

A LEVEL/AS SOCIOLOGY (AQA)

FAMILIES AND HOUSEHOLDS RESEARCH METHODS

REVISION PACK

by

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HOW TO USE THESE REVISION NOTES

Structure:

This pack contains three sets of revision notes for each of Families and Households and Research Methods. In each case, the first is a complete set of revision notes including Exam Guidance. The second set is a reduced version of the full notes and the third set is reduced even further.

The full set is meant to provide enough material to gain a top grade at A level (and at AS). The second set should be sufficient to gain a sound A level grade or a top grade at AS. The third level of notes are more basic and summaristic but are enough to obtain a sound grade at AS.

How to revise: the ever reducing revision notes

The other reason for presenting these notes in this way is that it reflects the usual way in which knowledge revision works. It is all about **MEMORY REINFORCEMENT THROUGH REPETITION**. There is a lot of evidence to show that simply reading through notes or textbooks is not that effective. You may notice it yourself when you've simply read something and it just doesn't seem to stick in your mind. Even re-reading – though helpful – does not have much more effect. The key thing it works with what is written. There's a number of things you can do here, you can underline, highlight, use different colours etc on your revision notes. But if you really want to drive the knowledge home, here's probably the most effective technique.

REVISION NOTE REDUCTION

This is where the revision note reduction process is very helpful. It means that as you memorise and write out from memory the material you want to remember, you reduce your revision notes to a smaller and smaller amount. If you have kept each 'level' of revision note, you will be able to use the reduced version on your revisit.

The process goes something like this:

- Write out your revision notes
- Read through them/a section of them
- Cover them up and write (or speed scribble) them out from memory
- Check for any omissions
- Repeat process using a reduced version of your notes
- Repeat again

Return to the notes a day/week/month later

FAMILIES AND HOUSEHOLDS: FULL REVISION NOTES

1 THEORIES OF THE FAMILY

Key Issues

- What are the functionalist, Marxist and feminist perspectives on the role of the family in society?
- What does the Personal Life perspective have to say about the meaning of 'family'?
- How have each of these views been evaluated?

EXAM GUIDANCE

AS: Small mark questions at **AS** will usually ask you to outline one or more functions of the family (you can draw on all three structural theories). So you need to have some examples ready to use.

AS and AL: 10 mark questions are likely to ask for two functions and how they work family or possibly two versions of feminism or two criticisms of a perspective. Essay questions could focus on one main perspective or ask you to evaluate structural approaches (i.e. functionalism, Marxism, Feminism). Here it will be important to note that the Personal Life approach runs counter to these theories so it can be used as evaluation. You can also draw from other topics in your answer such as from social policy and family diversity/changing family patterns.

FUNCTIONALISM

- Functionalism sees society as based on a value consensus which enables cooperation and survival.
- Society is a system made up of sub-systems that contribute to the good of the whole system. The family is one such sub-system, fulfilling functions to maintain the health of the whole society.
- Functionalist sociologists stress the positive role of the family for society and all its members. It is seen as essential in providing functions for the maintenance of society from one generation to the next.

Murdock (1949)

In a study of 250 societies, Murdock argued that the family is universal because it is the best way of adjusting to society's basic needs. The family performs 4 basic functions serving both society and its individual members: sexual, reproductive, economic and educational.

Parsons (1959) In modern societies the family performs two 'basic and irreducible' functions:

primary socialisation of children - internalising society's culture and structuring personality

stabilisation of adult personalities - adults gain stability from emotional security, responsibility for children and a haven from the stresses and strains of modern society

A process of 'structural differentiation' has taken place. As society has industrialised, the family has lost some of its functions to other specialist institutions (e.g. health, education, religion). Those left to the family are the most important and vital.

There is a 'functional fit' between types of society and types of family. The isolated nuclear family as most typical and suitable for modern industrial society because:

- geographical and social mobility suits the modern economy
- now status is mainly achieved, not ascribed - applied to individuals rather than families, its isolation from kin prevents possible conflicts of status and ensures warm, close relationships

Male and female partners perform different functions. The male role is seen as 'instrumental', working and competing in the world as a breadwinner. This leads to stress and anxiety, which is relieved by the female, acting out her 'expressive' role providing care, love, warmth and emotional support. This sexual division of labour Parsons believed was based on biological differences.

Criticisms of functionalism

- The nuclear family was common in pre-industrial societies (Laslett, Wilmott and Young) because of short life expectancy and cottage industry.
- Early industrial society featured the extended family as means of mutual support in times of major social change and hardship (Anderson)
- The functionalist view of women's role simply justifies their oppression (feminism)
- In other societies, men and women take very different roles (feminist – Oakley. The nuclear family produces problems and misery as well as harmony - such as mental illness and domestic violence (radical psychiatrists, feminists)
- The extended family still exists in modern/late modern society albeit sometimes in a different form to the three generational household.

MARXIST PERSPECTIVES

Unlike functionalism, Marxism emphasises **conflict and inequalities** and, in particular, **the dominance of the economy** over other institutions such as the family.

Main Themes

- the nature of the family is determined by the economic system - in modern society it serves the interests of capitalism
- in early communal society, the family was not needed - it only became necessary with the accumulation of wealth and the need to defend it (Engels)
- the family provides a steady supply of new workers for the economy at no extra charge
- these workers are socialised by the family into discipline and the 'correct' attitudes of obedience and acceptance of hierarchy
- the family provides a 'safety valve' - a release from alienation and oppression at work – thereby allowing that oppression to continue by making it more bearable (Zaretsky)
- by giving workers' family responsibilities, it encourages them to work and reduces their bargaining power
- it is a unit of consumption e.g. media adverts target children.
- it acts as an 'ideological state apparatus' defending the status quo, patriarchy and power the role of the wife is to maintain the worker and absorb his frustrations

Engels: Evolutionary theory of human development

With the rise of private property an organised system of inheritance was necessary - fathers needed to be sure that property was passed to their offspring.

Monogamy arose to serve the interests of the economy and women were brought increasingly into the privacy of the home and family, under the domination of men - previously they had been equally involved in the public sphere.

Criticisms of Marxist views of the family

- Presumes a universal nuclear family where the husband works and the wife stays at home. Disregards the increasing variety in family and household composition in recent years
- Overly deterministic assuming the dominance of the economy
- Too based on modern western society - there are many variations worldwide
- The family serves the interests of men and patriarchy as well as capitalism (feminism)
- Seen by some as too biased and negative, starting from an ideological position that condemns the family as an agency of capitalist values

FEMINIST PERSPECTIVES

Like Marxism, feminism is a 'conflict' approach to sociological theory. However, whereas for Marxists the family serves the interests of capitalism, for feminists it serves the interests of men. Feminists of various types see the family as a prime site of female oppression.

1 Liberal feminists advocate increasing gender equality through the law and changing societal values. They claim that power relations and the division of labour within marriage are becoming more equal, whilst gender socialisation is less pronounced than in the past. This is largely as a consequence of changes in women's work patterns and through equality legislation. However, liberal feminists underestimate the strength of patriarchal attitudes and structures so merely changing the law doesn't bring about fundamental change.

2 Marxist-feminists

- Female subordination is the product of capitalism which benefits in many ways.
- Marxist-feminists argue that wives ('service' workers), produce and socialise new workers, producing more 'surplus value' (profit) for the economy (Benston)
- Women not only provide this unpaid role but also provide a 'reserve army of labour' - extra, cheap and temporary workers who can be engaged and sacked as and when they are needed by the economy.
- Women are the 'takers of shit', absorbing many of the pressures created by capitalism – male worker alienation under capitalism can lead to domestic violence.
- Radical feminists claim that class is less important than gender.

3 Radical feminists

- Society is fundamentally patriarchal. Men are the cause of female exploitation, controlling them through domestic violence.
- Marriage and the family are the key foci of female oppression, where men get sexual services and domestic labour.
- The socialisation of women into the mother/housewife role is seen as a form of oppression.
- Historically and in other cultures, women have been more independent - it was largely men and industrialisation that 'put them in the home'.
- The solution is to end patriarchy, creating all-female households and abolishing the family.
- However, radical feminists may over-estimate the extent of female inequality and underestimate the advances that have been made in employment, education etc.

4 Difference feminists are wary of generalising about all women having the same experience of the family. They see class, sexuality and especially ethnicity as creating differences in family experience. For black feminists, the family = protection against racism.

The Personal Life perspective

Whereas the preceding perspectives are all structural theories which tend to examine the functions the family performs for society, this new approach starts from the idea that it is important to focus on the meanings family members give to their relationships.

- This is influenced partly by postmodernism which stresses the pluralism, diversity and fragmentation of modern life and which argues there is no single overarching, dominant 'truth'.
- It is also influenced by interactionist ideas that we are not just the puppets of society but capable of making choices.
- Personal life approaches argue that family relationships do not mean the same to everyone – there is no single husband-wife, sister-brother, father-son etc relationship.
- Many relationships – broader than the 'usual' family relationships – are important in our sense of identity e.g. friends, other networks, social media contacts and pets can all be potentially more important to our sense of who we are.
- Although useful in understanding the meanings 'family' have to individuals, this approach neglects the impact of social forces in determining who we are.

2 SOCIAL POLICY, IDEOLOGY AND THE FAMILY

Key Issues

- What is meant by social policy and by ideology in relation to the family?
- What are the different sociological perspectives on the role of social policy in relation to the family?
- In particular, what is the New Right view of the family and how much does this influence family policy?
- Does government policy support one particular type of family?

EXAM GUIDANCE

AS: Small mark questions at **AS** will usually ask you to outline one or more policies and how they affect the family or reflect a particular view/form of the family. So you need to have some examples ready to use.

AS and AL: 10 mark questions are likely to ask for two policies and how they may support a particular form of the family or possibly two sociological views of the role of social policy and the family. Essay questions could ask if social policies reinforce traditional forms of the family, or if they fail to do so. Here it will be important to see there is a mixed message here - some polices appear to support and others do not.

Ideology

An ideology is a **set of ideas** - values, beliefs and knowledge - that explain the way society is structured. This set of ideas serve to justify and legitimate social action and behaviour. It also justifies elements of our culture, such as the family. Ideology therefore shapes the way we view the world - what we think of as a 'family' and what views we have towards it. This view, then, is likely to be a selective and partial one.

Marxist and feminist sociologists often refer to **dominant ideologies**. This means that those who are in more powerful positions are able to ensure that their ideas dominate the view of the world held by all the rest. Their view of the world is then seen as natural or inevitable.

Marxists stress the dominant ideology of the ruling class, whereas **feminists** focus on the way ideology helps maintain men's 'exploitation' of women.

Policies

Social policies are those laws, actions, taxation, spending programmes etc planned by the state that affect groups in society. Laws about marriage and divorce, adoption, child protection, education, social care of dependents (old, young, disabled) etc all affect family life.

These policies often reflect a particular view (sometimes views) of how the family should operate – in other words, they may have an ideological basis.

Views of social policy and the family

Functionalism sees social policies such as the welfare state, NHS etc as supporting the family, helping it to function more efficiently.

However, this 'march of progress' view can be criticised as some family policies can make life more difficult for some families.

Donzelot argues that social policies allow the state to monitor and intervene in family life, especially in those families seen as 'social problems'.

For example, Parenting Orders and compulsory school attendance are legal tools that force parents to control the behaviour of their children.

Apparently benign state agencies such as social work departments are effectively maintaining surveillance over families.

Marxists see social policies towards the family as protecting the interests of the ruling class, perpetuating the idea that hierarchy and inequality are justifiable.

