

SOCIOLOGY IGCSE



RESEARCH METHODS

REVISION BOOKLET

Kinds of Data

Quantitative data



- **Tends to deal with numerical data**
- **Low involvement of researcher, e.g. in terms of time and face-to-face contact**
- **High number of people being researched**
- **Examples include:**
 - **postal questionnaires**
 - **structured interviews**
 - **surveys**
 - **official statistics**

Qualitative data

- **Tends to deal with descriptive data**
- **High participation by researcher in terms of time, face-to-face contact**
- **Low number of people being researched**
- **Examples include:**
 - **in-depth interviews**
 - **non-participant observation**
 - **participant observation**
 - **case studies**
 - **personal documents**
 - **visual resources**

Sources of Data

Primary sources



- This is when new data is gathered by the researcher
- This would include:
 - participant observation,
 - non-participant observation,
 - case studies,
 - structured and unstructured interviews,
 - postal questionnaires
 - surveys

Secondary sources

- This is when the researcher uses existing sources of information
- This would include:
 - official statistics
 - non- personal documents,
 - visual resources

RESEARCH METHODS - Fact sheet 1:

Postal questionnaires



Key features:

- An example of quantitative data.
- It is a primary source of data.
- Involves a pre-set of questions that the respondent answers and returns to researcher.
- Questions will most likely be 'closed' questions.
- Answers will be limited to such responses as 'yes', 'no', 'sometimes', 'unsure', or may take the form of factual information, e.g. how many rooms do you have in your house?

Advantages:

- Can cover a wide sample, eg. by selecting from postal code areas.
- Relatively cheap to administer – cost of stamps, questionnaire publication, etc.
- Low cost as it can cover a large number of people for small amount of money.
- Only needs minimum involvement of researcher. Time only needed in drawing up questionnaire, sending it and analysing results.
- Responses are usually easy to quantify because of questionnaire construction. This is especially the case with pre-set questions.
- Good for obtaining factual information.
- Respondents may like the anonymity of a postal questionnaire and therefore may be more honest in giving answers to questions.

Disadvantages:

- Can get a poor response rate because people forget to send it back or lack motivation or incentive to do so.
- Postal questionnaires are usually limited in terms of length of questionnaire and type of questions that are asked. If too lengthy or too complex then respondents will not take time to complete it.
- No way of exploring issues.
- Respondents are unable to clarify any points they are unsure about.
- Relies on respondent's ability to read and write.
- Relies on respondent's ability to understand the questions.

Examples of use:

- Attitude surveys, e.g. Research into TV violence.
- Lifestyle surveys, e.g. Research to find out people's consumption habits.

RESEARCH METHODS - Fact sheet 2:

Structured interviews



Key features:

- Quantitative data.
- It is a primary source of data.
- Carried out face-to-face by a researcher.
- Researcher asks a set of pre-set questions.
- Questions will tend to be 'closed' so as to demand a limited response.

Advantages:

- Ensures a good response rate, as questions have to be answered there and then.
- If questions are pre-set then the results are easy to quantify.
- Good for gaining factual information.
- Respondents would not have to be able to read or write to take part in any study.
- Respondent can ask for clarification if they have not understood something.

Disadvantages:

- Can be costly as it involves face-to-face contact.
- Need the researcher to be there to carry out the interview.
- Can be time-consuming for researcher and respondent.
- If pre-set questions are used these cannot be explored (only clarified if something is not understood).
- People may not answer honestly. This may be because they are too embarrassed, or they give an answer that they think the researcher wants to hear.

Examples:

- Socio-economic status and political views.
- Ethnicity and attitudes to 'stop and search' policing.

RESEARCH METHODS - Fact sheet 3:

Unstructured interviews



Key features:

1. Qualitative data.
2. Primary source.
3. Researcher has a number of broad topics/general areas to cover with interviewee.
4. Questions would be 'open' questions.
5. Respondent is allowed to elaborate on any of the areas covered.

Advantages:

1. Allows the researcher to explore issues in an in-depth way.
2. The researcher is not restricted to pre-set questions.
3. The researcher can clarify points and explore particular points.
4. Good for ascertaining meaning, feelings, motives, etc.

