

# Research Methods Revision Guide



# Why do sociologists conduct research?

Sociologists have **three** aims in research

1. To make their research **valid** and **reliable**
2. To use a **representative** sample (it is impossible to study every single person!) and to make their results **generalisable**
3. To be **objective** and **avoid bias**

It is almost impossible to achieve all three aims, but sociologists will try their hardest to achieve as close as possible. Their main aim is to ***explain*** social phenomena e.g. increase in crime rates amongst a certain group. therefore they want to achieve the best explanation possible with all three aims.

# Types of research

<p>Primary data – collected <b>first hand</b>.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>-Its up to date and recent</li><li>--You choose your method and can make it as valid/reliable as possible.</li><li>-It can be expensive</li><li>-Time consuming</li><li>-Can be dangerous</li><li>-Can have researcher bias</li><li>-Cant always get access</li></ul>	<p>Secondary data – the information <b>already exists</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>-Quick and easy to collect</li><li>-Study past events, compare to the present</li><li>-May not be valid and reliable</li><li>-May not be authentic information/ documents</li><li>-Don't have to worry about consent</li><li>-No researcher bias from the researcher using the information</li></ul>
<p>Qualitative data- <b>valid</b> but not very <b>reliable</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>-Detailed description of behaviour</li><li>-Meanings and motives</li><li>-Build up trust (rapport)</li><li>-Difficult to repeat (unreliable)</li><li>-Small scale so not representative</li><li>-Subjective and open to interpretation</li></ul>	<p>Quantitative data – <b>reliable</b>, but not very <b>valid</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>-Establish cause and effect relationships</li><li>-easy to analyse</li><li>-Can repeat (reliable)</li><li>-Large sample= generalizable</li><li>-Tight categories in the research method can hide the truth</li><li>-No meanings</li><li>-Can be politically biased</li></ul>

# Evaluative concepts

## Practical issues

**Time** The most time-consuming method is probably ethnography (long-term observation of a group, usually combined with informal interviews), while structured observation is quicker. To obtain a representative sample, interviewers need to approach a wide range of people. Time lags, such as waiting for questionnaires to be returned, are also significant.

**Cost** Postage and travel may be costly and so is loss of earning power if a study takes many months.

**Access** It may be difficult for sociologists to gain permission to research in some institutions. With covert observation, being accepted by a group may depend on being the appropriate age and sex and assuming a native costume.

**Danger** Covert methods risk exposing the sociologist, if discovered, to the anger of the group. Indeed any method conducted with deviant groups indulging in risk-taking activities needs to be considered carefully.

## Ethical

Researchers may find their research rejected if they ignore ethical guidelines. These include:

- participants in studies should have **given fully-informed consent**. This makes covert studies questionable;
- no participants should **be harmed, either physically** or through being distressed;
- participants' **confidentially** should be respected, so in any publications there should be no details that identify them;
- sociologists should not **break the law** or be present when others are doing so.

## Reliability (consistency and replicability)

For a research method to be considered reliable, it must **produce the same results** regardless of time, place and the characteristics of the researcher.

**Positivists emphasise the need for reliability** in research techniques and therefore they use social surveys, experiments and other forms of structured investigation. Methods such as participant observation and unstructured interviews are considered unreliable by positivists because they cannot be repeated or checked for bias.

## Validity

refers to the question **of how authentic and accurate the data produced** is. Does the research really provide a genuine picture of what is being studied?

Clearly the aim of any research method is **to "get to the truth"** of a social phenomenon and to generate accurate data.

The question of validity has to be answered by using methods such as participant observation or unstructured interviews. Survey methods, experiments and other methods favoured by positivists are rejected because they do not step into meaning of each person you are studying.

**Examples** are there any other studies you know of that have used this method in a similar context? Or has another researcher chosen another method which is useful for the context?

## Representativeness (SAMPLE)

A researcher has to take a sample which is representative, or **typical, of the whole group**.

To be representative, the characteristics of the sample need to be the same as for the whole membership of that phenomenon.

With a representative sample, the researcher can **make generalisations** i.e. they can claim that what is true for the smaller sample is likely to be true for the whole group.

# Evaluation sentence starters

P	One practical advantage of the method used in item... is	One practical disadvantage of the method used in item... is
E	One ethical advantage of the research method in item... is This would mean...	One ethical disadvantage of the research method in item... is This would mean...
R	The method of choice for the context of... would arguably be reliable. By having reliable data this would mean... This is important for the context of....because	The method of choice for the context of... would arguably be unreliable. By having unreliable data this would mean... This is a disadvantage for the context of....because
V	The method... used in item... to study... can be argued to be valid. Having valid data would... therefore having valid data in the given context would mean...	The method... used in item... to study... can be argued lack validity. Not having valid data would...
E	Another example of research which has used a similar method... therefore...	An example of research which used a different method in a similar context is... By using this method, researchers were able to...
R	The sample used to study... in item... can be argued to be representative, favoured by positivist methods. This would suggest that... Therefore...	The sample used to study... in item... can be argued not to be representative, often as a result of interpretivist methods. This would suggest mean...
T	The approach which would favour this research method would be... This would suggest from the research they would aim to...	The approach which would not favour this research method would be... This would suggest from the research they would be able to gather...

Reliability, representativeness and validity are important because they are ideas that help you to assess the **usefulness** of a particular research method.