Feminists argue that social policies reinforce patriarchal attitudes and structures. These include:

- assumes women will be involved in childcare
- school hours and holidays make it difficult for both parents to be employed full-time and it is usually women who work part-time as a result
- lack of state assistance for the elderly who live with relatives generally means that women are expected to do the caring
- there are still differences in the ways men and women are treated; also married and unmarried couples.

Even policies that appear to support women, like maternity leave, can work against them as paternity leave is shorter – reinforcing the message that child care is primarily the woman's responsibility.

The New Right and the family

A major ideological influence on social policies towards the family is that of the New Right.

A neo-liberal view of the family, this emphasises two-parent nuclear family based on heterosexual marriage between two parents as self-reliant and the 'building block' of society. Parental roles are divided by gender.

Main concern = that the contemporary family is under threat and breaking down. New Right contributors often link these trends to a wide range of social problems such as crime, youth subcultures, drink and drug abuse etc.

- High level of lone parent families
- Increasing teenage pregnancies
- Lack of male role models in families
- Increasing number of same-sex relationships

New Right: causes of family decline

The New Right argue that family breakdown is caused by a number of factors:

- Decline of traditional social values about the centrality of the family
- Feminist ideas have undermined the family
- The 'sexual revolution' since the 1960s - greater sexual permissiveness

The role played by social policy in decline of traditional family:

Civil Partnerships and gay marriage (2014) puts same-sex marriage on a par with heterosexual marriage.

Legal changes making divorce much easier undermines the key family relationship

Welfare benefits: Murray and others claim welfare benefits are too high and offer perverse incentives in that the state will take responsibility for lone-parent families. These create a **dependency culture**.

Solutions?

- Government policies to support the traditional family structure
- A return to traditional family values
- A less generous welfare state

Criticisms of New Right

Feminists such as Abbott and Wallace (1992) see the New Right ideas as a form of patriarchy. Attacks on single parent families are expressions of the view that a woman's place is in the home. Feminists also argue that, if the welfare state is 'rolled back' as the New Right wish, then it will be women who will be expected to pick up the responsibilities.

Their fundamental assumption that the patriarchal family is the 'natural' family structure is wrong.

Marxists see New Right views as an ideological justification for capitalism. They argue that poverty and inequality are not the fault of the individual but a result of the way the society is structured.

Policies and the family

Conservative governments tend to be more traditional in their approach to family policy. However, most governments whether Conservative-led or Labour have introduced policies some of which have reflected New Right views and some which have not.

Conservative governments 1979-97

- Banned teaching that homosexuality was an appropriate family relationship; set up Child Support Agency to chase absent fathers for maintenance payments.
- But gave illegitimate children the same rights as those born into a marriage.

New Labour governments 1997-2010

Still a strong emphasis on the importance of the family but also supported diverse family forms:

- Longer maternity leave, plus paternity leave
- Working Families Tax Credit - allowing the claiming of tax relief to enable parents to work without losing income through childcare costs.
- New Deal - to help single parents return to paid employment
- Help with childcare for single mothers
- Increased Child benefit
- Sure Start programme to help low earners
- Civil partnerships for same-sex couples
- Making discrimination on the grounds of sexuality illegal.

Conservative-Liberal Democrat Coalition government 2010-15 and Conservative government 2015 onwards

- Coalition government introduced gay marriage
- Austerity changes to tax and benefits reducing the role of the state is in line with New Right ideas about a small, non-interventionist state.
- Poorer families (lone-parent families affected more by this) face losing the tax credits introduced by Labour.

Evaluation

Many government policies support traditional family values and structures. The extent to which this comes through in policies does vary. Past Conservative government have placed a stronger emphasis on this, New Labour has taken a softer line accepting family diversity and increasing help to disadvantaged groups including lone parents. More recently, David Cameron, the Conservative leader has adopted a similar tone.

3 DEMOGRAPHY

Demography is the study of population trends and their causes and consequences. Commonly demography looks at population size and age composition. This means examining birth rates, death rates, emigration and immigration.

The UK has had a growing population over the past 100 years.

UK 1901 - 38 million

2014 - 65 million.

The UK's population is projected to grow by a further 10+ million in the next 25 years.

The causes of population change are

- Natural - births and deaths
- Migration - immigration to and emigration from a country.

The main reasons for the UK's changing population size used to be natural ones, now it is the result of net migration.

EXAM GUIDANCE

AS: Small mark questions at **AS** will usually ask you to outline one or more reasons for demographic changes such as falling death and birth rates – or their effects.

AS and AL: 10 mark questions are likely to ask for two reasons for demographic changes such to birth rates, death rates, immigration etc. Alternatively, questions could ask about the implications of such changes. Essay questions could ask for explanations of changes in the demographic composition of the UK and/or their effects.

Births

3 measures of births:

- raw numbers of births
- birth rate (number per 1000 members of the population)
- TFR - total fertility rate i.e. the average number of children a woman would have during her life.

All three measures of births have fallen in the UK since 1900.

Implications

A falling birth rate means a falling population UNLESS the death rate falls at the same or a greater pace or if migration patterns compensate.

Reasons for a falling birth rate

Falling infant mortality rate: previously high (154/1000 in 1900, now it is 5). As so few infants die, there is no pressure on families to have more children to compensate for these losses. The IMR has fallen because of better hygiene, housing and sanitation, greater knowledge of disease, improved welfare services and preventative action that has eradicated many earlier childhood killers.

Changes in role of women: better access to divorce, abortion, contraception etc; better access to education and paid employment; changing social attitudes to marriage, divorce, children etc have all contributed to a falling birth rate.

Child centredness: in society and the family through legal changes to position of children, changing values, longer periods of dependency because of education all contribute to a falling birth rate. Children are an expensive investment.

Deaths

3 measures of death:

- raw numbers of deaths
- death rate (number per 1000 members of the population)
- Infant Mortality Rate - deaths under the age of one year per 1000 live births

In the UK, the death rate has fallen from 18 to 9 between 1900 and 2005.

The IMR has fallen from 154 in 1900 to 5 in 2005

Implications

Population growth has happened until recently because the falling death rate has more than balanced the falling birth rate.

The falling death rate has led to increased life expectancy (1901: males 45 yrs, females 49 yrs, 2005 males 77 yrs, females 81 yrs). This produces an ageing population.

Reasons for a falling death rate

- **Improved public health:** public sanitation, housing improvements, clean water, clean air all resulting from central and local government policies.
- **Medical improvements:** widespread immunisation has virtually eradicated most major diseases (although the 'diseases of affluence' e.g. heart disease have to a limited extent taken their place). Antibiotics since the late 1930s have also reduced deaths.
- **Better nutrition:** laws controlling food quality and higher living standards have created potentially better diets.
- **Occupational change:** the decline in heavy manual work reduced risks of illness and death.
- **Improved welfare provision:** vulnerable groups e.g. the elderly are better cared for and so are likely to live longer.

Other demographic patterns

- Life expectancy has risen markedly in the last 100 years.
- There are major class differences in life expectancy – which causes regional differences too.
- There are major gender differences, with women living longer.

Implications of changes to birth and death rates

- Smaller families and extended education mean women more able to go into paid employment.
- Impact on **dependency ratio** – fewer dependent children, but in future, fewer workers of the future means fewer people supporting an ageing population who are dependent on them for economic security. The previous 'age pyramid' with disproportionately fewer older people is being turned into a sequence of fairly similarly sized age groupings.
- Impact on public services – decline in need for schools but increase in older population means more demand for care and health services.
- Rise in one-person elderly households – mostly females.
- Impact on social policy. This is not just about housing issues, social services and health care, but how society finances an ageing population.
- Effect on family life – family may be expected to take lead in care for the elderly.
- Class and gender differences carry on into old age with great inequalities in pension incomes and wealth.
- Politically, the elderly have become a major voting bloc.
- The definitions of 'old', 'elderly' and 'retirement' may well change – the last for example, being defined as something you reach a lot later in life than previously.

Migration

- Emigration = number of people leaving a country
- Immigration = number of people entering a country
- Net migration = Immigration - emigration

Migration – especially immigration – is a highly politicised issue. The 'targets' of those concerned that immigration is a problem have changed with Islamophobia developing post 9/11 and more recently, anti-eastern European settlement.

Emigration from the UK

- Until the 1980s, the UK experienced more emigration than immigration.
- Emigration was mainly to the USA and the old British Commonwealth countries of Australia, New Zealand and Canada.
- Most emigrants were young adults.
- The main reasons were economic.
- Immediately after the Second World War (1945), a weak UK economy encouraged people to leave.
- More recently emigration has also been to the member states of the EC.

Immigration into the UK

- In the first part of the 20th century, most immigrants to the UK were Irish or (in smaller numbers) east Europeans.
- In the 1950s, immigration from the Caribbean increased.
- In the 1960s and 1970s, there was immigration from the Indian sub-continent and of Asians from East Africa.
- In the last 20 years, most immigrants have been from Europe.
- The main causes of immigration have been economic and political persecution. (The UK government advertised in the Caribbean in the 1950s for workers; Asians were driven out of some East African countries in the 1960s/1970s).
- Since the early 1980s, immigration controls have limited movement from non-European countries.

Outcomes

- In the past 20 years, immigration has outweighed emigration and the annual net migration into the UK is currently around 200,000 a year.
- This is mainly the result of the entry into the EC of many east European states.

Recent changes to immigration

- Globalisation has increased the amount of immigration.
- Immigration to Britain is now from a wider range of countries of origin rather than from a few former colonies.
- Some immigrants are relatively wealthy or possess professional skills needed by the host country e.g. health professionals. Others are poorer, filling often poorly paid service sector jobs.
- Previously most immigrants were men, now the pattern is more or less equal between men and women. This is the result of an increased demand for domestic and care workers in developed countries like the UK.
- Immigration has always been a highly politicised issue but is even more so today with many voters in the 2015 General Election identifying it as a major concern. Marxists would argue that this provides the basis for a ruling class dividing the working class.

4 CHILDHOOD

Key Issues

- What is meant by social construction of childhood?
- What is the cross-cultural and historical evidence for childhood being a social construct?
- What are the different sociological perspectives on the nature of childhood in contemporary Britain?
- Has the experience of childhood improved or is it 'toxic'?

EXAM GUIDANCE

AS: Small mark questions at **AS** will usually ask you to outline one or more ways in which childhood is controlled, toxic, or unequal. Alternatively, there's room here for questions asking you to outline the reasons for changes to the position of children in Britain.

AS and AL: 10 mark questions are likely to ask for two inequalities between children and adults or two arguments for childhood being socially constructed. Essay questions could ask for explanations of changes in the position of children or if these changes have benefited children or not.

Childhood is 'socially constructed'

- Social construction means that something is created by society. It is not the result of biology; not the 'natural' way of things, but a set of ideas created in society.
- Age is a biological fact but ideas about age are socially constructed.
- The key test is whether what is seen as childhood is the same in every society and in all historical periods. If not, then what explains the differences? It must be what goes on in society.
- 'Childhood' is not the same in different societies and at different points in time. There are variations in terms of expectations of behaviour and capabilities, rights and responsibilities, dress and appearance, legal status, economic role, how long childhood lasts etc. These vary historically and between societies (and within societies too).

Childhood: cross-cultural examples

There are many examples of hugely different expectations of children in different societies. These include:

- child soldiers
- indigenous Bolivian tribes expect children to work from age of 5 years
- Malinowski found tolerance of sexual activity by children amongst the Trobriand Islanders

These examples show that 'childhood' is not a natural state but is socially defined.

