

AS SOCIOLOGICAL RESEARCH

Exemplar answers to 20-mark 'part (e)' questions

EXEMPLAR ANSWERS

- Examine the usefulness of longitudinal studies in sociological research.
- Explain why some sociologists find personal documents useful in their research.
- Examine the reasons why most sociologists prefer to carry out primary research.
- Examine the problems sociologists face when trying to use experiments in their research.
- Examine the reasons why some sociologists find covert and overt participant observation to be useful research techniques.
- Examine the reasons why some sociologists collect quantitative data as part of their research.
- Examine the reasons why some sociologists use mailed social surveys.
- Examine the problems sociologists encounter when asking questions in sociological research.

Using these exemplar answers

- Each exemplar answer is formatted into an opening summary (a 'decode' of the question), material for an opening focus on the question (your first paragraph in an answer), a main section and a final overview (your concluding paragraph). These sections offer a good analytical structure to an answer. Putting material in this kind of order will help to gain marks for the skill of analysis.
- There is more information in each specimen answer than you would probably have time to cover in an exam which is why the main section suggests that you **could** make mention of the evidence/arguments.
- Some of the material is highlighted in **bold and italics**. These points are examples of statements that are likely to gain you further marks for **analysis** and for **evaluation**. Try to include as many of these as possible in your answer.
- You should try to include a few opening points in your first paragraph before launching into the main part of your answer. You can draw example opening points from the 'opening focus' section in each answer.
- You should try to include a few evaluation points in your final paragraph after the main part of your answer. You can draw example final evaluation points from the 'overview' section in each answer.
- You should also add examples of research studies from your own notes.

EXAMINE THE USEFULNESS OF LONGITUDINAL STUDIES IN SOCIOLOGICAL RESEARCH

SUMMARY

Longitudinal studies are carried out over a lengthy period of time. Usually the research team returns to the same research sample after intervals of some months/years to measure changes in their attitudes and behaviour. Longitudinal studies usually collect quantitative data using survey approaches. The main strength of longitudinal research is it allows sociologists to directly compare attitudes and behaviour over time. The main problems are to do with the length of time needed for them to be carried out.

You will get marks for your knowledge of longitudinal studies. There will also be some marks available for offering some examination of the usefulness of this method. This can be done by identifying the strengths and weaknesses of longitudinal studies and by comparing them with other methods. ***Assessment points are italicised in bold in each section of text.*** You should also try to refer to examples of longitudinal studies that have been used in sociological research.

A OPENING FOCUS

There are not many examples of longitudinal studies, mainly because of the cost but examples include:

the Child Health and Education Survey which followed every child born between 3-9 March 1958 (although a journalistic rather than a sociological study) the Granada TV series '7-UP' which every seven years interviewed a number of children who were seven years old in the early 1960s.

Some participant observation research may also fall into the category of longitudinal studies if it is carried out over a long period. Sometimes the participant observer takes a break from the research subjects, returning after some months, even years, to carry out further study.

B EXAMINING THE USES OF LONGITUDINAL STUDIES

Here are some of the advantages of longitudinal studies you could refer to in your answer.

- **Making comparisons.** The usual purpose of a longitudinal study is to identify patterns in behaviour - both changes and continuities over a period of time. By tracking the same group of people, usually interviewing them periodically, researchers can uncover any alterations in attitudes and behaviour that may have occurred in the intervening periods between interviews. This is different to most studies which tend to be 'one-off', 'snapshot' research. Longitudinal studies, provide a series of snapshots over a period of time. The purpose and research methods used tend to stay the same, making it ***much easier to make comparisons between sets of data. In a lot of research, the data created cannot be compared with other studies so the great strength of longitudinal research is comparability.***
- **Keeping the same sample.** Individual research studies are based on different samples and no matter how carefully they are selected, these sample will vary at least slightly from each other. There is a great advantage in using the same sample at each stage of the study. By using the same sample, a research team would be removing the possibility of a change in responses being due to a different sample being selected at the second or third stage of the study. ***By using the same sample, one potentially disruptive variable is removed.***
- **Large-scale social movements.** Longitudinal studies are ***particularly useful in tracking large-scale patterns of social behaviour*** such as the relationship between social class and health, education, employment etc. e.g. the Child Health and Education Survey.

B EXAMINING THE USES OF LONGITUDINAL STUDIES (continued)

- **Lack of alternatives.** Longitudinal studies are the most effective way of creating information about behaviour over a sustained period of time. The alternative is to use oral history. *It is much more preferable to ask people about their behaviour at the time rather than after an interval of many years.*

C EXAMINING THE PROBLEMS OF LONGITUDINAL STUDIES

Most of the problems with longitudinal studies result from the fact that they take a long time to carry out. Here are some you could refer to in your answer.

