews to gain additional information.

Advantages and Disadvantages of each Research Method

We will now consider some of the ways in which we can find out about people and the social world. Throughout of the course of the 2 years, there will be opportunities for you to try some of these methods yourself.

QUESTIONNAIRES

- **Type of questions:** closed
- **Type of data collected:** quantitative

TWO ADVANTAGES OF QUESTIONNAIRES	TWO DISADVANTAGES OF QUESTIONNAIRES
<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. As the participant only has to choose from a range of answers and tick a box, it is a quick and easy method to fill in. This means that data can be collected from a large sample quickly and is therefore high in representativeness. 2. As the participant is not face to face with the researcher, there is no chance that they can be influenced by the researcher's opinions and therefore the data should be objective (free from bias). 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. The data collected may be low in validity. This is because the participant does not get to use their own words to explain their attitudes/ behaviour, they just pick from a range of options. So, they might not really give their true opinion. 2. The data collected will be biased, that is subjective. The researcher has chosen the question and the range of answers, the researcher will have imposed their attitudes on the participant. that is they will have shaped what they can and cannot say.

STRUCTURED INTERVIEWS

- **Types of questions:** closed (like a questionnaire but read out face to face, researcher noting down answer rather than the participant)
- **Type of data collected:** quantitative

Two advantages of structured interviews	Two disadvantages of structured interviews
<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. As the researcher is face to face with the participant, if the participant does not understand a question then it can be explained to them. Therefore the data should be high in reliability. 2. As the questions are closed, a large number can be done in a short space 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. As the researcher is face to face with the participant there is the danger of interviewer bias, that is, that the researcher might influence the participant's answer. 2. As the interviews are based on closed questions, the participant does not

of time and therefore data should be higher in representativeness than from more time consuming unstructured interviews.	have the opportunity to explain their views/ behaviour using their own words and therefore the data will lack validity .
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UNSTRUCTURED INTERVIEWS

- **Type of questions:** open
- **Type of data collected:** qualitative

Two advantages of unstructured interviews	Two disadvantages of unstructured interviews
<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. As the interviews are based on open questions, the participant can use their own words to explain their attitudes/ behaviour. Therefore the data should be high in validity. 2. There is the chance that the participant will come up with issues / ideas that the researcher had not thought of, that is serendipitous findings. 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. As the interviews are based on open questions they are very time consuming as participants can speak at length. This means that only small samples can usually be reached which limits the representativeness of the data. 2. As the interviews flow like conversations, each one is different and therefore impossible to compare. If repeated it is unlikely that the same results would be achieved by another researcher. Therefore the data obtained is low in reliability.

COVERT PARTICIPANT OBSERVATION (Undercover)

- **Type of data collected:** usually qualitative from one group

Two advantages of covert PO	Two disadvantages of covert PO
<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. As the group studied do not know they are being watched, they will be behaving naturally in their real surroundings and therefore the data collected should be high in validity. This is particularly useful for closed, deviant groups, e.g.. Football hooligans. 2. As the researcher joins in with the group, there is the chance to talk to 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. It is unethical since it involves a lack of consent from participants. They do not know they are part of a research project and have not therefore given their consent. 2. The researcher might get too involved with the group and start to influence the way the group is acting. For example, encouraging more extreme behaviour. This would

participants to really **find out why they behave** the way they do. Therefore **the researcher really gets a truthful insight into a way of life.**

decrease the validity of the data collected.

OVERT PARTICIPANT OBSERVATION (Not undercover)

- **Type of data collected:** usually qualitative from one group

Two advantages of overt PO	Two disadvantages of overt PO
<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. As the participants know they are part of a research project, ethical problems with consent can be avoided and the researcher finds it much easier to record what they see etc immediately as their note taking does not have to be hidden. Therefore the data collected should be high in validity 2. As the researcher joins in with group, they have the chance to talk to the participants and find out why they behave the way that they do. The researcher really gets a truthful insight into a way of life 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. As the participants know that they are being watched, they might behave differently. This means that the data will lack validity. 2. This type of observation is time consuming, as the researcher needs to build trust with the participants if any truthful data is going to be collected. Therefore it often involves studying one group and lacks representativeness.