Disadvantages:

1. Can lose track of the purpose of the interview.
2. The interviewee may digress into irrelevant information.
3. Can be difficult to quantify results, as much of the data may be descriptive.
4. Can be time-consuming for the researcher and respondent.
5. High cost because of high researcher involvement.
6. May be difficult to compare answers given by different individuals.

Examples:

1. Studies that explore causes of marital breakdown.
2. In-depth studies of poverty and how it affects

RESEARCH METHODS - Fact sheet 4:

Non-participant observation



Key features:

1. Qualitative method.
2. Primary source.
3. The researcher observes the social behaviour of others.
4. Records what he/she observes either at the time or as soon as possible after the event.
5. The researcher has to take what she/he sees at face value and interpret what is observed.

Advantages:

1. Good for describing 'natural' behaviour – if the individual/group being observed is unaware of the researcher's presence.
2. Good for gaining an in-depth picture of social behaviour.

Disadvantages:

1. Needs a high input from the observer in terms of time.
2. Costs are high, as researcher needs to be there all the time.
3. Difficult to quantify behaviour.
4. No way of checking details or exploring issues further.
5. There may be bias on the part of the researcher in what he/she sees.
6. Ethical considerations related to individuals/groups being observed without their knowledge.

Examples:

Social behaviour in public places, e.g..

1. Racial prejudice on public transport.
2. Sharing behaviour of children in playground at school.

RESEARCH METHODS - Fact sheet 5:

Participant observation



Key features:

1. Qualitative data.
2. Primary source.
3. Researcher becomes a participant in the group/situation he/she wishes to observe.
4. Researcher's presence will probably be unknown to those being observed or may only be known to one or two key individuals.
5. There are three stages to participant observation – 'getting in', 'staying in', and 'getting out'.

Advantages:

1. Gives an in-depth picture of social behaviour.
2. Can give a realistic picture of social behaviour.
3. Is good for exploring issues of feelings, meanings, interactions and processes.

Disadvantages:

1. High involvement of researcher in terms of time - Researcher has to be in the situation.
2. Costs are high because of high involvement of the researcher.
3. Can be biased.
4. 'Hawthorne effect' – the presence of the researcher may change or influence the situation or the behaviour of those he/she is studying.
5. Can be dangerous - For example, participant observation into gang behaviour.
6. Can be biased because the researcher becomes part of what he/she is studying.
7. Difficult to quantify results - Data tends to be descriptive.
8. Difficult to record - If the researcher is part of a group, writing down details may be impossible.
9. May be difficult to generalise findings - Findings may only apply to a particular situation or group.

Examples:

1. Behaviour of drug users.
2. Classroom behaviour.

RESEARCH METHODS - Fact sheet 6:

Official statistics



Key features:

- Quantitative data.
- Secondary source as the researcher is using existing data.
- Statistics used would be those gathered by government, police, health authorities, etc.
- Often used to analyse trends in social behaviour.
- Statistics must be treated with care, as all statistics require interpretation.

Advantages:

- Good for quantitative studies, eg. how many crimes are reported each year.
- Can save researcher a lot of time as information has already been gathered.
- Low cost.
- May be a good indicator of a general trend of a particular social behaviour.
- Some statistics gathered from a wide representation of the population.

Disadvantages:

- May be biased because of the way information was gathered. The researcher has no control over this.
- People may lie in official statistics. For example, it is estimated that 1 million people did not complete Census forms in 1991 because of Poll Tax issues.
- It may be difficult to use statistics for comparison between different time periods. This is because indicators and criteria may change between time periods. For example, statistics on socio-economic status.

Examples:

- Trends in violent crimes.
- Socio-economic status and health care.

RESEARCH METHODS - Fact sheet 7:

Personal documents



Key features:

1. Qualitative data.
2. Secondary source.
3. Uses existing data such as diaries, letters, personal accounts.
4. May be found in personal collections, published form, government archives, libraries or museums.
5. Provides evidence for in-depth accounts, case studies, or to give a historical perspective to a particular study.

Advantages:

1. Can give insight to a particular situation or period in time.
2. Good for looking at society from a particular individual's point of view.
3. May be the only source of information about a particular society, event, etc.
4. May support other evidence. For example, statistics on disease in the early part of the century may be supported by personal documents from physicians of the time.