- **'Sample shrinkage'.** It is difficult to keep in contact with the same sample over a long period of time. Members of the sample may die, emigrate, no longer wish to be involved or otherwise become inaccessible. This is sometimes referred to as 'sample attrition'. A shrinking sample is a problem not because of the decreasing size of the sample but because *it can affect the representativeness of the sample in the later stages of research. If certain groups are more likely than others to be excluded from the sample then the data will become distorted.*
- **Representativeness.** If the original sample is not representative, then the whole study will be affected. Something that cannot be taken into account at the beginning of a longitudinal study is that *the demographic composition of a society may change over time leaving the original sample partially unrepresentative.* For example, a sample begun in the 1950s may not include sufficient members of ethnic minority groups to keep the sample representative by the 1970s and 1980s.
- **Changing research interests.** The concerns and focus of research will often change over the whole period of the longitudinal study. For example, there may have been little interest in asking questions in the 1950s and 1960s about the experiences of the disabled, women and ethnic minority groups but more recently these have become important research interests. In any longitudinal study relating to health issues, there is the difficulty of the emergence and disappearance of different forms of disease. *The result of this kind of problem is that the comparability of data may diminish over time as research concerns change.*
- **Sample membership and their responses.** Knowing that they are a member of a sample which is likely to be returned to at regular intervals may affect the responses given. Respondents may become to some extent 'conditioned' by their role, giving responses they feel meet the needs of the research project. Being aware that they are part of an on-going research project may affect the way they think and respond.
- **Cost.** There are relatively few longitudinal studies primarily because of the cost involved in this approach. The research team also has to be highly committed if the work is taking place over a long period of time.
- **Structured research.** Longitudinal studies which collect quantitative data via structured research techniques suffer from the problems associated with them. In particular, *the data can be criticised for lacking validity.*

D OVERVIEW

- *There are many advantages with longitudinal studies, in particular in the way in which data can be used for comparative purposes. Reliability and representativeness are both claimed to be high through using the same sample and employing similar research techniques.*
- *However there are a number of problems that undermine the representativeness of longitudinal studies and other problems that cast doubt on the validity of the data generated.*
- *Nevertheless, unlike most research approaches, longitudinal approaches do allow for comparisons to be drawn.*
- *They are not suited to the study of small-scale social interaction and there are problems with accessing groups that do not welcome being researched.*

EXPLAIN WHY SOME SOCIOLOGISTS FIND PERSONAL DOCUMENTS USEFUL IN THEIR RESEARCH.

SUMMARY

Personal documents are a source of secondary data that sometimes proves useful to the sociologist. Although not such a mainstream source of data/research method as official statistics, questionnaires etc., personal documents do have their value in research. Interactionist sociologists in particular find them useful as a source of qualitative data which offers insights into the way individuals and groups think and act. Positivists generally do not see them as being very useful because they provide data that is neither reliable nor representative. Different types of personal documents also have different advantages and disadvantages for the sociologist.

You will get marks for your knowledge of personal documents. There will also be some marks available for offering some examination of the usefulness of this kind of data. ***Assessment points are italicised in bold in each section of text.*** You should also try to refer to examples of personal documents that have been used in sociological research.

A OPENING FOCUS

- There are several types of personal documents which sociologists may be able to use in the research process. By definition, these are produced not by sociologists, but by individuals for their own reasons and use. They are qualitative material because they carry the meanings and interpretations which individuals attach to events.
- ***Although they tend not to be used in sociological research as much as official statistics and data collected through primary research, personal documents can prove useful in the study of particular social groups and issues.***
- Personal documents include:
 - diaries kept of events
 - memoirs written some time after the event (sometimes based on diaries)
 - letters sent to other individuals or organisations
 - historical documents
- ***Different types of personal document have different strengths and weaknesses when used in sociological research.***

B THE USES OF PERSONAL DOCUMENTS IN SOCIOLOGICAL RESEARCH

Here are some of the uses of personal documents that you could refer to in your answer.

- Personal documents often give a genuine insight into what an individual thinks and feels. This is particularly true of letters or diary entries as these tend to be written for personal purposes and not necessarily for public consumption. Therefore the content is likely to be fairly high in validity, as the individual is less likely to be hiding any of their thoughts and opinions.
- Sometimes personal records are one of the few, if not the only, source of information about certain groups in society. Some powerful groups are fairly hidden from the public gaze and evidence of their attitudes and activities may only emerge sometime after the event in the form of personal documents. For example, decisions made by high-ranking politicians are often not open to the public gaze and it is sometimes only through later political memoirs that we find out how decisions were reached.
- Where there are sufficient documentary sources, it is possible to create a statistical database of the information in them. Studies in the 1960s and 1970s of the historical records of slave plantations in the pre-civil war Old South, drew out statistical data concerning treatment of slaves and the financial status of different sizes of plantations. This kind of treatment of personal records is however, relatively rare.

C DISADVANTAGES OF PERSONAL DOCUMENTS

- Personal documents, being an expression of individual views are limited in that they only represent one personal point of view. There is no way of knowing how representative that document is of a larger group of people. There is no way of establishing how representative a particular author is unless the sociologist is very fortunate in having a range of sources to analyse.
- The variations in literacy and the way in which individuals see themselves and their importance means that some social groups leave relatively few personal documents. Whereas there are plenty of examples of letters, memoirs and diaries of high-ranking politicians, soldiers, royalty etc. there are comparatively few such personal records of 'ordinary' people.
- There is always going to be the problem of ascertaining the accuracy - and therefore the validity - of the contents of any personal document. Unless there are other contemporary sources, there is no way of checking the accuracy of the original source. We are unlikely to know what has been omitted from the document or why it has been omitted.
- Undeniably, people use personal documents to present a personal - and therefore biased - viewpoint. It has become fairly commonplace for ex-Cabinet Ministers to write their memoirs after retiring from Parliament. It is also not unusual for these memoirs to be used to present the writer in a highly favourable light whilst 'doing down' any political opponents. Given that the minutes of cabinet meetings are secret, there is no way of establishing the correct version of events.
- There may also be the problem of fully understanding the content of documents, particularly if they were written some time in the past. People also sometimes use personal terms which the sociologist may not be able to understand
- Some personal documents, for example, memoirs, are not written at the same time as the events they are describing. Even when they are based on diaries and other records, most memoirs are written with the benefit of hindsight, that is, past actions are viewed through the sets of perceptions held now and this may radically change the interpretation of those past events. Evidence may also be forgotten and information from other sources included as though it was part of the original thought