NON- PARTICIPANT OBSERVATION

- **Type of data collected:** quantitative or qualitative

Two advantages of non PO	Two disadvantages of non PO
<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. As the researcher does not join in with the group, they are able to be objective, that is, sit back and watch rather than influence the group's actions at all. 2. The researcher is observing actual behaviour, not how someone says they behave. Therefore the data should be higher in validity compared to interviews or questionnaires. 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. As the group often knows they are being watched they might behave differently. Thus the data collected will lack validity. 2. As the researcher watches but does not join in they do not have the chance to ask participants why they behaved in a particular way and thus have to draw their own conclusions. The data will be their interpretation of what they see and therefore will be highly subjective.

EXPERIMENTS

- **Type of data collected:** quantitative
- The aim of experiments is to find out what factors cause certain things to happen so they involve controlling variables and measuring outcomes.

Two advantages	Two disadvantages
<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. As the researcher does not join in with the group, they are able to be objective. 2. The researcher generally has a high level of control over the variables (especially in a lab) so this makes it reliable as they can repeat the experiment in exactly the same way. 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. As the group often knows they are part of an experiment they might behave differently. Thus the data collected will lack validity. (Hawthorne effect) 2. There are plenty of ethical disadvantages with experiments. They often cause emotional harm and involve some level of deception.

SECONDARY SOURCES

SECONDARY DATA: OFFICIAL STATISTICS

- **Type of data:** quantitative

Two advantages of official statistics	Two disadvantages of official statistics
<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. They are a free source of huge amounts of quantitative data. Only the government can afford to conduct large-scale surveys costing millions of pounds, such as the Census covering every household. Only the government has the power to force citizens to provide it with information, for example, to register a birth. Sociologists can make use of this data, saving them both time and money. 2. Because official statistics are collected at regular intervals they show trends and patterns over time. This means that sociologists can use them for 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. The definitions that the government uses in collecting the data may be different from those that sociologists would use. For example, they may define 'poverty' or 'homelessness' differently. If definitions change over time, it may make comparisons difficult. For example, the official definition of unemployment changed over 30 times during the 1980s and early 1990s. 2. A major problem with using official statistics is that of validity (truthfulness). Do they actually measure the thing that they claim to measure? For example, crime statistics only show

<p>'before and after' studies. For example, we can compare divorce statistics before and after a change in the divorce law to measure what affect the new legislation has had.</p>	<p>recorded crime. They do not show unreported and unrecorded crime and therefore do not show all crime that occurs.</p>
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SECONDARY DATA: DOCUMENTS

✓ **Type of data:** qualitative

Two advantages of documents	Two disadvantages of documents
<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Historical documents can give us first hand detailed accounts of people's lives in the past. (e.g. Diaries) and might be the only source of data available from that time period. 2. Personal documents (e.g. letters, diaries) give us a real insight into a person's life and their feelings / thoughts. This data should be high in validity. 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. As they are a person's account, they are highly subjective, that is just one person's opinion. 2. It needs to be considered why the document was written and how believable it is. For example, If a politician writes a diary knowing that one day it will be published, its likely they will paint themselves in a good light throughout

ALTERNATIVE STUDIES AND METHODS

CASE STUDIES

A case study is simply a detailed in-depth study of **one particular example** of a type of gang, organisation or event. For example, if a sociologist carried out research into student behaviour in one school this would be a case study. They might choose to use a combination of different research methods to give a fuller, more rounded view of whatever it is they're studying (i.e. attendance data, interviews, observations, OFSTED reports)

ADVANTAGES	DISADVANTAGES
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Case studies can be valuable and they are often used to develop ideas for testing in further larger scale research. • They are useful when an in depth look at a complex group or topic is required. This increases validity. • It allows the researcher to tailor their research approach to the situation. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • It is not usually possible to generalise from the findings of a case study, as it is not representative but just one example. • Low in reliability as they are usually qualitative •

LONGITUDINAL STUDIES

A longitudinal study is **one that follows the same sample or group over an extended period of time. The group is researched at set intervals.** For example, you may interview the same group of people every year, or observe the same class of students every month for 2 years.

ADVANTAGES	DISADVANTAGES
<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Longitudinal studies trace developments and changes over a period of time. 2. By making comparisons of groups over time, sociologists can identify causes. For example, Douglas followed children of different social backgrounds but similar ability to discover why middle class children did better at school. 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Attrition rate (drop-out)- there can be problems keeping trace of the original sample. This can be because of death, loss of contact or participants refusing to continue. This makes the remaining sample less representative. 2. Very time consuming

ETHNOGRAPHY

An ethnography is the observation and description of a group of people and their way of life. It usually includes spending an extended amount of time with the group observing their behaviour, asking questions and then finally reflecting on their experience. It originates from anthropologists who used methods like this to study other tribal cultures in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

ADVANTAGES	DISADVANTAGES
<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Because it is based on direct observation and provides in depth data it provides a more valid, well-rounded picture of the topic. 2. It allows comparisons between different culture so we can consider how two groups differ. 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. It lacks reliability as behaviour can be misinterpreted or the research can be contradicted by other sociologists 2. The hawthorne effect occurs as you influence the behaviour of those you study.