Disadvantages:

1. May be biased. For example, the author may be aware that someone would read his/her account.
2. If the person is no longer alive, then there is no way of checking his/her account.
3. Personal accounts only say what the person wanted others to know – they do not tell us what is missed out.
4. If some documents are in private collections it may be difficult to get permission to use in research. This may also be the case with government documents that may be subject to laws regarding confidentiality and time lapses before disclosure.
5. They may be subject to data protection legislation.
6. The authenticity of some documents may be questioned if authenticity cannot be proved. For example, the case of the 'Hitler diaries' that proved to be a hoax.

Examples:

1. Studies showing the changing role of women throughout the centuries.
2. Studies that examine changing social structures, e.g. feudalism /capitalism.

RESEARCH METHODS - Fact sheet 8:

Surveys



Key features:

1. A method for obtaining quantitative data.
2. It is a primary source of data.
3. Used to gain statistical information that can be used to represent wider populations
4. Involves a pre-set of questions that respondents answer.
5. Questions will most likely be 'closed' questions and will be standardised – every respondent is asked the same questions.
6. Most answers will be limited to such responses as 'yes', 'no', 'sometimes', 'unsure', or may take the form of factual information, but some scope for open answers.

Advantages:

1. Efficient and practical way of collecting information from a large number of respondents.
2. Very large samples and coverage made possible.
3. Statistical calculations can be made to measure reliability, validity, and statistical significance. Amenable to the collection of a wide range of information
4. Relatively easy to administer format allows researcher to focus on directly relevant information.

Disadvantages:

1. Reliant on respondents being honest, motivated, able to respond and remembering accurately. Hawthorne effects.
2. Not appropriate for studying complex social behaviour where an academic understanding may be required. Results may be superficial and anecdotal.
3. Answers may lack depth and may not adequately reflect qualitative aspects.
4. Although sample is often randomly gathered, respondents are normally selected, which reduces reliability and validity.

Examples

1. Often used to study modes of behaviour, values, attitudes, and beliefs.

RESEARCH METHODS - Fact sheet 9:

Case Studies



Key features:

1. A method for obtaining qualitative data
2. Often involves systematic and in-depth examination of a single event or case over time.
3. Involves detailed study, data collection, analysis of information and reporting of results.
4. Often carried out to glean specific information and understanding rather than to test hypotheses.

Advantages:

1. Allows in-depth analysis and understanding of particular cases.
2. May generate ideas and hypotheses for future research.
3. May complement the use of other methods such as interviews and observation.

Disadvantages:

1. Very time-consuming and demanding of researcher.
2. Information may only be applicable to the case under investigation.
3. Information may be difficult to collate.
4. Information may be difficult to quantify.

Examples:

1. Studies tend to be of individuals, events.

RESEARCH METHODS - Fact sheet 10: Visual Resources



Key features:

1. Often takes the form of content analyses.
2. A method for obtaining quantitative data in the form of statistics.
3. Often involves systematic and in-depth examination of a film, documentary or newspapers.
4. Involves categorising an aspect or incidence of a particular behaviour or use of language and recording frequency of occurrence.

Advantages:

1. Allows in-depth analysis of materials not normally subject to such detailed analysis.
2. Cheap and easy to conduct.
3. Makes use of readily available household equipment.

Disadvantages:

1. May be time-consuming and pedantic to conduct.
2. Information may only be applicable to the resources under investigation.
3. Information may be difficult to qualify.

Examples:

1. Studies of how stereotypes are reinforced by characters in a TV drama such as the BBC 1 programme *River City*.
2. Studies of TV news coverage of current events.

RESEARCH METHODS - Fact sheet 11: Sampling



Random Sampling

simple- when the whole sample has a equal chance of being picked.

Stratified-when the sample is divided into groups e.g. age, gender and is equally representative.

Cluster- sampling people from different areas, 10 people from Leeds and 10 people from Manchester

Non-random sampling

Snowball-this is where the researcher gets in touch with a group, then that group introduces the researcher to another group, then the other group introduces the researcher to the group the researcher really wants to research

Quota- doing a street survey asking random people questions

Systematic- having a list of names, sampling every 6th name