Historical evidence

Phillipe Ariès (1962) - 'Centuries of Childhood'

- In medieval society the idea of childhood did not exist. 'Childhood' did not begin to appear until the fifteenth century.
- After the dependent stage of infancy, children from the age of five or six were 'absorbed into the world of adults' and were companions to adults
- Children were not depicted differently from adults in medieval paintings

Neil Postman - 'The Disappearance of Childhood'

- Life was communal and informal and children were not protected from life.
- Dependence on an oral tradition means that there was little significant difference between children and adults

Where did modern ideas of childhood in western Europe come from?

- **Ariès** suggests that childhood as we know it emerged with industrialisation, although the upper and then middle classes began first to treat their children differently - working class children were still expected to work and their lives were much closer to the medieval ones.
- Although at first children provided cheap labour in the factories, from the 1830s Factory Acts limited the age from which they could be employed (to 10 years).
- By the twentieth century childhood was identified as a crucial period of development by doctors and psychologists, and children were later given special dietary, dental and medical care.
- Children's moral and social welfare became the concern of social services
- The decline in the birth rate and in infant mortality meant that families began to invest more time and affection in their small number of children.

Postman :

- A new definition of adulthood arose with the invention of the printing press and the spread of literacy.
- This led to a new conception of childhood and greater power of adults over children.
- Children were now seen as in need of control, discipline and obedience in order to become an adult.
- We now have a more child-centred form of learning but the status of childhood is still under the control of adults.

Reasons for changes to the position of children

- Industrialisation needs a skilled workforce requiring a longer time spent in education
- Compulsory schooling from the end of the 19th century
- Lower infant mortality rates mean families can put more investment into their children
- Growth of children's rights in UK and globally
- Legal changes to employment of young people
- Growth of social welfare provision for young people

Children and inequality

There are major inequalities between children and adults. This can be seen as the result of wanting to protect children or as a way of controlling them and socialising them into accepting hierarchy.

Economic inequality: compulsory schooling up to age 18, laws restricting child employment etc make children financially dependent.

Parental control over time and behaviour: parents direct the behaviour of children in virtually all ways, determining what they can do at a particular age (setting bedtimes, structuring their day) etc.

Control and surveillance: where children can go and when, is delineated, CCTV in children's play

areas, fear of strangers, perception of some children (e.g. teenagers) as problematic, state intervention through social services, schools etc.

Inequalities between children – class, gender and ethnicity

Boys are more likely to be allowed more leeway in their behaviour, especially outside the home, girls seen as more vulnerable and in need of protection.

There is a close correlation between poverty and more restricted physical and intellectual development as well as educational under-achievement.

The experience of childhood is different in different ethnic groups, often girls are particularly controlled and their behaviour closely monitored.

In whose interests?

- ‘March of Progress’ theorists argue that much of the above has been introduced in the interests of children e.g. preventing employers from exploiting them economically or protecting them from adult sexual exploitation.
- **Gittins** sees this as ‘age patriarchy’ – adult men controlling children in similar ways to those they use to control women. However, some of what is seen as adult control of children may simply be normal socialisation into socially acceptable behaviour. Some state intervention is also clearly for the protection of children from abuse or neglect.

Childhood in the UK – progress or ‘toxic’?

‘March of Progress’ theorists

Aries and others believe that there has been a steady and sustained improvement in the position of children. Children in modern society have more rights, greater protection against abuse and exploitation, higher standard of living, better health, greater access to leisure and more access to education. Modern society is ‘child-centred’.

‘Toxic childhood’

Palmer argues that many changes to childhood are damaging to children. These include increasing obesity, much more testing in schools, alcohol and drug use, earlier sexual experience, online access to pornography, computer games and being targeted by advertisers.

Lee claims that childhood has become an ambiguous social category. There are tensions in their role and in the way adults treat them. Children are controlled – supported, dependent – independent. affluent – exploited. media savvy - exploited by media.

5 COUPLES

Key Issues

- What are the main sociological theories about couples?
- What is the nature of couples in relation to the domestic division of labour, housework, decision-making and domestic violence?
- What are the cultural and material explanations for changes in the nature of couple’s relationships?

EXAM GUIDANCE

AS: Small mark questions at **AS** will usually ask you to outline one or more characteristics of the symmetrical family or ways in which couples’ relationships remain unequal or explanations of why the level of domestic violence may be under-represented in official statistics.

AS and AL: 10 mark questions are likely to ask for two explanations of changes to the domestic division of labour or for domestic violence. Essay questions could ask about materialist and/or cultural explanations of the nature of couple-dom or whether couples are now more equal.

Are couples becoming more equal?

Studies have examined this in terms of how far gender roles in the family have become similar, housework, childcare, decision-making, control of finances and domestic abuse/violence.

Sociological perspectives

Functionalism: sees gender roles in the family as clearly divided – men fulfill the instrumental role through paid employment while women carry out the expressive role caring for children etc. This is seen as reflecting ‘natural’ differences between men and women.

'March of Progress' theories: Willmott and Young see family life as steadily improving and moving towards more symmetrical roles. Women go out to work, couples are more socially and geographically mobile and have a generally higher standard of living than in the past.

Feminism: is highly critical of functionalism and the rosy view put forward by March of Progress' theorists. Oakley argues that husbands 'helping' doesn't equate to symmetry.

1 Housework

In terms of how much domestic work is done by gender, most recent data indicates women still do twice as much as men.

Domestic tasks are heavily gender focused e.g. men doing diy, women doing cooking.

Attitudes appear to be changing with around 10% of people holding the traditional view of gender roles in the home.

Interpretation? There seems to be room for both the 'March of Progress' and feminism to see these patterns as evidence for their views.

2 Childcare

Boulton - 'On Being a Mother'(1983)

- Found that men often helped but never took primary responsibility
- Women were more likely to put their own lives and interests second
- Only 18% of husbands gave extensive help; 46% gave minimal help

Ferri and Smith (1996) 'Parenting in the 1990s'

- Found similar results to Boulton
- Little evidence of more equal sharing of household chores
- Father was main carer in fewer than 4% of families
- Fathers still rarely looked after children when they were ill
- Women's employment seems to have had little impact on the sharing of tasks

Braun et al (2011)

Most men were 'background fathers'

Both fathers and mothers mainly held traditional views of the breadwinner-primary carer division.

Duncombe and Marsden (1995) - the 'Triple Shift'

Identified another area of work usually done by women - 'emotion work' - keeping people happy, making everything go smoothly

See women as learning this types of emotional skills and holding relationships together by 'doing the emotion work' - many men did not realise there was a 'problem'.

Saw women therefore as doing a 'triple shift' ('triple shift' = most of the housework + paid employment + most of the emotion work.)

Sociological explanations

Cultural explanations: emphasise the importance of society's norms determining behaviour. Gershuny found that the children of parents who shared domestic work more equally then later in life themselves took a similar line. Support for the traditional view of domestic division of labour is more pronounced among older people. Lesbian couples are also more likely to share domestic tasks more equally.

Material explanations: see the key factor as who does how much paid employment. Where both partners work full-time, domestic tasks are more equally shared. Paid work also has a similar effect within same-sex couples. Social class cuts across this as well with middle-class women being able to do less domestic work as help is bought in.

However one problem in many studies is that men tend to over-estimate and women under-estimate the amount of time they spend on domestic tasks. The amount of time spent also doesn't tell us which tasks are the most important or which are the most boring.

3 Decision-making

Edgell (1980) 'Middle Class Couples'

Husbands dominated three areas of decision-making - moving house, finance and car - all seen as important by both partners

Wives dominated decisions on internal decorations, children's clothes, domestic spending on things like food - all seen as relatively unimportant by both partners. Half the husbands and wives

interviewed saw equality as a bad thing

NB Davis (1991) suggests that this approach is flawed as it does not take account of the ways in which power and persuasion can be exercised in a number of subtle ways. She suggests that many women accept the situation or may use their social and manipulative skills to undermine men's power.

Finance

Pahl (1993) 'Money, Marriage and Ideology'

Described four patterns, depending on type of bank account and who had control:

- **husband-controlled pooling** - most common. Money shared but husband had most control. Wife often had lower income.
- **wife-controlled pooling** - Next most common. Money shared but wife did most of spending and paying bills. Often where couple both had well-paid jobs.
- **husband-control** - husband often had main or only wage and complete control. Wife often only given housekeeping money.
- **wife-control** - least common. Often where there was low income or no earner. Women given responsibility of 'making ends meet'.

Therefore, in just over 25% of couples, there was some degree of equality, but in most cases men had more power.

Men spent more on themselves. Women were more likely to go short themselves to have more for husband and children.

Vogler (1994)

- Found fewer women were given housekeeping money than in Pahl's study
- Pooling increased to 50%, but majority still had unequal financial control (80%), despite the increase in women's employment.
- Wife-controlled systems were still usually in struggling low-income households.

Hardill (1997) – study of dual-career middle-class couples found men's careers usually came first and men made the important decisions.

Evaluation

Pooling money does not necessarily mean equality – it then depends who makes decisions about the pooled money.

It is also about what the control/non-control of money means to individuals, some are not concerned if their partner in control of finances.

Weeks et al (2001) found the typical pattern to be pooling some money for specific household spending and keeping the remainder individually.

It is also going to depend on how much income the couple have.

4 Domestic Violence

Dobash and Dobash (1979) - 'Violence against Wives'

- In-depth interviews with 137 female victims. Found wife-battering is widespread - 25% of all serious assaults were domestic, though many go unrecorded.
- Argue that it is important to understand marital relationships in order to understand violence - women are made dependent as wives and mothers.
- This power relationship reflects the social norms and social inequalities in the wider society.
- Women often have to stay in the situation because of economic dependence and the absence of childcare facilities.

Other studies have built on this important early study finding:

- Women are likely to be victims of multiple attacks
- It is difficult to 'count' the number of incidents in the usual way as they often form a continuous process.
- There are severe psychological effects
- Domestic abuse is widespread and substantial (making up around 20% of all reported violent crimes).
- It is primarily carried out by men against women although domestic violence against men also occurs.
- Some groups of women are more at risk – women who are young, deprived, alcohol/drug abusers or disabled.

How much domestic violence?

- Official statistics are likely to substantially under-estimate the amount of domestic violence.
- Under-reporting of domestic violence is likely – fear of reprisals, economic dependency, family pressure, fear they will not be believed etc all make for a high level of under-reporting.
- Police and prosecution services may then not take cases forward because a major feeling is that the family is a private rather than public sphere, charges may be withdrawn or problems with evidence. The result is less than 10% of reported incidents result in prosecutions.

Sociological explanations of domestic violence

Radical feminists: male violence is an inevitable result of patriarchal society. Male dominance is ultimately enforced through violence and this is mainly accepted by male-dominated institutions like the police and the courts.

However, this does not explain female domestic violence against men, why some women are more at risk of being the victims of violence and violence within lesbian relationships.

Materialist explanation

Wilkinson and Pickett argue there is a close link between domestic abuse and inequality – low income, poor housing and job insecurity are all factors that fuel domestic violence.

However, this doesn't explain why it is predominantly women who are the victims

As with the radical feminist view, it doesn't explain why some men in these circumstances do not commit acts of domestic violence.

6 FAMILY DIVERSITY

Modernist views of the family

These views – functionalist, New Right and the neo-conventional nuclear family approach see some form of the nuclear family as being the best family form in modern society.

Functionalism: Parsons' view is that there is a 'functional fit' between a geographically and socially mobile workforce and the nuclear family which has a gendered division of labour between the male breadwinner role and the female expressive role. Other family types do not function so well for modern society so they may be considered dysfunctional.