CONTENT ANALYSIS

Content analysis is a method for dealing systematically with the contents of documents. It is best known for its use in **analysing document produced by the mass media, such as television news bulletins or advertisements.**

Although such documents are usually qualitative, **content analysis enables the sociologist to produce quantitative data from these sources.** The researcher decides the media product to be examined, for example magazines. And then decides the categories to count, for example, the number of times women are shown in underwear or less. This allows patterns and stereotyping to be researched.

IMPROVE YOUR OWN LEARNING

Watch a range of adverts on TV and perform some content analysis upon them. For example, you may wish to count the number of times that women are shown as mothers and carers, sex symbols, or independent women.

The research process

Formulating a hypothesis or aim

Most studies have a hypothesis. A hypothesis is a possible explanation that can be tested by collecting evidence to prove it true or false.

For example, we might think that family size affects educational achievement. If so we can formulate a hypothesis as a cause-and-effect statement, such as: 'differences in family size cause differences in achievement'. If the hypothesis turns out to be false we must get rid of it.

The advantage of the hypothesis is that it gives direction to our research. It will give a focus to our questions, since their purpose is to gather information that will either confirm or disprove our hypothesis.

While a hypothesis is a statement about a specific relationship, an aim is more general often it will be simply to collect data on a particular topic e.g. the way of life of a subculture.

The advantage of an aim is that it is more open-ended. We are not tied to trying to prove a particular thing; instead we can gather data on anything that appears interesting. This can be very useful at the start of research, when we know very little about the topic.

The Pilot Study

Once the researcher has a hypothesis, the next stage is to produce **a draft version of the research method** that they intend to use and to give this a trial run. This is known as a pilot study.

Why should you do a pilot study?

Samples and Sampling

Once you have chosen a topic and a method you need to find participants who are willing to take part in your research. Sociologists cannot possibly research everyone as this is too time consuming and expensive so they use a variety of sampling

methods to ensure that they have participants that are suitable for the study and that also reflect the wider population.

Sampling Frame

As we shall see, some (but not all!) methods of sampling require a **sampling frame**. For sampling to be representative (that is, mirror the research population) it is most often seen as necessary to obtain a list of the individuals who make up the target population. **This list is known as a sampling frame**. A sampling frame forms a group from which to select people.

Types of Sampling Method:

RANDOM SAMPLING

Here, everyone has an equal chance of being selected. It is the equivalent of putting numbers into a hat, although some sociologists tend to select every Xth person on a list e.g. with 100 people on the sampling frame list, you may select every 5 people to get a sample size of 20. However, to do this, you need a list of names, called a **sampling frame**. This is not always possible.

Advantages?

Disadvantages?

STRATIFIED RANDOM SAMPLING

Before being chosen randomly, the relevant population is first divided up into their important respective proportions in wider society according to, for example, class, gender, ethnicity, family type etc. This ensures that all important groups are represented. Then, random samples are taken from these groupings. However, to do this, you need a list of names, called a sampling frame. This is not always possible.

Advantages?

Disadvantages?

VOLUNTEER SAMPLING

Have you ever filled in/returned a questionnaire from a magazine voluntarily? This is a form of volunteer sampling. Advertisements, leaflets, posters, radio or TV broadcasts, newspaper/magazine articles announce the research and request volunteers.

Advantages?

Disadvantages?

SNOWBALL SAMPLING

Snowball sampling works by the researcher **finding one person that fits the bill**. They then use this person as a means of meeting more people like them. E.g. a football hooligan may then introduce the researcher to some of his/her mates

Advantages?

Disadvantages?

QUOTA SAMPLING

Firstly the researcher has to identify what the specific qualities of the research participants should be – these are often dictated by the focus of the research. A sample is then drawn up that includes a specific number of people in each category e.g. you may wish to sample half (20) males / half (20) females or 30 black working class males. The quota is filled 'in the field' without a sampling frame; the researcher simply fills his/her quota from the first available bodies

Advantages?

Disadvantages?