D OVERVIEW

- ***From a positivist viewpoint, personal documents are of little use to the sociologist. They present all manner of problems concerning representativeness and reliability. The data can rarely, if ever, be presented in statistical form, as the content of personal documents simply does not lend itself to being analysed in quantitative terms.***
- ***Viewed from an interpretivist perspective personal documents can be seen as providing a useful insight into the minds of individuals. In early American interpretivist sociology there was some emphasis placed on using personal documents or even creating them through life histories - a form of sociologist-assisted autobiography. This virtually disappeared from use as participant observation became the main ethnographic method.***
- ***Even from an interpretivist standpoint, personal documents present substantial difficulties. Although they may give insights into the worldviews of certain individuals or social groups, the lack of opportunity to substantiate the accuracy of documents undermines their claim to validity.***

EXAMINE THE REASONS WHY MOST SOCIOLOGISTS PREFER TO CARRY OUT PRIMARY RESEARCH

SUMMARY

Most sociologists prefer to carry out their own primary research rather than rely on data that is already in existence. They see primary data as having many advantages over secondary data especially in terms of the control primary research gives to the sociologist. Secondary data, because it has been carried out by others also has particular problems for the sociologist which makes carrying out primary research even more attractive. However, it is also important to acknowledge that primary research has many drawbacks and that secondary data does have its uses for the sociologist.

You will get marks for your knowledge of the reasons why many sociologists prefer to create their own data and what the problems are with secondary data. The question wants you to focus on the advantages of primary research over using secondary data rather than considering the advantages/disadvantages of specific methods. There will also be some marks available for offering some assessment of these reasons. ***Assessment points are italicised in bold in each section of text.*** You should also try to refer to examples of primary and secondary data.

A OPENING FOCUS

- Most sociologists prefer to create their own research data rather than have to rely on data created by others. Primary data is collected first hand by the researcher based on sociological concepts and theories. This can be quantitative material generated through postal questionnaires, structured interviews, longitudinal studies and even experiments. Primary data can also be qualitative, the result of unstructured interviewing, participant observation and other ethnographic techniques. ***Most of the advantages in creating primary data lie in the fact that the researcher has control over what data is collected and how this is done.***
- Secondary data is material which is already in existence and which may be of use to the sociologist. It too can be both quantitative - usually official statistics - or qualitative in the form of personal documents, historical material or media reports. ***Most of the problems sociologists find with secondary data relate to it being created by others, including non-sociologists.***

B REASONS WHY SOCIOLOGISTS PREFER PRIMARY RESEARCH

Here are some of the advantages of primary data that you could refer to in your answer.

The benefits of collecting primary data lie primarily in respect of the degree of control it gives then over various stages in the research process.

- The researcher can create data that is specifically relevant to the research aims. The data created can fit the research aims. ***With secondary data, the sociologist has to use whatever is available which may or may not match their research aims.***
- By exerting control over question design/structure/format, the sociologists can keep a full focus on the research purpose. No irrelevant questions should appear. ***Secondary data results from questions asked by others, for other reasons or by non-sociologists which reduces its' relevance to the sociologist.***
- Using primary methods enables the researcher to exercise choice over which methods to use - quantitative, qualitative, a combination and if so, what balance between them. ***With secondary data, the researcher has to accept whatever methods have been used in its' creation.***
- The researcher can also create their own definitions, of social class for example, and not be restricted by official classifications. Furthermore, the sociologists has a free hand in deciding how to operationalise these concepts, that is, in determining the most appropriate ways to put concepts into measurable forms. ***Secondary data is based on the ideas of others which may or may not match those of the sociologist.***

B REASONS WHY SOCIOLOGISTS PREFER PRIMARY RESEARCH (Cont.)

- The researcher also has control over the selection of the research sample to be studied. They can decide whether a representative, purposive, snowball or opportunity sample is most appropriate for their specific research purpose. ***The researcher has no such control over the sample used in the creation of secondary data.***
- Once the data is collected, because the researcher has designed the research process, they are in a much better position when it comes to interpreting and presenting the data. The researcher will have 'lived' the research process, becoming fully involved in it and having a very full understanding of what has been done.
- Having control over the collection of primary data allows the sociologist to take advantage of research opportunities as they occur - an important consideration particularly in researching certain social groups. ***With secondary data, the sociologist is limited to using whatever material is available.***

Secondary data presents many problems for the sociologist

- Although sometimes comprehensive, it can also be very patchy in coverage. Official statistics are very thorough concerning some areas of social life, crime and unemployment for example, but for other areas such as marriage and divorce it presents only a superficial picture. ***So secondary data may not exist for the issue being researched.***
- Qualitative documents in particular vary greatly in terms of their coverage and are not likely to be representative. It is also not always possible to verify the representativeness of this material.
- Official statistics, the source of much secondary data, have particular problems. Interpretivists have shown fairly conclusively that they are the product of social processes in which the decisions made by individuals, official agencies etc. become translated - sometimes inappropriately - into objective statistical 'facts'. Marxists also argue that data generated by governments may well be biased towards politically biased
- Each of the types of secondary material which sociologists might consider using has its own specific strengths and weaknesses.