New Right:

- As the traditional family is seen as the best family form, diversity is seen as a threat. The New Right wish to defend the nuclear family and traditional morality.
- Diversity therefore means that the family is in a state of crisis, leading to breakdown and an increase in the levels of educational failure, delinquency and so on.
- In particular, lone-parent families are seen as a major threat as boys lack a strong male role model which leads to their educational failure and a lack of discipline.
- Cohabitation also produces a less stable family context.
- The New Right answer to this threat is to cut benefits, enforce responsibility on parents, as an attempt to reinforce the position of marriage and the traditional family.

Chester (1985) argues

- Most typical is now the 'neo-conventional' family, made up of two parents and a small number of children in which the wife is economically active.
- If we look at people's life-cycles rather than a 'snapshot' picture of the numbers of different types of households, we can see the continued importance of the nuclear family.
- Most people are still born into a nuclear family, most will be a member of one or two nuclear families during their lifetime, and most still see the nuclear family as the norm.

EXAM GUIDANCE

AS: Small mark questions at AS will usually ask you to outline one or more ways in which childhood is controlled, toxic, or unequal. Alternatively, there's room here for questions asking you to outline the reasons for changes to the position of children in Britain.

AS and AL: 10 mark questions are likely to ask for two causes of family diversity or two forms it might take. Essay questions could ask for an evaluation of the extent to which family diversity means the nuclear family is now less important/in decline. With these questions you may benefit from relating the changes to theories of the family, especially what it means for the functionalist approach.

Criticisms

Rhona and Robert Rapoport (1982) - Five types of Diversity

As a result of recent changes in society, there is more flexibility and choice of options for family living. Diversity in family form is a sign of a pluralistic society.

- **Organisational** different structures or ways of organising the household. Who is included, who earns a wage, who performs each role, and so on.
- **Cultural** - the nature of family life and relationships can vary considerably between different ethnic and cultural groups.
- **Class/economic** differences may be based on class, such as sharing of domestic roles and decisions, employing a nanny.
- **Life-course** the nature of the family can change over the life-course of the individual. For example, living in a nuclear family is more likely for those in their 30s than those in their 60s.
- **Cohort** individuals born at the same time may have similar experiences because of wider social and historical events, such as economic depression, war, expansion of education.

Ethnic Diversity: You will need to be able to refer to one or two types of ethnic diversity.

- Many **South Asian families** have a more traditional family structure - larger families, more extended, less joint conjugal roles. (However, Westwood and Bhachu (1988) argue that most Asian families are now based on the nuclear family, though they may have stronger kinship ties and more respect for the elderly.
- These differences are likely to have resulted from the fact that many Asian immigrants have come from a traditional agricultural economy where family patterns are more like pre-industrial Britain.
- **Black Caribbean families** are more likely to be single-parent families or 'mother households', in which the mother is the breadwinner and female kin and friends help out with childcare and other duties. However, this support is less likely in Britain than in the Caribbean and nuclear families are also common.
- **Feminists:** challenge the idea that biology determines the roles of husbands and wives. New Right ideas are an expression of patriarchal ideology. No evidence that children in lone-parent families are more likely to become young offenders – once social class is factored in.

Reasons for increased diversity

- effects of changes in marriage, cohabitation and divorce patterns
- effects of demographic changes - decline in birth and death rates
- effects of changing social attitudes
- changes in the position of women in society
- secularisation
- welfare support from the state
- increase in Britain in the variety of cultures and ethnicities
- changing patterns of social life
- historical events and periods

Postmodernism and the family

- Stacey (1996) argues that Western family arrangements are now diverse and fluid. This does not mean the emergence of another form of family - it no longer makes sense to ask what type of family is dominant. This fluid situation is here to stay and it would be impossible now to go back to having a single standard family type. Instead, social attitudes and social policies must adjust to the more diverse situation.
- Morgan (1996) sees diversity in family forms as evidence of the wider plurality and fragmentation in society - which characterises postmodern society. What were seen in the past to be exceptions to the family form are no longer problematic.

Individualisation thesis

This approach, influenced by postmodernist ideas, argues that in postmodern society people are freed from the fixed roles that defined earlier generations. Individuals have more freedom to choose their life courses.

Giddens argues that intimate relationships are based on choice and equality rather than the conventions of social norms e.g. same-sex couples. Couples remain together because they choose to not because society demands this of them. This does make relationships less stable.

Beck: traditional has less of a hold over people and the traditional patriarchal family with well-defined gender roles has been undermined by greater gender equality and individualism. The result is the

'negotiated' family – designed by those involved.

Criticisms: How much real choice do people have? All our decisions about relationships are taken within a social context and subject to social pressures. Class, ethnic and gender inequalities all impact on the decisions of individuals as do religious and other values.

7 CHANGING PATTERNS OF RELATIONSHIPS

Key Issues

- What have been the main changes in typical family and household structure in Britain in the last 40 years?
- What are the main reasons behind the increases in cohabitation, divorce, births outside marriage, single-parent families, reconstituted families, single person and couple households?
- What are the main reasons behind the decreases in first marriages, especially religious marriages, and the increase in remarriage?
- Why do New Right thinkers see these changes as disastrous for the traditional family?
- Do such changes mean that the family as an institution is disintegrating?

EXAM GUIDANCE

AS: Small mark questions at **AS** will usually ask you to outline one or more explanations of high divorce rates, declining marriage increased cohabitation etc.

AS and AL: 10 mark questions are likely to ask for two reasons for increased divorce, the effects of increased divorce, the decline in marriage, sociological explanations of the meaning of high divorce rate etc. Essay questions could ask for explanations of changes in family relationships or explanations of increased divorce.

MAIN CHANGES

Marriage and cohabitation

- **Marriage** in Britain reached its peak around 1970 and has since declined. There has been an overall decline in the number of marriages in last 30 years
- The greatest decline has been in the proportion of **first marriages**; a much higher proportion of marriages are now **re-marriages** - second or subsequent marriages, in which at least one partner has been married before (15% in 1971;40% in 2005).
- The **average age** at which people marry has also been rising. By 2005 this had risen to an average age at marriage of 32 for men and 29 for women.
- The proportion of **religious marriages** has decreased (61% are now civil ceremonies). Marriages can now be held in many more 'approved premises'
- **Cohabitation**
- By 1997, 24% of couples between the ages of 16-59 were cohabiting.
- Later marriages are often preceded by a period of cohabitation. Many marry only after the birth of a child.
- However, many choose not to marry at all - this seems to apply particularly to divorcees.
- The proportion of couples cohabiting has also been increased by the growing numbers of gay and lesbian couples and families.
- Increased cohabitation rates have been partly responsible for an increase in the proportion of births outside marriage. In 1992 75% of births outside marriage were registered by both parents, compared to 45% in 1971. This suggests that the births took place within a stable cohabiting relationship.

Divorce: recent trends

- Divorce has risen dramatically over the last century - from 800 petitions per year in 1900 to 160,000 per year in 1990.
- Since the mid-1990s, the number of divorces has fallen (mainly because the decline in marriage means that there are fewer married couples around to get divorced).
- However, the divorce rate has remained high. The divorce rate has increased from 2.1 divorces per 1000 married couples in 1961 to 13.5 in 1991.
- Many divorcees remarry later. By 1996 remarriages for one or both partners constituted 41% of all marriages.

Changes in divorce legislation

- 1949-50: Legal Aid Act gave assistance to those who could not afford to go to court
- 1970: Divorce Reform Act. One ground for divorce which was the 'irretrievable breakdown of the marriage'. No longer had to be a 'guilty party' and divorce by consent after separation allowed
- 1985: Time limit for divorce reduced from three to one year
- 1996: Family Law Bill required a 'period of reflection'. Later this was dropped
- 2014 Same-sex marriage – with same grounds for divorce as opposite-sex married couples.

Explanation of increased divorce

Secularisation

- The proportion of the population regularly attending some sort of religious institution has declined significantly, meaning that religious beliefs and religious vows have a less direct influence over large sections of the population.
- The increase in the number of civil marriages has meant that marriage is not seen by many as a religious institution, one in which unbreakable, sacred vows are made. The possibility of divorce is therefore greater.
- British society has become more diverse in terms of religion, ethnicity and culture. With the increase in marriages that bridge these divisions, couples are less likely to have a marriage ceremony conducted by one particular faith or denomination.

Changes in the law

- The laws relating to divorce have changed in a number of ways, most of which have made the acquisition of a divorce easier and quicker.
- Changes include the grounds for divorce, the speed of divorce, a shortening of the period of marriage necessary before a divorce can take place, the cost of divorce (easier through legal aid), the possibility of 'no blame' divorces. See the section on divorce for more details.
- Other important changes in the law have been those which have given women equal rights in terms of jobs, opportunities and finance.
- Alongside smaller families, the extension of laws protecting children have added to the overall increase in child-centredness.

Support from state

- Women in particular feel more able to support themselves independently as a lone mother or divorcee, since the state has provided help in terms of child benefit, income support etc.
- Families feel more able to leave elderly relatives to live on their own when the state can provide support for those old people through day-care, meals-on-wheels, supplementary pensions, carelines etc.

The position of women

- In the last 40 years, women have gained many rights and begun to achieve equally to men, in education and in work roles.
- The majority of women now have a career or a job and see this as an important part of their lives.
- These changes also mean that women generally feel more independent and able to support themselves without the help of a man.
- This has had a considerable effect on the level of divorce and also the numbers of women who feel able to bring up a child by themselves. In 1950, $\frac{3}{4}$ of divorce petitions were by men; by 1990, $\frac{3}{4}$ were made by women - this reflects their increased confidence to be independent.

More choices available

With less social pressure to conform and more opportunities available for individual achievement:

- Marriage and childbirth may be postponed because of career and education
- With more social mobility, there is less pressure or support from the extended family, which may lead to more divorce and more individual choice
- There may be a positive choice not to marry.

Changing social attitudes

- Many of the changes which have taken place have happened alongside and as a result of changing social attitudes. This becomes a 'snowball effect', as people see more and more examples of the changing types of household in their own lives.
- Attitudes towards cohabitation have changed - no longer seen as 'living in sin'. It has become quite a 'normal' situation, with new terms such as 'partner' regularly used.
- Similarly, marriage is no longer seen as so necessary, often as a possible later stage of full commitment.
- Attitudes to illegitimacy have become more tolerant as single-parent families have become more common. Even the terms 'illegitimate' and 'unmarried mother' seem to have been replaced by less judgemental terms such as 'single-parent family'.
- Attitudes to gay and lesbian relationships have become more open and tolerant
- we have begun to focus more closely on the needs and fulfilment of the individual and whatever is seen by him/herself as appropriate
- The cost of marriage may also have had an effect - there is some evidence that this factor now plays a role in decisions about marriage.
- As divorce has become more common, it has been seen less as a cause for scandal and gossip and more as a routine aspect of life which happens sometimes in most families.
- As divorce has become more common, this in itself may put some people off marriage and extend cohabitation.

Life expectancy

More people today survive into old age. This has a number of effects on household composition:

- Many couple households are composed of those whose children have left home
- As women on average live longer than men, many single-person households are made up of elderly women
- Because people expect to live a long time, they may put off marriage and childbirth until later
- This may lead to more single households and more cohabiting couples
- For women in particular, a long period of life is available after completing families
- In addition, the birth rate has also declined, resulting in a high proportion of small families.