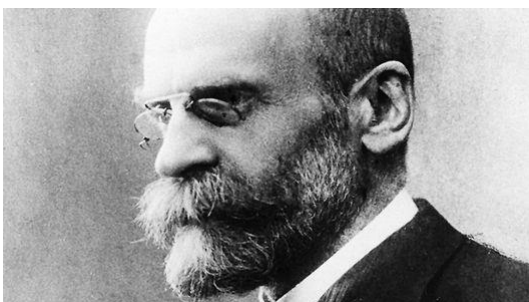
# Approaches to research

## Positivist

- Positivists believe that society can be studied to discover laws of **cause and effect**
- They favour **quantitative** research methods
- They are **objective** in their approach to research
- Research groups to **generalise** to find solutions to social problems

## Interpretivist

- Interpretivists like to focus on **individuals or small groups** of people rather than on large scale amounts
- They favour **qualitative** research methods
- They are **subjective** in their approach to research
- They also believe we have **freewill, choice** and **consciousness**



# Research process

# Factors that influence a research topic

There are many reasons influencing a sociologists choice of topic. These are some:

- Researcher's **theoretical** perspective e.g. Positivist or interpretivist
- **Societal** values
- **Funding** body (who is paying)
- **Accessibility** of research participants e.g. Can you access them
- **Availability** of data e.g. Can you get hold of statistics



YOU SHALL NOT PASS!



# Designing research

When conducting research, firstly you have to figure out what you are going to research, you may need to **operationalise** some concepts before you can start. You will then try to narrow your research down into a question (**aim or hypothesis**) so you can focus your research on a particular area. You then may decide that you need to try a **detect bias**, you can do this through a pilot study or respondent validation.

## **Aims/Hypothesis**

**Aims:** creating a single research question to focus their research- this should be value free e.g. *How far does culture impact on crime rates of ethnic minorities?*

**Hypothesis:** a statement which makes a prediction- it usually a relationship between two factors e.g. *'crime rates will increase due to institutional racism'*

## **Operationalisation**

This is where vague concepts need to be made measurable. You can't research something if you can't measure it. You will measure the concept by something else it is linked to- this is called an indicator.

e.g. Democracy- can be defined differently by different people. Therefore you might use the number of people who participate in voting to measure democracy.

e.g. social class- you may use income to determine different social classes

## **Detecting bias**

You can detect bias by conducting a pilot study

**Pilot study:** small scale practice run. You can test the accuracy of your questions, train interviewers, check for technical issues, it can be time consuming and expensive but can also secure funding.

**Respondent validation:** is another way to detect bias. Researchers can check their interpretation of an event can be checked with those who took part in the research. It is mainly used in interpretivist research to reduce bias.

# Sampling

**Representative sampling** – where attempts are made to accurately sample the target population to ensure representative and generalizable results

## Random sampling

Where every possible participant has an equal chance of being chosen

Three main types:

**Systematic sampling** every nth on list

**Stratified** – divided on known criteria but you have to know the % of characteristic in population

**Cluster** e.g. geographic

## Quota sampling

Often used by market researchers

Sampling based on proportions in UK population – e.g. age, sex, income, ethnicity

Each pp would be chosen on the basis that they fulfil these e.g. if 1% of population is Asian and female 1% of those sampled will be like that.

**Non-representative sampling** – where a valid study of the experiences of a group is more important than accuracy e.g. studying prostitution

## Snowball

Where each participant is asked to refer researcher on to someone of interest the researcher. Highly biased but useful for investigating marginalised groups

## Volunteer sampling

When you are asked to take part in research and no sampling frame is available- one of the weakest sampling techniques as they will more than likely have an agenda

## Opportunity sampling

When researchers choose volunteers who are available at that time and fit the nature of the research

**SAMPLING FRAME.** Basically, a **sampling frame** is a complete list of all the members of the population that we wish to study.

# In depth research methods

## **Longitudinal**

A longitudinal study is a social survey over a period of time. They are done at regular intervals. They are often large scale and quantitative.

- Changes can be analysed over time
- Study changes in attitudes
- Hard to recruit a committed sample
- You need long term sample

## **Case studies**

Is a focus on just one thing. They may look at the life history of one person. Interpretivists like case studies as they give detailed information about one person. They aren't representative because of their sample size.

# Methods- Social Surveys

For each of the following ensure that you have:

- A definition
- The positives
- The negatives
- An example of where it has been used

## 1. Questionnaires

- Closed/open questions
- Postal questionnaires

## 2. Interviews

- Structured

# Methods- Ethnographic

For each of the following ensure that you have:

- A definition
- The positives
- The negatives
- An example of where it has been used

1. Unstructured interviews
2. Group interviews
3. Focus groups
4. Semi-structured interviews
5. Participant observations
6. Non-participant observations

# Methods- Secondary data

For each of the following ensure that you have:

- A definition
- The positives
- The negatives
- An example of where it has been used

1. Statistics (official)
2. Statistics (unofficial)
3. Documents
4. Content analysis

# Methods- mixed methods

## **Triangulation**

Where you combine research methods to check validity of your findings

You compare the findings from each method to check your understanding of what you have found

## **Methodological pluralism**

You combine research methods to create a fuller picture, you can collect qualitative and quantitative research to build up a bigger picture.

# Exam technique