C OVERVIEW

- ***Although sociologists generally tend to prefer to collect primary data for the reasons already outlined, they nevertheless often also use secondary data at various points in their research.***
- ***It is often the case that primary and secondary data have different roles to play in the research process. Although primary research methods usually provide the main thrust in a study, there may also be a place for personal documents or media reports because of the insights they sometimes offer. Official statistics might provide a background picture to the research.***
- ***All forms of research have their weaknesses and strengths so few sociologists dismiss using any kind of secondary material. Sometimes the only material available is from existing sources in which case the sociologist has little choice but to use it.***
- ***Types of data are sometimes compared as though they are opposites or even alternatives to each other. This is too simplistic. It is much more a matter of choosing the most appropriate research methods for particular research purposes.***

EXAMINE THE PROBLEMS SOCIOLOGISTS FACE WHEN TRYING TO USE EXPERIMENTS IN THEIR RESEARCH.

SUMMARY

Experiments are not used very often in sociological research. This is mainly because there are so many difficulties involved in trying to create experimental situations that reflect the complexities of social life. Experimenting with human research subjects also raises moral problems. What sometimes happens is that sociologists bend existing social situations into field experiments to test some aspect of their research. Not as rigorous as the laboratory experiment, field experiments apply some elements of the experimental technique.

You will get marks for your knowledge of the problems sociologists have with experiments. Remember to treat laboratory and field experiments separately. There will also be some marks available for offering some assessment of these problems. ***Assessment points are italicised in bold in each section of text.*** You should also try to refer to examples of attempts to use experiments in sociological research.

A OPENING FOCUS

- The experiment is a method associated with the natural sciences. In an experiment, the researcher identifies and controls the variables that can affect the outcome of whatever is being studied. What makes experiments so useful is the amount of control researchers have over the research.
- Although experiments may work with the study of inanimate objects like chemicals, trying to carry out experiments with people in social situations is much more difficult. The practical and moral problems with experiments in sociology are so great that sociologists do not use them very often. Sometimes sociologists create field experiments which do not give them the same degree of control as laboratory experiments but which do get closer to 'real' social life.
- Laboratory and field experiments have different problems.
- Sociologists also sometimes 'borrow' some of the experimental results from social psychology in areas of interest to them such as the link between media images and violence, responses to authority and so on.

B EXAMINING THE PROBLEMS WITH EXPERIMENTS IN SOCIOLOGICAL RESEARCH

Here are some of the problems associated with laboratory and field experiments that you could make reference to in your answer.

Laboratory experiments

- **Artificiality** The laboratory is a highly artificial situation – do experimental results have any meaning for the real social world? How people react to the artificially constructed authority situation in a laboratory (as **Milgram** attempted to create) may tell us little about the way they respond to authority in real life situations.
- **Controlling social variables** The laboratory experiment only works if everything that can affect the outcome can be identified and controlled. It is impossible to identify, let alone control, all the variables that influence social behaviour. Many factors influence social behaviour - not to mention the way humans constantly change the meanings they attach to events. ***Lack of control undermines the reliability of an experiment.***
- **'Experimental effect'** Knowing that they are involved in an experiment is likely to have an effect on the behaviour of those involved. ***This endangers the validity of the results.***
- **Scale** Sociologists often want to examine large-scale social behaviour. ***The laboratory is just too small in which to do this.***
- **Ethical problems** In an experiment the researcher tries to control what happens and there are ethical limits to how far this can go with humans. Some experiments involve exposing people to things they may find uncomfortable – for example, **Bandura** exposed young children to violent stimuli – and which may have a damaging effect. Most experiments have to mislead the research subject about the real purpose of the research in which case, how far can it be said that they have given their permission to be researched? ***Problems of consent, psychological damage and manipulation make experiments unsuitable for studying social interaction.***

B EXAMINING PROBLEMS WITH EXPERIMENTS IN SOCIOLOGICAL RESEARCH (Cont.)

Field experiments

Field experiments take place in the real social world. They usually take existing real life situations and amend them to meet research purposes. Outside of the research team, those involved are unaware that an experiment is taking place. The aim of field experiments is to avoid being too artificial but retaining some element of control. For example, the PEP/PSI studies of racial discrimination in which applications to real jobs were made either by actors or the research team representing a range of different ethnic identities with equal qualifications and experience. Their relative success rate gave some indication of the degree of racial discrimination in employment opportunities. Superstition can be measured by watching the response of passers-by to a ladder placed in their path, attitudes to social class by an actor dressing in different styles of clothing and asking for assistance etc.

- **Lack of control** All the variables are not identified and controlled. For example, **Rosenthal and Jacobson** ('Pygmalion in the Classroom') had no idea of what other factors - home, media, cultural - may have influenced the academic achievement of the students they studied.
- **Limited scope** Field experiments are useful only for studying limited issues, usually measuring a single form of behaviour. ***Most of the large-scale issues sociologists are interested in cannot be studied in this way.***
- **Timescale** Most social processes take place over a long time period ***whereas experiments can only hope to measure short-term patterns.***
- **Ethical problems** Field experiments still have the problem of consent. To work, field experiments need those involved to have no idea what is happening, as otherwise their behaviour would be different.