Single-parent families

- By 1993, 22% of families with dependent children were headed by lone parents (8% in 1971). 20 % were headed by lone mothers and 2% by lone fathers. Britain has the second-highest rate of lone parenthood in Europe, after Denmark.
- In the past, most lone-parent families were the result of the death of one parent. By 1995, only 1% of the 20% of families headed by lone mothers were due to this cause; 12% were due to divorce or separation; 8% were single mothers who had never been married.
- Despite the focus of concern in recent years, the number of children born to single teenage mothers has fallen, though the British rate remains one of the highest in Europe.

Other important changes

- The number of **reconstituted families** has risen, as new nuclear families are formed when divorcees remarry.
- By 1998, 28% of households contained only **one person**. About half of these are elderly, particularly women; the other half are younger and likely to be divorcees or those who have not married.
- Another 34% of households contain only a **couple** - no children, or non-dependent children only.
- Asian families tend to be larger than other ethnic groups and are sometimes extended through three generations. There is a trend away from sharing the same house but replacing this with living close to each other.
- Black families have a higher proportion of lone-parent families. This is variously explained in terms of black women's demand for independence, the long-term effect of slavery or high rates of male desertion.

IMPLICATIONS OF THESE CHANGES - THEORETICAL PERSPECTIVES

Sociologists have disagreed about the implications of these changes for society and for the future of the family as an institution. On the one hand, New Right perspectives have seen them as a threat to the traditional family, resulting in many social problems. From a very different point of view, feminist sociologists have seen many of the changes as a liberating influence on our lives, particularly those of women. Others who are supporters of the family see the changes as less important, hiding what are in fact minor alterations to a relatively unchanging situation.

New Right/Neo-liberal perspectives

- Changes seen as a worrying challenge to the best family form - the traditional nuclear family
- An increase in promiscuity, cohabitation, divorce, illegitimacy, single-parent families are all seen as detrimental to the family. Easier divorce and abortion etc. are seen as threatening.
- Even feminism and equal rights may be seen as undermining the essential differences in the traditional roles of men and women.
- State support is seen as costing too much, an encouragement to immorality and welfare scrounging and reducing individual responsibility.
- Criticism has focused on single young mothers. Single parent families are seen as a 'defective' form of family that cannot function properly.
- Lack of a traditional family structure leads to a lack of adequate socialisation and male role model, resulting in educational failure, juvenile delinquency and drug abuse.
- Murray claims that single parenthood has contributed to creating an underclass.

Feminist Perspectives

- Women have less to gain from marriage and divorce may allow them to escape from conflict and/or violence.
- Many of the changes are positively good for women because they reflect women's increased ability to feel independent.
- many of the problems cited as resulting from single-parent families are more likely to be due to poverty and the result of 'bad' rather than 'broken' homes.
- Dallos and Sapsford (1995) show that lone-parenting may now be a matter of positive choice.
- Feminists may criticise New Right views on lone mothers, pointing out that there is little 'incentive' in gaining the low income and poor housing provided by the state.

Postmodernists – the individuation thesis

- Individuals are increasingly able to make relationships that reflect their individual needs.
- Consequently, relationship ties are not as strong as in modern and traditional societies; the old ideas of duty such as staying together for the sake of the children no longer have as much hold on people.
- This can have effects in a number of areas of the family. It means that the marriage tie is less strong, women can build their own careers outside the family and traditional gender roles, serial monogamous relationships are more likely, lone parenthood can be a deliberate choice etc.

Does this point to the disintegration of the family?

A number of sociologists have shown ways in which the family is still maintained, rather than disintegrating, despite all these changes:

- Dennis (1993) suggests that many single parent families have 'committed' fathers.
- Cohabitation and births outside marriage often conceal what are, in all other ways, stable nuclear families.
- Chester (1985) argues that most reconstituted families are 'neo-conventional' families, made up of two parents and a small number of children, with long-term commitment. The main change is that the wife is now much more likely to be economically active.
- Brown (1995) points out that we now have fewer 'shotgun weddings' than in the past. This leads to more cohabitation and fewer rushed marriages, which may actually mean more stability.
- Similarly, Gillis (1985) suggests that the hundred years between 1850 and 1960 were exceptional - before this period couples often lived together and only married once a child was expected.

FAMILIES AND HOUSEHOLDS REVISION NOTES: REDUCED VERSION

1 THEORIES OF THE FAMILY

Key Issues

- What are the functionalist, Marxist and feminist perspectives on the role of the family in society?
- What does the Personal Life perspective have to say about the meaning of 'family'?

FUNCTIONALISM

- Society = based on value consensus which enables survival.
- Social system made up of sub-systems that contribute to the good of the whole system. The family is one such sub-system.
- Stresses positive role of the family for society and individuals.

Murdock (1949)

Family = universal because is best way of meeting society's needs.

Family performs 4 basic functions serving both society and its individual members:

sexual – reproductive - economic – educational.

Parsons (1959)

In modern societies the family performs two 'basic and irreducible' functions:

primary socialisation of children - internalising society's culture

stabilisation of adult personalities - adults gain stability from emotional security.

= process of '**structural differentiation**' as society industrialised, family lost some functions to other specialist institutions (e.g. health, education, religion).

= '**functional fit**' between types of society and types of family. The isolated nuclear family fits industrial society because: has geographical and social and status is mainly achieved, not ascribed

Male and female partners perform different functions. Male role = 'instrumental' - the breadwinner. This leads to stress and anxiety, which is relieved by the female, acting out her 'expressive' role providing care, love, warmth and emotional support.

Criticisms of functionalism

- Nuclear family = common in pre-industrial societies (Laslett, Wilmott and Young).
- Early industrial society featured the extended family as means of mutual support.
- The functionalist view of women's role simply justifies their oppression (feminism)
- The nuclear family produces problems and misery as well.
- The extended family still exists in modern/late modern society.

MARXIST PERSPECTIVES

Main Themes

- the family serves the interests of capitalism - in early communal society, the family was not needed
- the family provides a steady, free supply of new workers for the economy
- children socialised by the family into obedience and acceptance of hierarchy
- the family makes oppression more bearable (Zaretsky)
- by giving workers' family responsibilities, it encourages them to work
- = unit of consumption e.g. media adverts target children.

Engels: with rise of private property, inheritance was necessary – monogamy arose to serve the interests of the economy and women were brought into the privacy of the home and family, under the domination of men.

Criticisms

- Disregards the increasing variety in family and household composition.
- Overly deterministic assuming the dominance of the economy
- Too based on modern western society - there are many variations worldwide
- The family serves the interests of men and patriarchy as well as capitalism.

FEMINIST PERSPECTIVES

Feminism = 'conflict' approach - the family serves the interests of men. Feminists of various types see the family as a prime site of female oppression.

Liberal feminists increase gender equality through changing laws and societal values. Power relations and division of labour = becoming more equal, gender socialisation is less pronounced than in the past.

However, liberal feminists underestimate the strength of patriarchal attitudes.

Marxist-feminists

- Female subordination is the product of capitalism, wives ('service' workers), produce and socialise new workers, = more 'surplus value' for the economy
- Women provide a 'reserve army of labour' - extra, cheap and temporary workers
- Women are the 'takers of shit', absorbing many of the pressures created by capitalism
- Radical feminists claim that class is less important than gender.

Radical feminists

- Society = patriarchal. Men = cause of female exploitation, controlling them
- Marriage and the family = female oppression
- Women socialised into the mother/housewife role = oppression
- = largely men and industrialisation that 'put women in the home'.
- The solution is to end patriarchy and abolishing the family.
- However, radical feminists may underestimate the advances in work, education etc.

Difference feminists - sexuality and especially ethnicity create differences in family experience. For black feminists, the family can be a protection against racism.

The Personal Life perspective

Preceding perspectives = structural theories; this new approach starts from the idea that it is important to focus on the meanings family members give to their relationships.

- influenced by postmodernism stressing pluralism, diversity and fragmentation.
- people capable of making choices.
- family relationships do not mean same to everyone
- Many relationships – broader than the 'usual' family relationships – are important in our sense of identity e.g. friends, social media contacts and pets.
- However, neglects the impact of social forces in determining who we are.

2 SOCIAL POLICY, IDEOLOGY AND THE FAMILY

Ideology = set of ideas - values, beliefs and knowledge - that justifies and legitimates social action and behaviour. = shapes the way we view the world - what we think of as a 'family' and what views we have towards it.

Marxist and feminist sociologists refer to **dominant ideologies** - those in more powerful positions ensure their ideas dominate the view of the world held by the rest.

Marxists dominant ideology = of ruling class, **feminists** = men's 'exploitation' of women.

Policies

= laws, actions, taxation, spending programmes etc by the state e.g. laws about marriage, divorce, adoption, child protection, education, social care of dependents.

These reflect a particular view of how the family should operate – in other words, they may have an ideological basis.

Theories and policies

Functionalism sees social policies = helping family to function more efficiently.

However, some family policies can make life more difficult for some families.

Donzelot - social policies = state to monitor and intervene in 'social problems' e.g. Parenting Orders and compulsory school attendance. State agencies maintaining surveillance.

Marxists see social policies towards the family as protecting the interests of the ruling class.

Feminists argue that social policies reinforce patriarchal attitudes and structures e.g. assumes women will be involved in childcare, lack of state assistance for the elderly means that women are expected to do the caring

Even policies that appear to support women, like maternity leave, paternity leave is shorter – reinforcing message that child care is primarily the woman's responsibility.

The New Right

= major ideological influence on social policies towards the family. = neo-liberal view emphasising two-parent nuclear family - heterosexual marriage - self-reliant and the 'building block' of society. Parental roles are divided by gender.

Main concern = contemporary family is breaking down. Link changes in family to social problems e.g. crime, youth subcultures, drink and drug abuse etc.

Increasing number of lone parent families, teenage pregnancies, same-sex relationships and lack of male role models in families.

New Right: causes of family decline

Decline of traditional social values about the centrality of the family, feminism, 'sexual revolution' since the 1960s,

Social policy and decline of traditional family

Civil Partnerships and gay marriage, legal changes making divorce much easier, welfare benefits = perverse incentives - create dependency culture.

Solutions?

Government policies to support traditional family value less generous welfare state.

Criticisms

Feminists - New Right ideas as a form of patriarchy - a woman's place is in the home.

If welfare state is 'rolled back', women will pick up the responsibilities. Fundamental assumption that the patriarchal family is the 'natural' family structure is wrong.

Marxists New Right = ideological justification for capitalism. They argue that poverty and inequality are not the fault of the individual but a result of the way the society is structured.

Policies and the Family

Most governments have introduced policies some of which have reflected New Right views and some which have not.

Conservative governments 1979-97

Banned teaching that homosexuality was an appropriate family relationship; set up Child Support Agency – but illegitimate children the same rights as those born into a marriage.

New Labour governments 1997-2010

Still a strong emphasis on the importance of the family but also supported diverse family forms: longer maternity leave, paternity leave, Working Families Tax Credit, New Deal; help with childcare for single mothers, increased child benefit, Sure Start, Civil partnerships for same-sex couples, discrimination on the grounds of sexuality illegal.

Conservative-Liberal Democrat Coalition government 2010-15 and Conservative government 2015 onwards

Gay marriage, reducing the role of the state = a small, non-interventionist state.

Poorer families (lone-parent families affected more by this) face losing the tax credits.

Evaluation

Many government policies support traditional family values and structures.

Conservative governments placed stronger emphasis on this, New Labour has taken a softer line accepting family diversity and increasing help to disadvantaged groups.

3 DEMOGRAPHY

The UK has had a growing population over the past 100 years.

UK 1901 - 38 million, 2014 - 65 million, projected to grow further 10+ million in 25 years.

The causes of population change are Natural - births and deaths – and migration.

Main reasons for change used to be natural ones, now it is the result of net migration.