Choosing a Research Method



When sociologists choose a research method they have to consider several different factors before selecting the most appropriate method. These factors are broken down into 3 areas:

1. **Practical factors** – these are issues that would make it difficult to conduct the research and may even make it impossible for certain methods to be used.
2. **Ethical factors** – these are moral issues about the impact that your research may have on the people that you are studying and therefore whether you should be allowed to use certain methods
3. **Theoretical factors** – these might sometimes be called methodological factors and are about which research methods certain sociologists prefer to use. This is usually based on their theoretical perspective (whether they are a structural or an action theorist).

1. Practical factors:

a) Access

Some groups of people can be studied using almost any method e.g. schools pupils can be studied using questionnaires, observation, interviews, official statistics.

However, some groups - particularly deviants - are difficult to study due to the closed nature of their activities. They don't like people researching them and this makes some methods very difficult.

Activity

Imagine that you wanted to study a criminal gang. What method might not be very good and why?

b) Resources: time and money

- Some research can take a long **TIME** - a classic example being participant observation that can take months or even years.
- **MONEY** is also an important factor: large scale nationally representative questionnaires may need a bigger budget to pay for postage and to pay for people to help you analyse data.



c) Personal skills and characteristics of the researcher

Many topics can only be studied in certain ways by certain people possessing certain features, qualities or skills that gain them entry (access) to the research situation. For this reason, the personal characteristics of the researcher can be crucial, especially in terms of the technique of covert participant observation.

2. Ethical factors

Sociologists are expected to follow a set off ethical guidelines written by the British Sociological Association (also known as the BSA). If the research proposal doesn't meet the standards outlined by the BSA then funding can be restricted and the research may not be published. There are many ethical issues that sociologists need to consider in research, here are the main ones:

- a) CONFIDENTIALITY**- researchers should always protect the identity of their participants

THINK ABOUT IT: How could you do this as a researcher?

b) **GAINING INFORMED CONSENT-**

researchers should always tell their participants what they are doing and why. They should always ask participants if they want to take part. **If researchers don't, there is a lack of informed consent and participants are being deceived (lied to).** For example, covert PO involves participants being deceived and not being told they are in research. As part of this, participants should also be given a **RIGHT TO WITHDRAW** from the research.



c) **PROTECTION FROM HARM** - researchers must always make sure that they do not cause any harm to their participants. For example, they should not upset them and if they do they should stop the research.



d) **GUILTY KNOWLEDGE** – If the researcher finds out during their research that the participant has done something needs to be reported (i.e. committed a crime, evidence of domestic violence), what do they do? They have an ethical obligation to maintain confidentiality, but another ethical obligation to protect people from harm.

3. Theoretical Factors

When deciding how to approach research, many sociologists are rarely free from theoretical or methodological preferences. Often researchers conduct their research with clear preference for one theoretical perspective or methodology. As such, there is nothing 'random' about their choice of method. Rather, their chosen method stems from clear theoretical/methodological beliefs about how research should be done. This diagram below explains how sociologists decide upon a method based on their theoretical perspective.

STRUCTURAL THEORIES

Examines society as a whole and effect of society's institutions and structural forces on the individual. They see individuals as puppets whose actions are controlled by wider forces.



POSITIVISM

Since humans are largely *predictable*, "scientific laws" can be developed to examine the effect of structural forces on human behaviour e.g. social class on educational achievement or gender on crime rates



Best found / proven using **QUANTITATIVE** Techniques e.g. **QUESTIONNAIRES, STRUCTURED INTERVIEWS, OFFICIAL STATS**

ACTION THEORIES

Examines individuals/small scale groups and how they interpret / give meaning to the world. They believe everyone is individual and chooses how they interpret things and how they want to react to things around them.



INTERPRETIVISM

Since human beings perceive and give *meaning* to their situation, we need to understand the meanings people attach to events and situations.



Best found / proven using **QUALITATIVE** techniques e.g., **IN-DEPTH / UNSTRUCTURED INTERVIEWS, DIARIES, OBSERVATION**

Generally speaking Positivist research tries to mirror the natural sciences and attempts to find universal laws that explain the behaviour of humans. In order to do this they focus on their data being reliable so that they can test their hypothesis time and time again and get the same result. If this happens they have established a 'law' or theory. They also want their data to be representative as it can only be a universal law if it applies to everyone and not simply one or two people.

Interpretivists argue that scientific research is impossible when studying humans because we are all different and all have the ability to read a social situation and decide how we want to react. If this is the case we can never find a 'one size fits all' theory that explains human behaviour. They therefore focus on validity over reliability and representativeness as the main thing they want to find out is 'why' a person 'chose' to behave a particular way.