C OVERVIEW

- ***The biggest problem with experiments stems from the unique subject matter of sociology. Human beings have consciousness. This ability to attach different and changing meanings to social situations makes it impossible to identify and control all the factors that affect social interaction. Other problems including ethical issues and the difficulty of analysing large-scale, long-term social processes combine to make the laboratory experiment of limited value in sociological research.***
- ***The field experiment has had more use in social research and if used imaginatively as in the PEP/PSI research into racial discrimination, it can create useful data. This is often enhanced when used in combination with other research techniques.***

EXAMINE THE REASONS WHY SOME SOCIOLOGISTS FIND COVERT AND OVERT PARTICIPANT OBSERVATION TO BE USEFUL RESEARCH TECHNIQUES.

SUMMARY

Participant observation has many strengths and weaknesses as a research technique. Interpretivist sociologists see it as a very useful approach particularly because of the validity of the data it generates. Covert and overt forms of PO have different strengths. Some sociologists have doubted that the data created by PO is as high in validity as is sometimes claimed. There are also practical and ethical problems with both covert and overt forms of PO. As well as some sociologist finding PO a useful research technique, others have not. Positivists see it as failing to meet the demands of reliability and representativeness.

You will get marks for your knowledge of covert and overt forms of PO and why some sociologists find them useful research techniques. The question wants you to focus on the advantages of both forms of PO. There will also be some marks available for offering some assessment of these advantages, including pointing to some of the problems they have. **Assessment points are italicised in bold in each section of text.** You should also try to refer to examples of participant observation in sociological research – but be careful not to be too descriptive of these studies.

A OPENING FOCUS

- Participant observation is the main method employed by interpretivist sociologists. It involves the researcher joining a social group to study them 'from within', sharing their experiences to gain a better understanding of how they see the world.
- Some PO studies are overt – when the research subjects are aware of the researchers' real purpose – and some are covert, with the researcher keeping their real identity hidden.
- The main reason why interpretivists use PO is because this method is seen generating data which is high in validity. 'Validity' refers to how accurate and authentic the data collected is. Does it reflect the real meanings and interpretations that individuals and groups hold about social actions and events? If the aim of research is to 'get to the truth' of the matter, so the whole point of research must be to gather valid data.
- However, there is some doubt whether PO data is high in validity. Positivist sociologists also argue that PO should be avoided because even if the data is more valid, it is not a reliable or representative form of research.

B EXAMINING THE REASONS WHY SOME SOCIOLOGISTS FIND PARTICIPANT OBSERVATION TO BE A USEFUL RESEARCH TECHNIQUE

Here are some of the reasons why some sociologists find participant observation a useful technique.

Interpretivists use participant observation because it has a number of characteristics that lead to it creating data which is high in validity.

- **Observation rather than asking questions** Observing a groups' normal social routines is likely to produce a more authentic account of their world-view than asking questions. In PO studies, you see *what a group does rather than what it says it does*. **Question-based research has the constant problem of never really knowing how accurate the answers given are.**
- **Maintaining normal social activity** Interpretivists argue that valid data is more likely to be created when a group is studied in its normal social setting. By going to the group rather than bringing it into an artificial research setting like an interview, the researcher is able to observe the group behaving as they normally would. ***This is more likely to be achieved with a covert approach as it is less likely to disturb and alter the behaviour of the research group. With overt PO, the normality of a group's behaviour may be affected by the knowledge that they are being studied.***

B EXAMINING THE REASONS WHY SOME SOCIOLOGISTS FIND PARTICIPANT OBSERVATION A USEFUL RESEARCH TECHNIQUE (Cont.)

- **Open Research** Participant observation is a fluid, flexible approach in which the researcher 'goes with the flow' of research allowing it to unfold in the context of the groups' activities. Observers usually avoid any fixed hypotheses about their research subjects, as these might be a barrier to understanding things from the groups' point of view.
- **Insight** 'Insight' is difficult to define but generally refers to the perceptions a sociologist can make when the layers of social norms are peeled back. It is argued that insight only comes through sharing the experiences of a group. Seeing things from the inside can lead to a deeper understanding of a social group. ***Covert PO may allow for greater insight as group members may be less on their guard if they are not aware of the real identity of the researcher. If the PO is overt however, it is easier for the observer to ask questions and dig towards a deeper insight.***
- **Research opportunity** Sometimes a research opportunity arises out of the blue, as it did for **Patrick** when he was challenged to join a Glasgow gang. In many such cases, PO is the only way of seizing the research opportunity as other methods require substantial preparation.
- **Joining a group** It is not always easy to persuade people to be studied. Some social groups, especially deviant or powerful groups, do not want to be investigated. Joining a group and carrying out covert PO is one way to get around this problem. ***However, there is an ethical problem in doing this as the researcher will not have obtained any consent to be researched from the group.***

Is the data from PO really all that valid?