Births

Three measures of births: raw numbers, birth rate (per 1000), TFR - total fertility rate.

All three measures of births have fallen in the UK since 1900.

A falling birth rate means a falling population UNLESS the death rate falls.

Reasons for a falling birth rate

- **Falling infant mortality rate:** previously high now it is 5, as so few infants die. IMR has fallen because better hygiene, housing and sanitation, improved welfare services and preventative action.
- **Changes in role of women:** better access to divorce, abortion, contraception etc; better education and employment; changing attitudes to marriage, divorce, children etc.
- **Child centredness:** in society and the family through legal changes to position of children, changing values, longer periods of dependency because of education.

Deaths

Three measures of death - raw numbers, death rate (number per 1000) Infant Mortality Rate

UK death rate has fallen from 18 to 9 and IMR has fallen from 154 to 5 from 1900 to 2005.

Implications

Population growth as falling death rate has more than balanced the falling birth rate. Falling death rate has led to increased life expectancy = produces an ageing population.

Reasons for a falling death rate

- **Improved public health:** public sanitation, housing improvements, clean water, clean air.
- **Medical improvements:** widespread immunisation and antibiotics.
- **Better nutrition:** laws controlling food quality and higher living standards.
- **Occupational change:** the decline in heavy manual work reduced risks of illness and death.
- **Improved welfare provision:** for vulnerable groups e.g. elderly.

Other demographic patterns

Life expectancy has risen markedly, major class/gender differences in life expectancy.

Implications of changes to birth and death rates

- Smaller families mean women more able to go into paid employment.
- **Dependency ratio** – fewer dependent children = fewer future workers = fewer people supporting an ageing population who are dependent on them for economic security.
- Impact on public services = more demand for elderly care and health services.
- Rise in one-person elderly households – mostly females.
- Impact on social policy - how society finances an ageing population.
- Effect on family life – family may be expected to take lead in care for the elderly.
- Class and gender inequalities carry on into old age.
- Politically, the elderly have become a major voting bloc.
- The definitions of 'old', 'elderly' and 'retirement' may well change.

Migration

Net migration = Immigration minus emigration

Immigration = highly politicised issue. Islamophobia developing post 9/11 and more recently, anti-eastern European settlement.

Emigration from the UK

- Pre-1980s, UK more emigration than immigration USA, Australia, New Zealand etc.
- Most emigrants were young adults and main reasons were economic.
- More recently emigration has also been to the member states of the EC.

Immigration into the UK

- Early 20th century, most immigrants to the UK were Irish.
- 1950s, immigration from the Caribbean increased; 1960/70s, Indian sub-continent.
- In the last 20 years, most immigrants have been from Europe.
- The main causes of immigration have been economic and political persecution.
- 1980s, immigration controls have limited movement from non-European countries.

Outcomes

- In the past 20 years, annual net migration into the UK is currently around 200,000 a year.
- This is mainly the result of the entry into the EC of many east European states.

Recent changes to immigration

- Globalisation has increased immigration, now from a wider range of countries rather than from a few former colonies.
- Some immigrants are relatively wealthy or possess professional skills needed by the host country. Others are poorer, filling often poorly paid service sector jobs.
- Previously most immigrants were men, now is more or less equal between men and women. This is the result of an increased demand for domestic and care workers.
- Immigration has always been a highly politicised issue but is even more so today with many voters in the 2015 General Election identifying it as a major concern. Marxists would argue that this provides the basis for a ruling class dividing the working class.

4 CHILDHOOD

Key Issues

- What is meant by social construction of childhood?
- What is the cross-cultural and historical evidence for childhood being a social construct?
- What are the different sociological perspectives on the nature of childhood.
- Has the experience of childhood improved or is it 'toxic'?

Childhood is 'socially constructed'

- Social construction means that something is created by society. It is not the result of biology; not the 'natural' way of things, but a set of ideas created in society.
- Age is a biological fact but ideas about age are socially constructed.
- Is childhood the same in every society and in all historical periods. If not, then what explains the differences? It must be what goes on in society.

Childhood: cross-cultural examples

There are many examples of hugely different expectations of children in different societies including child soldiers, children working from 5 years = 'childhood' is socially defined.

Historical evidence

Ariès 'Centuries of Childhood' In medieval society the idea of childhood did not exist, children from the age of five or six were 'absorbed into the world of adults'.

Postman 'The Disappearance of Childhood' Life = communal and informal and children were not protected from life, little difference between children and adults.

Where did modern ideas of childhood in western Europe come from?

- **Ariès** suggests that childhood as we know it emerged with industrialisation, although the upper and then middle classes began first to treat their children differently.
- 1830s Factory Acts limited the age from which they could be employed (to 10 years).
- Twentieth century - childhood was identified as a crucial period of development by doctors and psychologists, social welfare became the concern of social services
- Decline in the birth rate meant invest more time in fewer children.

Postman :

- A new definition of adulthood arose with the spread of literacy producing new conception of childhood and greater power of adults over children.
- We now have a more child-centred form of learning but the status of childhood is still under the control of adults.

Reasons for changes to the position of children

Industrialisation needs a skilled workforce so compulsory schooling from the end of the 19th century, growth of children's, legal changes, growth of social welfare

Children and inequality

There are major inequalities between children and adults. Is this wanting to protect children or controlling them and socialising them into accepting hierarchy?

Economic inequality: schooling to age 18, laws restricting child employment etc make children financially dependent. **Parental control** over time and behaviour. **Control and surveillance** – e.g. CCTV in children's play areas, fear of strangers, perception of some children (e.g. teenagers) as problematic, state intervention through social services, schools.

Inequalities between children – class, gender and ethnicity

Boys - more leeway in their behaviour, especially outside the home, girls seen as more vulnerable and in need of protection. The experience of childhood is different in different ethnic groups, often girls are particularly controlled and their behaviour closely monitored.

In whose interests?

- **'March of Progress'** theorists argue that much of the above has been introduced in the interests of children.
- **Gittins** sees this as 'age patriarchy' – adult men controlling children in similar ways to those they use to control women. However, some state intervention is clearly for the protection of children from abuse or neglect.

Childhood in the UK – progress or 'toxic'?

- **'March of Progress' theorists** - steady and sustained improvement in the position of children. Children in modern society have more rights, greater protection against abuse and exploitation, higher standard of living, better health, leisure, education. = 'child-centred'.
- **'Toxic childhood'**
- **Palmer** many changes to childhood are damaging to children e.g. increasing obesity, testing in schools, alcohol and drug use, earlier sexual experience, targeted by advertisers.
- **Lee** childhood = ambiguous social category, tensions in their role and in the way adults treat them. Children are controlled – supported, dependent – independent, affluent – exploited, etc. Great social/economic inequalities make some children's lives very difficult.

5 COUPLES

Key Issues

- What are the main sociological theories about couples?
- Domestic division of labour, decision-making and domestic violence patterns?

Are couples becoming more equal?

Have gender roles in the family become similar, housework, childcare, decision-making, control of finances and domestic abuse/violence?

Sociological perspectives

Functionalism: gender roles clearly divided – men = instrumental role/work; women = expressive role caring for children etc. Reflects 'natural' differences.

'March of Progress' theories: Willmott and Young - family life moving towards symmetrical roles. Women go out to work, couples are more socially and geographically mobile.

Feminism: is highly critical of functionalism and the rosy view put forward by March of Progress' theorists. Oakley argues that husbands 'helping' doesn't equate to symmetry.

1 Housework

Women still do twice as much as men, heavily gender divided e.g. men diy, women cooking, attitudes changing 10% of people hold traditional view of gender roles.

Both 'March of Progress' and feminism could see this as evidence for their views.

2 Childcare

- **Boulton:** men often helped but never took primary responsibility, women more likely to put own lives second, only 18% of husbands gave extensive help; 46% gave minimal help.
- **Ferri and Smith** - little evidence of more equal sharing of household chores, father main carer in 4% of families and rarely looked after children when they were ill, women's employment seems to have had little impact on the sharing of tasks
- **Braun (2011) most men** = 'background fathers'. Fathers and mothers mainly held traditional views of the breadwinner-primary carer division.
- **Duncombe and Marsden 'Triple Shift'** = most of the housework + paid employment + most of the emotion work done by women.

Sociological explanations

Cultural explanations: Gershuny found children of parents who shared domestic work more equally themselves took a similar line. Lesbian couples = more likely to equally share.

Material explanations: key factor = paid employment, both partners work full-time = more equally shared. Similar effect within same-sex couples. Middle-class women being able to do less domestic work as help is bought in.

However men over-estimate and women under-estimate the amount of time they spend on domestic tasks. Also doesn't tell us which tasks are the most important/boring.

3 Decision-making

Edgell M/C husbands dominated three areas of decision-making - moving house, finance and car. Wives dominated decisions on internal decorations, children's clothes, domestic spending on things like food - all seen as relatively unimportant by both partners.

Finance

Pahl: four patterns, depending on type of bank account and who had control:

- **husband-controlled pooling** - most common.
- **wife-controlled pooling** - Next most common.
- **husband-control**
- **wife-control** - least common. Women given responsibility of 'making ends meet'.

In 25% of couples, some degree of equality, but in most cases men had more power.

Men spent more on themselves. Women were more likely to go short themselves.

Vogler: Pooling increased to 50%, but majority still had unequal financial control (80%), despite the increase in women's employment.

Hardill: dual-career middle-class couples - men's careers came first, men made the important decisions.

Evaluation

Pooling money does not necessarily mean equality – it then depends who makes decisions.

Some not concerned if partner in control of finances. **Weeks** (2001) found the typical pattern = pooling money for specific household spending and keeping the remainder individually.

4 Domestic Violence

Dobash and Dobash: wife-battering is widespread - 25% of all serious assaults were domestic, though many go unrecorded. This power relationship reflects the social norms and social inequalities in the wider society. Women often have to stay in the situation because of economic dependence and the absence of childcare facilities.

Other studies have built on this important early study finding:

Women are likely to be victims of multiple attacks, difficult to 'count' the number of incidents as = continuous process, severe psychological effects, = widespread and substantial (20% of all reported violent crimes), mainly men against women, some groups of women are more at risk – women who are young, deprived, alcohol/drug abusers or disabled.

How much domestic violence?

- Official statistics are likely to substantially under-estimate the amount of domestic violence.
- Under-reporting is likely – fear of reprisals, economic dependency, family pressure.
- Police and prosecution services may then not take cases forward because a major feeling is that the family is a private rather than public sphere.

Sociological explanations of domestic violence

Radical feminists: male violence = inevitable result of patriarchal society. Male dominance is ultimately enforced through violence, tolerated by police and courts.

But not explain why some women are more at risk or violence within lesbian relationships.

Materialist explanation: Wilkinson and Pickett = close link between domestic abuse and inequality – low income, poor housing and job insecurity fuel domestic violence.

However, this doesn't explain why it is predominantly women who are the victims

Neither explain why some men do not commit acts of domestic violence.

6 FAMILY DIVERSITY

Modernist views of the family

Functionalist, New Right and the neo-conventional nuclear family approach: nuclear family as being the best family form in modern society.

Functionalism: Parsons = 'functional fit' between geographically/socially mobile workforce and nuclear family plus male breadwinner and female expressive role division.

New Right: traditional family = best family form, diversity is threat to traditional morality.

Diversity = family is in a state of crisis, leading to breakdown and increase in educational failure, delinquency. Lone-parent families = major threat, boys lack a strong male role model which leads to their educational failure and a lack of discipline. Cohabitation = less stable family context. Answer to this threat is to cut benefits, enforce responsibility on parents, as an attempt to reinforce the position of marriage and the traditional family.

Chester: most typical = 'neo-conventional' family, made up of two parents and a small number of children in which the wife is economically active. Life-cycles show continued importance of the nuclear family. Most people born into nuclear family, a member of one or two nuclear families during their lifetime, and most still see the nuclear family as the norm.

Criticisms

Rapoport Five types of Diversity: Organisational = different structures or ways of organising the household. **Cultural** - the nature of family relationships can vary in different ethnic groups.

Class/economic differences may be based on class. **Life-course** family experience changes over the life-course of the individual. **Cohort** individuals born at the same time may have similar experiences.

Ethnic Diversity: Many **South Asian families** = larger, extended, less joint conjugal roles.

Westwood and Bhachu: most Asian families are now based on the nuclear family, though they may have stronger kinship ties and more respect for the elderly. **Black Caribbean families** are more likely single-parent families or 'mother households', in which female kin and friends help out with childcare and other duties.

Reasons for increased diversity

Changes in marriage, cohabitation and divorce patterns; decline in birth and death rates; changing social attitudes; changes in the position of women, secularisation, welfare support from state, variety of ethnicities, changing patterns of social life.

Postmodernism and the family

Stacey: Western family arrangements now diverse and fluid - not mean emergence of another form of family, no longer makes sense to ask what type of family is dominant. Impossible now to go back to having a single standard family type.

Morgan: diversity in family forms = evidence of wider plurality and fragmentation in postmodern society.

Individualisation thesis

Postmodernists argue that postmodern society people are freed from the fixed roles that defined earlier generations. Individuals have more freedom to choose their life courses.

Giddens argues that intimate relationships are based on choice and equality rather than the conventions of social norms e.g. same-sex couples. Couples remain together because they choose to. This does make relationships less stable.

Beck: traditional patriarchal family with well-defined gender roles = undermined by greater gender equality and individualism. = the 'negotiated' family – designed by those involved.

Criticisms: How much real choice do people have? All our decisions about relationships are taken within a social context and subject to social pressures. Class, ethnic and gender inequalities all impact on the decisions of individuals as do religious and other values.

7 CHANGING PATTERNS OF RELATIONSHIPS

Key Issues

- What are the reasons for changes in family and household structure in last 40 years?
- Why do New Right thinkers see changes as disastrous for the traditional family?
- Do such changes mean that the family is disintegrating or just changing?

MAIN CHANGES

Marriage and cohabitation

- Marriage in Britain reached its peak around 1970 and has since declined.
- Greatest decline = proportion of first marriages; a much higher proportion of marriages are now re-marriages.
- Average age at which people marry has also been rising.
- Religious marriages decreased.
- Cohabitation increased. Many marry only after the birth of a child.
- Many choose not to marry at all - this seems to apply particularly to divorcees.
- Growing numbers of gay and lesbian couples and families.
- Increase in births outside marriage – linked to cohabitation.

Divorce

- Divorce has risen dramatically over the last century.
- Since the mid-1990s, the number of divorces has fallen (decline in marriage means that there are fewer married couples around to get divorced).
- However, divorce rate remains high.
- Many divorcees remarry later.

Changes in divorce legislation

- 1970: Divorce Reform Act. Grounds for divorce = 'irretrievable breakdown of marriage'. No longer had to be a 'guilty party', divorce by consent.
- 1985: Time limit for divorce reduced from three to one year
- 2014 Same-sex marriage = same grounds for divorce.

Explanations of increased divorce

Secularisation: declined in religiosity = religious beliefs and religious vows have less direct influence; number of civil marriages = marriage is not seen as religious institution, one in which unbreakable, sacred vows are made.

Changes in the law: divorce easier and quicker, the grounds for divorce, the speed and shortening of the period of marriage needed, cost of divorce, 'no blame' divorces. Other legal changes given women equal rights in jobs and finance.

Support from state child benefit, income support, support for elderly relatives etc.

Position of women: many women now have a career or a job = more independent without the help of a man.

More choices available: - less social pressure to conform and more opportunities available.

Changing social attitudes: attitudes towards cohabitation have changed - no longer seen as 'living in sin', marriage is no longer seen as so necessary, often as a possible later stage of full commitment, attitudes to illegitimacy = more tolerant as single-parent families have become more common, attitudes to gay and lesbian relationships have become more tolerant, more focus on the needs of the individual, divorce seen as routine.

Life expectancy

More people today survive into old age. Many couple households are 'empty nest', many single-person households = elderly women, put off marriage and childbirth until later, more cohabiting couples, birth rate has also declined, resulting in a high proportion of small families.

Single-parent families

- By 1993, 22% of families with dependent children were headed by lone parent
- In the past, most were result of the death of one parent. Different pattern now.
- Number of children born to single teenage mothers has fallen.

Other important changes

- The number of **reconstituted families** has risen.
- Asian families tend to be larger than other ethnic groups - trend away from sharing the same house but replacing this with living close to each other.
- Black families have a higher proportion of lone-parent families.

IMPLICATIONS OF THESE CHANGES - THEORETICAL PERSPECTIVES

New Right = threat to the traditional family, resulting in many social problems.

Feminists = changes as a liberating influence on women's lives.

Others = changes less important, minor alterations to a relatively unchanging situation.

New Right/Neo-liberal perspectives

Changes = worrying challenge to the best family form - the traditional nuclear family. Increase in promiscuity, cohabitation, divorce, illegitimacy, single-parent families all = detrimental to the family. Easier divorce and abortion etc. are seen as threatening. Feminism/ equal rights = undermining traditional roles of men and women. State support = costing too much and encourages welfare scrounging and reducing individual responsibility. Single parent families are seen as a 'defective' form of family that cannot function properly. Lack of traditional family structure = inadequate socialisation resulting in educational failure, juvenile delinquency and drug abuse. Contributes to creating an underclass.

Feminist Perspectives

Women have less to gain from marriage. Divorce = escape from conflict. Problems more likely to be due to poverty. Lone-parenting may now be a matter of positive choice. Little 'incentive' in the low income and poor housing provided by the state.

Postmodernists – the individuation thesis

Individuals are increasingly able to make relationships that reflect their individual needs so relationship ties are not as strong; old ideas of duty no longer have as much hold on people. Marriage tie less strong, women can build their own careers outside the family and traditional gender roles, serial monogamous relationships are more likely.

Does this point to the disintegration of the family?

A number of sociologists have shown ways in which the family is still strong e.g. many single parent families have 'committed' fathers, cohabitation and births outside marriage often conceal stable nuclear families, most reconstituted families = two parents and a small number of children, with long-term commitment, fewer rushed marriages, which may actually mean more stability.

FAMILIES AND HOUSEHOLDS REVISION NOTES: FURTHER REDUCED VERSION

1 THEORIES OF THE FAMILY

Key Issues What are the functionalist, Marxist, feminist and Personal Life?

FUNCTIONALISM

Society = based on value consensus, made up of sub-systems that work for good of the whole system. The family is one such sub-system. Family = positive role.

Murdock Family = universal because is best way of meeting society's need, 4 basic functions sexual – reproductive - economic – educational.

Parsons Today family performs two 'basic and irreducible' functions - **primary socialisation of children + stabilisation of adult personalities.**

= process of '**structural differentiation**' society industrialised, family lost some functions to other specialist institutions (e.g. health, education, religion).

= '**functional fit**' between types of society and types of family. The isolated nuclear family fits industrial society - geographical and social mobility and status is mainly achieved.

Male role = 'instrumental' - the breadwinner. This leads to stress and anxiety, so female, acts out 'expressive' role providing care, love, warmth and emotional support.

Criticisms of functionalism: Nuclear family = common in pre-industrial societies, early industrial society had extended family, this view of women's role justifies their oppression, nuclear family produces problems, extended family still exists in modern/late modern society.

MARXISM

Family serves interests of capitalism, provides steady, free supply of new workers, children socialised to accept hierarchy, makes oppression more bearable, workers' family responsibilities, it encourages them to work = unit of consumption.

Engels: with rise of private property, inheritance was necessary – monogamy arose to serve the interests of the economy.

Criticisms Disregards increasing variety of families, assumes dominance of the economy, too based on modern western society, family serves the interests of men and patriarchy.

FEMINISM

Feminism = 'conflict' - family serves interests of men; = prime site of female oppression.

Liberal feminists - equality through changing laws; division of labour = becoming more equal, gender socialisation is less pronounced than in the past.

Marxist-feminists

Female subordination is the product of capitalism, produce and socialise new workers; women = 'reserve army of labour' - cheap temporary workers; women as 'takers of shit'.

Radical feminists

Society = patriarchal.; men = cause of female exploitation; marriage/family = female oppression; = men and industrialisation 'put women in the home'; solution = end patriarchy and abolish the family.

Difference feminists - sexuality and especially ethnicity create differences in family experience. For black feminists, the family can be a protection against racism.

The Personal Life perspective

New approach = important to focus on the meanings people give to their relationships; postmodernist stressing pluralism/fragmentation; people capable of making choices; relationships do not mean same to everyone broader than the 'usual' family relationships – are important in our sense of identity e.g. friends, social media contacts and pets.

2 SOCIAL POLICY, IDEOLOGY AND THE FAMILY

Ideology = set of ideas - values, beliefs and knowledge - that justifies and legitimates social action; what we think of as a 'family' and what views we have towards it; **Marxists** see dominant ideology = of ruling class, **feminists** = men's 'exploitation' of women.

Policies = laws, actions, taxation, spending programmes etc by the state.

Theories and policies

Functionalism - social policies = helping family to function more efficiently.

Donzelot - social policies = state to monitor and intervene in 'social problems'.

Marxists see social policies towards the family as protecting the interests of the ruling class.

Feminists argue that social policies reinforce patriarchal attitudes and structures. Even policies that appear to support women, like maternity leave, paternity leave is shorter – reinforcing message that child care is primarily the woman's responsibility.

The New Right

= major ideological influence on social policies towards the family; = neo-liberal view emphasising two-parent nuclear family - heterosexual marriage - self-reliant and the 'building block' of society. Parental roles are divided by gender.

Main concern = contemporary family is breaking down. Link changes in family to social problems e.g. crime, youth subcultures, drink and drug abuse etc.

Causes of family decline = decline of traditional view of centrality of the family. Civil Partnerships and gay marriage, legal changes making divorce much easier, welfare benefits = perverse incentives - create 'dependency culture'.

Solutions - policies to support traditional family value less generous welfare state.

Criticisms = form of patriarchy - a woman's place is in the home. women will pick up the responsibilities. Fundamental assumption patriarchal family = 'natural' family is wrong.

Marxists New Right = ideological justification for capitalism.

Policies and the Family

Some have reflected New Right views and some which have not.

Conservative governments 1979-97 Banned teaching that homosexuality was OK; set up Child Support Agency – but illegitimate children same rights as those born into a marriage.

New Labour governments 1997-2010 Supported diverse family forms: longer maternity leave, paternity leave, Working Families Tax Credit, New Deal; help with childcare for single mothers, increased child benefit, Sure Start, Civil partnerships for same-sex couples.

Conservative-Liberal Democrat Coalition government 2010-15 and Conservative government 2015 onwards

Gay marriage, reducing the role of the state = a small, non-interventionist state.

Poorer families (lone-parent families affected more by this) face losing the tax credits.

Evaluation

Many government policies and structures.

Conservative governments placed stronger emphasis on traditional family values, New Labour has accepted family diversity and increasing help to disadvantaged groups.

3 DEMOGRAPHY

The UK has had a growing population over the past 100 years; 2014 - 65 million.