- ***The presence of an observer will affect a group's behaviour. Even in covert participant observation, where the research purpose is hidden, the presence of a new member of the group can still affect its activities.***
- ***The observer is also going to be affected by the group, identifying with them or being repelled by their actions. Either way, this will affect the observer's interpretation of the group's actions.***
- ***Ultimately, all observation is limited by what the observer sees and how they interpret actions. How can the observer be certain that they have understood the meaning of events from the point of view of the research subjects? If they have misinterpreted these meanings then again, the resulting data will be lacking in validity.***

C OVERVIEW

- ***Interpretivists have very good reasons for using both forms of PO, primarily because of their emphasis on the need for validity in research data. However, certain aspects of PO may undermine the validity of the data it creates.***
- ***Positivists reject using PO because it is not replicable, representative and or reliable. Because participant observation is an open-ended research process, there are no fixed rules of research and no common agreed systems of measurement which means that the study cannot be replicated.***
- ***PO studies are very much 'one-offs' and there is no way of knowing how representative or not they are. Therefore no generalisations can be made on the basis of the data created.***
- ***Participant observation gives a lot of control over the research process to the subject group and in doing so removes any chance of the data being considered to be reliable.***

EXAMINE THE REASONS WHY SOME SOCIOLOGISTS COLLECT QUANTITATIVE DATA AS PART OF THEIR RESEARCH

SUMMARY

Some sociologists prefer to collect quantitative data as the main basis of their research. Positivists see quantitative data as the only appropriate data to create and use. They want to try to uncover 'social laws' and this means identifying patterns in social behaviour which can only be done by comparing quantitative evidence. However, it is only 'some' sociologists who think in this way. Interpretivists do not see much value in quantitative data.

You will get marks for your knowledge of the advantages some sociologists see with quantitative data. There will also be some marks available for offering some assessment of these advantages/reasons why some sociologists use this kind of data, including pointing to some of the problems with quantitative evidence. ***Assessment points are italicised in bold in each section of text.*** You should also try to refer to examples of methods used that create quantitative data – but be careful not to be too descriptive of these methods as the main focus here is on the nature of quantitative data not the methods used to collect it.

A OPENING FOCUS

- Quantitative data is evidence that can be put into statistical form and analysed and compared for trends and patterns. This is either created using structured research instruments such as formal interviews and postal questionnaires or taken from official statistics. Quantitative data is used in a lot of sociological research and this shows its importance to some sociologists.
- ***Quantitative data is collected only by some sociologists.*** How useful quantitative evidence is judged to be depends mainly on the methodological assumptions made by the sociologist. Positivists, who want sociology to be able to identify links between social factors (for example, between class and educational performance), see quantitative data as being the only appropriate form of evidence. The reasons for this lie in the way Positivists view society and the purpose of sociological investigation.
- ***However, Interpretivist sociologists see quantitative data as having many flaws and they have criticised many of the reasons for its use by Positivist sociologists.***

B EXAMINING THE REASONS WHY SOME SOCIOLOGISTS COLLECT QUANTITATIVE DATA AS PART OF THEIR RESEARCH

Here are some of the reasons why some sociologists find participant observation a useful technique.

Positivist sociologists have many reasons for using quantitative data. These mainly relate to the way quantitative data can be said to meet the criteria of reliability, representativeness and comparability.

- ***Making comparisons*** A major advantage of quantitative data is that comparisons can be drawn either within the data or between different sources of data. ***Comparisons can only be made if the data is quantified.*** For example, in structured interviews and self-completion questionnaires all respondents are asked the same questions with the same response categories. The result is data that can be expressed in a numerical form. The responses of different respondents can then be directly compared.
- ***Patterns and trends over time can be identified*** The sociologist is able to see if there are any changes in behaviour patterns and when these changes have occurred. The rate of change can be identified as can any unusual 'blips'. For example, the current divorce rate can be compared with that of previous years or with those of other societies. The rate of change in the divorce rate which occurred in the 1970s and 1980s can be seen to have slowed, with the figures appearing to reach some kind of plateau. Sudden increases in divorce can be seen immediately after the Second World War and following the introduction of the Divorce Law Reform Act. ***To the sociologist, such statistical changes are important as they indicate changes in social behaviour which then require explanation. Qualitative data cannot be analysed in this way as it appears in written form which is numerically unclassifiable.***

B EXAMINING THE REASONS WHY SOME SOCIOLOGISTS COLLECT QUANTITATIVE DATA AS PART OF THEIR RESEARCH (contd.)

- **Correlations can be drawn from statistical data.** This is when two or more factors seem to act in a connected way. *Often the behaviour patterns shown by quantitative data is the starting point for research.* For example, one of the most recent areas of educational research is into the tendency for males to underachieve in education this decade. It was quantitative data in the form of examination pass rates which indicated this trend and which caused concern amongst educationalists and in turn, prompted sociological investigation into why this has occurred.
- **Causal relationships** Positivist sociologists see statistical correlations as pointing to causal relationships. A causal relationship is where one or more phenomena act on other social phenomena and cause them to behave in the way observed. Thus for **Durkheim**, being Protestant caused a greater tendency towards committing suicide. *He went further and argued that behind this was a law of social behaviour relating to the degree of social integration and the rate of suicide.*
- **Representativeness** Quantitative data tends to be drawn from a larger sample of respondents than qualitative research. Positivists emphasise the need to use a representative sample. Most quantitative data is representative and therefore generalisations can be made on the basis of the results from the sample. *Qualitative research cannot make this claim as it tends to focus on very small groups of research subjects or one social situation.*
- **Reliability** Research methods like questionnaires that produce quantitative data can be repeated by other researchers and the results verified. *This improves the utility of the data produced.*

C OVERVIEW

- *Statistical data looks very impressive, but what does it really tell us about social behaviour? Interpretivists have identified the ways that quantitative data may not have much validity. If the data is not an accurate depiction of social reality then what use is it? The collection of quantitative data is itself a social process. Statistics are socially constructed and may well not be an accurate depiction of social reality. For example, official statistics concerning criminal activity are far from being objective 'facts' and they in all likelihood understate the true level of crime and distort the social characteristics of those who commit crime. Before a criminal act is recorded as such it has to be identified as a crime, reported and then acted upon. At each point in this process, social actors make decisions whether to report it etc. and the end result is an official level of reported crime and a 'dark figure' of unrecorded crime. Any sociological theory which is based on using official statistics is likely to be undermined by this critique.*
- *Even the quantitative data gathered first hand by the sociologist is of questionable validity. Any structured research instrument imposes the definitions, questions and response categories that the sociologist thinks appropriate. Any responses which do not fit, any questions which the respondent might feel are important to be considered, any interesting responses which in other circumstances could be usefully followed up and any questions with ill-defined wording all contribute to a loss of validity.*
- *Quantitative data tends to be very descriptive rather than analytical. It reveals patterns of social behaviour but it doesn't necessarily offer explanations why these patterns occur. Some sociologists argue that the exploration of the causes of patterns of behaviour is better attempted using qualitative evidence.*
- *Quantitative data is not always comparable. Sociologists use different definitions of the same behaviour and measure it in different ways, leading to difficulties in comparing data (for example in British social mobility studies). Without common, agreed systems of measurement as in the natural sciences, quantitative sociology fails to meet scientific criteria. There is the further problem of identifying causal relationships from statistical correlations. As well as spurious correlations, how does the sociologist know which pattern of social behaviour was the cause and which the effect - or were they both generated by another factor?*

EXAMINE THE REASONS WHY SOME SOCIOLOGISTS USE MAILED SOCIAL SURVEYS.

SUMMARY

The social survey is the most commonly used sociological research instrument. Often the survey is mailed out to potential respondents. There are many advantages with postal questionnaires which explain why some sociologists find them an attractive research technique. Some of these are practical advantages, others relate the emphasis positivist sociologists place on a method being reliable and representative.

You will get marks for your knowledge of mailed surveys and you should make sure that you emphasise the **mailed** dimension. There will also be some marks available for offering some examination of the usefulness of this method. This can be done by identifying the strengths and weaknesses of longitudinal studies and by comparing them with other methods. ***Assessment points are italicised in bold in each section of text.*** You should also try to refer to examples of studies that have used mailed questionnaires (taken from your own studies).

A OPENING FOCUS

- The questionnaire is one of the most useful research tools for the sociologist. Often questionnaires are mailed out to potential respondents. There are many advantages in doing this which means that some sociologists make a lot of use of this research technique. It tends to be Positivists who see advantages in posting out questionnaires for people to complete themselves without the sociologist being present. Everyone gets the same list of questions and answers which makes it a more reliable research method and because it is so cheap, a large sample can be created, helping the study to be representative.
- Interpretivists however, see many problems with mailed surveys and they feel that the validity of the data created is often weak. They tend not to use mailed questionnaires.
- One new form of this approach is to use the internet to contact potential respondents - an approach that is likely to raise new issues.

B EXAMINING THE ADVANTAGES OF MAILED SURVEYS

- It means that a geographically dispersed sample can be used. Respondents can be selected from anywhere in Britain whereas with any face-to-face method of research, this is both costly and sometimes impracticable. ***The sociologist is not limited to studying a limited locality.***
- It also means that a large sample can be contacted cheaply and quickly. Interviews take quite a long time to carry out, sending out a mailed questionnaire takes far less time. ***This is both cheap and likely to produce a bigger sample.***
- Being able to contact a larger sample can increase the possibility of creating a more representative sample. If the sample is more representative, then the sociologist can make generalisations about the whole research population. ***This is something that Positivists in particular want from a research method. However, a large sample does not guarantee representativeness as it all depends who returns the postal surveys. The most important, is the response rate - what proportion are returned? At times this can be as low as a few per cent of the total posted and a response rate of 25% is often considered to be a good, high return. It becomes very difficult to control and identify the representativeness of the survey. How does the researcher know whether those returning questionnaires are a cross-section of the research population? It may well be that some kinds of individuals are more likely to return postal questionnaires.***

B EXAMINING THE ADVANTAGES OF MAILED SURVEYS (contd.)

- There is no face-to-face contact between researcher and respondent, removing any 'interviewer bias'. ***This increases the validity of the data generated*** because the respondent will not be altering their responses because of how they see the interviewer or the interview situation. ***However, because the researcher is not present when the questionnaire is completed, there is no way of knowing whether the person for whom it was intended actually did fill in the responses. Nor is it possible, without follow-up interviews, to know how well the respondent understood the questions or how accurately they responded.***
- The survey approach is based on the use of standardised, pre-coded questions. The data generated from fixed-response questions is presentable in statistical form and can then be easily analysed for patterns and correlations. Comparisons between social groups and over time can be made, so positivists in particular see this as an enormous advantage. ***Using fixed response questions makes the whole process more reliable. The survey can be replicated by other researchers and the results verified. But, as soon as the questionnaire has been mailed to potential respondents it passes out of the researchers control. This produces a number of problems. Words used in questions may have different meanings to different individuals and groups. The researcher can never feel completely confident that there will be no misinterpretations of their questions.***
- Most questions in mailed questionnaires have fixed response categories so that the responses can be easily quantified and analysed for patterns and statistical correlations. ***This limits the ways in which the respondent can answer. Their true feelings may fall between two of the fixed categories or may not fall into any. The research subject is therefore not giving their own views, they end up giving them in the words of the questionnaire designer and this reduces the validity of the recorded results.***

C OVERVIEW

- ***Positivists prefer to use mailed surveys because they stress on the need for research methods to be reliable and representative. They are mainly concerned with measuring social behaviour and identifying trends and patterns in that behaviour. To do this requires asking the same questions of respondents and limiting their responses so that statistical data can result.***
- ***This is particularly useful in the study of large-scale social behaviour - social mobility, conjugal roles etc.—and in identifying the range of attitudes people hold, for example in relation to religious belief or fear of crime.***
- ***Many of the problems with postal surveys result from the lack of control the researcher has once the questionnaires have been sent out. They then have no idea who has completed them or how accurately, leading to problems with validity.***
- ***Other problems result from the type of questions asked in mailed surveys which again cause problems with the validity of the data created.***
- ***So mailed surveys may be useful in uncovering patterns of behaviour but not that useful for finding out the reasons why people behave in the way they do***

EXAMINE THE PROBLEMS SOCIOLOGISTS ENCOUNTER WHEN ASKING QUESTIONS IN SOCIOLOGICAL RESEARCH.

SUMMARY

Asking questions is a fundamental sociological research tool. Whether in a self-completion questionnaire, a structured interview or in an open-ended unstructured interview, questions are probably the most basic way to find out about social behaviour. They take several different forms, ranging from the fully open-ended to those with limited fixed response categories, each having strengths and weaknesses as a research technique.

You will get marks for your knowledge of different types of questions and the contexts in which they are used. There will also be some marks available for offering some examination of the problems with questions. This can be done by explaining the problems, indicating where they occur and looking at the ways sociologists try to deal with them. ***Assessment points are italicised in bold in each section of text.*** You should also try to refer to examples of questions from research studies.

A OPENING FOCUS

- ***There are different kinds of questions in sociological research.*** Questions can be structured by the researcher who fixes the range and nature of the responses allowed. Alternatively, questions can be asked that are open-ended in terms of their response and which the researcher creates within the flow of an unstructured interview. Questions can be written down for the respondent to answer without any guidance from the researcher or they can be asked face-to-face in an interview.
- ***There is also the issue of how questions are delivered.*** The presence of an interviewer can have an effect on the answers offered whilst written questions have many problems connected to understanding their meaning.
- ***Finally, how are answers to questions interpreted?***
- ***The usefulness of questions can be assessed in terms of their reliability as a research tool and the validity of the data they generate.***

B EXAMINING PROBLEMS WITH QUESTIONS

Here are some of the problems with questions that you could refer to in your answer.

General problems with all kinds of questions:

- How do you know that the respondent is telling the truth? All questions create a statement of what the respondent claims they think and do. It is very difficult to know how far the respondent actually does what they say they do.
- Another problem is that of how well the respondent understands the question. In an interview the researcher may be able to help with problems of understanding, but not when the question is in a self-completion questionnaire.
- Sometimes questions are created which contain more than one question - a 'double question' - which is impossible to answer.
- There is a danger of using technical words or using words open to interpretation.
- Questions that are too long can be problematic but so too are questions that are too short.
- There is also the danger of constructing a question in such a way that it leads respondents towards a particular answer - a 'leading question'.

'Interviewer bias'.

All questions asked in interviews have the problem of '**interviewer bias**'. Asking questions is not a neutral social occasion. How the respondent sees the interviewer (their social class, accent, gender etc.) can affect the responses they give and they may say that they think the researcher wants to hear rather than what they, the respondent, really thinks. ***In this case, the respondent has not given their true meanings reducing the validity of the responses.***

B EXAMINING PROBLEMS WITH QUESTIONS (cont.)

'Interviewer bias' (cont.)

Interviewer bias is more likely to happen during informal interviews when the interview is more like an open-ended conversation than in formal interviews when the researcher 'gives away' less about themselves and simply ask a fixed list of questions. Even then, the respondent will still react to how they see the researcher.

Written questions delivered through self-completion questionnaires do not have this problem.

Problems with closed/fixed response questions

- **Interpretivists argue that fixed response questions create data that lacks in validity.**
- Fixed response questions limit the ways in which the respondent can answer. Their true feelings may fall between two of the fixed categories or may not fall into any. The research subject is therefore not giving their own views, they end up giving them in the words of the question designer and this reduces the validity of the recorded results.

Problems with open-ended questions

Positivists believe that data from open-ended questions lacks reliability.

- Open-ended questions mean that any responses can be given - the answers given will be impossible to categorise.
- If respondents can introduce their own questions, then not all respondents will be asked the same questions so responses cannot be compared.
- With different questions and different responses, the interview cannot be replicable.

C OVERVIEW

- **Asking questions is problematic. There are general problems with all kinds of questions as well as problems with specific kinds of questions.**
- **There is a real tension between open-ended and fixed response questions. One meets the interactionist demand for validity, the other is closer to being a more reliable way to conduct research.**
- **However, apart from observing behaviour, the only way to find out about social behaviour is by asking questions. You can often find out more about the reasons behind behaviour by asking questions than by simply observing how people act. So despite the many problems with asking questions, they are a vital element in most research techniques.**