The causes of population change are natural - births and deaths – and migration.

Births

Three measures of births: raw numbers, birth rate (per 1000), TFR - total fertility rate.

All three have fallen in the UK since 1900.

Reasons for a falling birth rate; Falling infant mortality rate: previously high now it is 5 -better hygiene, housing and sanitation, improved welfare services; **Changes in role of women:** better access to divorce, abortion, contraception etc; better education and employment; **Child centredness** in society and the family through legal changes.

Deaths - fallen from 18 to 9 and IMR has fallen from 154 to 5 from 1900 to 2005.

Implications = increased life expectancy = produces an ageing population.

Reasons for a falling death rate: improved public health, medical improvements: widespread immunisation/antibiotics; better nutrition; occupational changes; welfare provision. Life expectancy has risen but major class/gender differences in life expectancy.

Implications of changes to birth and death rates: women more able to go into paid employment; **Dependency ratio;** more demand for elderly care and health services, rise in one-person elderly households – mostly females, how society finances an ageing population, family expected to take lead in care for the elderly, class and gender inequalities carry on into old age, definitions of 'old', 'elderly' and 'retirement' change.

Migration

Net migration = Immigration minus emigration = highly politicised issue e.g. Islamophobia

Emigration from the UK

Pre-1980s, UK more emigration than immigration; more recently emigration has also been to EC.

Immigration to UK: early 20th century, most immigrants = Irish; 1950s, = Caribbean, 1960/70s, Indian sub-continent; last 20 years, most from Europe. 1980s - immigration controls have limited movement from non-European countries.

Outcomes

In the past 20 years, annual net migration = 200,000. = result of the entry into the EC of many east European states.

Recent changes to immigration: globalisation has increased immigration, now from a wider range of countries; some immigrants are relatively wealthy or possess professional skills needed by the host country; others fill often poorly paid service sector jobs, more or less equal between men and women. Immigration = highly politicised issue e.g. many voters in the 2015 General Election = major concern.

4 CHILDHOOD

Key Issues

- What is the social construction of childhood?
- What is the cross-cultural and historical evidence for childhood being a social construct?
- Has the experience of childhood improved or is it 'toxic'?

Childhood is 'socially constructed' = created by society, not the result of biology. Age is a biological fact but ideas about age are socially constructed. If childhood is the same in every society and in all historical periods, then it would be natural. Many examples of hugely different expectations of children in different societies including child soldiers, children working from 5 years = 'childhood' is socially defined.

Historical evidence

Ariès - medieval society no idea of childhood.

Postman - life = communal and informal and little difference between children and adults.

Where did modern ideas of childhood in western Europe come from?

Ariès - industrialisation, upper and middle classes began first to treat their children differently.

Twentieth century - childhood was identified as a crucial period of development by doctors and psychologists, social welfare became the concern of social services

Postman : now have child-centred form of learning but childhood is still under the control of adults.

Reasons for changes to the position of children

Industrialisation needs a skilled workforce so compulsory schooling from the end of the 19th century, growth of children's, legal changes, growth of social welfare

Children and inequality

Major inequalities between children and adults. = protect or control children? Socialising them into accepting hierarchy. **Economic inequality:** schooling to age 18, laws restricting child employment etc = children financially dependent. **Parental control** over time and behaviour. **Control and surveillance** – e.g. CCTV in children's play areas, fear of strangers, perception of some children (e.g. teenagers) as problematic, state intervention through social services, schools.

Inequalities between children – class, gender and ethnicity

Boys - more leeway in their behaviour, girls = vulnerable and in need of protection. Childhood different in ethnic groups, often girls are particularly controlled and their behaviour closely monitored.

In whose interests?

'**March of Progress**' theorists argue that much of the above = in the interests of children.

Gittins = 'age patriarchy' – similar ways to those used to control women.

Childhood in the UK – progress or 'toxic'?

'**March of Progress**' theorists - steady and sustained improvement in the position of children.

Children in modern society have more rights, greater protection against abuse and exploitation, higher standard of living, better health, leisure, education. = 'child-centred'.

'**Toxic childhood**': **Palmer** changes are damaging to children e.g. increasing obesity, alcohol and drug use, earlier sexual experience, targeted by advertisers. **Lee** childhood = ambiguous social category, children controlled – supported, dependent – independent, affluent – exploited, etc.

5 COUPLES

Key Issues

Main sociological theories about couples, domestic division of labour, decision-making and domestic violence patterns.

Are couples becoming more equal?

Have gender roles become similar, housework, childcare, decision-making, control of finances and domestic abuse/violence?

Sociological perspectives

Functionalism: gender roles men = instrumental role/work; women = expressive role. Reflects 'natural' differences.

'March of Progress' theories: Willmott and Young - family life moving towards symmetrical roles. Women go out to work, couples are more socially and geographically mobile.

Feminism: is highly critical of functionalism and the rosy view put forward by March of Progress' theorists. Oakley: husbands 'helping' doesn't equate to symmetry.

1 Housework

Women still do twice as much as men, heavily gender divided e.g. men diy, women cooking, attitudes changing 10% of people hold traditional view of gender roles. 'March of Progress' and feminism could see this as evidence for their views.

2 Childcare

Boulton: men helped but not primary responsibility, women more likely to put own lives second.

Ferri and Smith - little evidence of more equal sharing of household chores, women's employment = little impact on the sharing of tasks

Braun (2011) most men = 'background fathers'.

Duncombe and Marsden 'Triple Shift' = most of the housework + paid employment + most of the emotion work done by women.

Sociological explanations

Cultural explanations: Gershuny found children of parents who shared domestic work more equally themselves took a similar line. Lesbian couples = more likely to equally share.

Material explanations: key factor = paid employment, both partners work full-time = more equally shared. Similar effect within same-sex couples.

However men over-estimate and women under-estimate the amount of time they spend on domestic tasks. Also doesn't tell us which tasks are the most important/boring.

3 Decision-making

Edgell M/C husbands dominated three areas of decision-making - moving house, finance and car. Wives = decisions on decorations, children's clothes, domestic spending on things like food

Finance

Pahl: four patterns (in order of likelihood), **husband-controlled pooling, wife-controlled pooling, husband-control, wife-control.** 25% of couples, some degree of equality.

Vogler: Pooling increased to 50%, but majority = unequal financial control (80%), despite women's employment. **Hardill:** dual-career middle-class couples - men's careers came first, men made the important decisions.

Evaluation

Pooling money does not necessarily mean equality – it then depends who makes decisions.

Some not concerned if partner in control of finances.

4 Domestic Violence

Dobash and Dobash: wife-battering is widespread - 25% of all serious assaults were domestic, many go unrecorded - reflects the social norms and social inequalities in the wider society. Women often have to stay in the situation because of economic dependence and the absence of childcare facilities.

Other studies:

Women are likely to be victims of multiple attacks, difficult to 'count' the number of incidents as = continuous process, severe psychological effects, = widespread and substantial (20% of all reported violent crimes), mainly men against women, some groups of women are more at risk – women who are young, deprived, alcohol/drug abusers or disabled.

How much domestic violence? Official statistics substantially under-estimate; under-reporting is likely – fear of reprisals, economic dependency, family pressure. Police may then not act.

Sociological explanations of domestic violence

Radical feminists: male violence = inevitable result of patriarchal society. Male dominance is ultimately enforced through violence, tolerated by police and courts.

But not explain why some women are more at risk or violence within lesbian relationships.

Materialist explanation: Wilkinson and Pickett = close link between domestic abuse and inequality – low income, poor housing and job insecurity fuel domestic violence.

Neither explain why some men do not commit acts of domestic violence.

6 FAMILY DIVERSITY

Modernist views of the family

Functionalist, New Right: nuclear family = best family form in modern society.

Functionalism Parsons: 'functional fit' geographically/socially mobile workforce and nuclear family plus male breadwinner and female expressive role division.

New Right: traditional family = best family form, diversity is threat to traditional morality.

Diversity = family is in a state of crisis, leading to breakdown and increase in educational failure, delinquency. Lone-parent families = major threat, boys lack a strong male role model which leads to their educational failure and a lack of discipline. Cohabitation = less stable family context. Answer = to cut benefits, enforce responsibility on parents.

Chester: most typical = 'neo-conventional' family, made up of two parents and a small number of children in which the wife is economically active. Most people born into nuclear family, a member of one or two nuclear families during their lifetime, and most still see the nuclear family as the norm.

Criticisms

Rapoport Five types of Diversity: Organisational = different structures or ways of organising the household. **Cultural** - the nature of family relationships can vary in different ethnic groups.

Class/economic differences may be based on class. **Life-course** family changes over the life-course of the individual. **Cohort** individuals born at the same time may have similar experiences.

Ethnic Diversity: Many **South Asian families** = larger, extended, less joint conjugal roles.

Westwood and Bhachu: most Asian families are now based on the nuclear family, though they may have stronger kinship ties and more respect for the elderly. **Black Caribbean families** more likely single-parent families or 'mother households', in which female kin and friends help out with childcare.

Reasons for increased diversity

Changes in marriage, cohabitation and divorce patterns; decline in birth and death rates; changing social attitudes; changes in the position of women, secularisation, welfare support from state, variety of ethnicities, changing patterns of social life.

Postmodernism and the family

Stacey: Western family arrangements now diverse and fluid - not mean emergence of another form of family, no longer makes sense to ask what type of family is dominant.

Morgan: diversity in family forms = evidence of wider plurality in postmodern society.

Individualisation thesis Postmodernists argue people are freed from the fixed roles that defined earlier generations. Individuals have more freedom to choose their life courses. **Giddens:** intimate relationships are based on choice and equality not conventions of social norms e.g. same-sex couples. Couples remain together because they choose to. This does make relationships less stable.

Beck: traditional patriarchal family with well-defined gender roles = undermined by greater gender equality and individualism. = the 'negotiated' family – designed by those involved.

Criticisms: How much real choice do people have? All our decisions about relationships are subject to social pressures. Class, ethnic and gender inequalities all impact on the decisions of individuals as do religious and other values.

7 CHANGING PATTERNS OF RELATIONSHIPS

Key Issues

- What are the reasons for changes in family and household structure in last 40 years?
- Why do New Right see changes as disastrous for the traditional family?
- Do such changes mean that the family is disintegrating or just changing?

MAIN CHANGES

Marriage and cohabitation

Marriage in Britain reached its peak around 1970, since declined; greatest decline = proportion of first marriages; a much higher proportion of marriages are now re-marriages, average age of marriage also been rising, cohabitation increased, many marry only after a child, many choose not to marry at all, growing numbers of gay and lesbian couples and families, increase in births outside marriage.

Divorce

Divorce has risen dramatically over the last century, mid-1990s, divorces has fallen (decline in marriage), however, divorce rate remains high, many divorcees remarry later.

Changes in divorce legislation 1970: Divorce Reform Act. Grounds for divorce = 'irretrievable breakdown of marriage', 1985: Time limit for divorce reduced from three to one year, 2014 same-sex marriage = same grounds for divorce.

Explanations of increased divorce

Secularisation: declined in religiosity = religious beliefs and religious vows have less direct influence; number of civil marriages = marriage is not seen as religious institution.

Changes in the law: divorce easier and quicker, the grounds for divorce, the speed and shortening of the period of marriage needed, cost of divorce, 'no blame' divorces.

Support from state child benefit, income support, support for elderly relatives etc.

Position of women: many women now = more independent without the help of a man.

More choices available: - less social pressure to conform and more opportunities available.

Changing social attitudes: attitudes towards cohabitation have changed, marriage is no longer seen as so necessary, often as a possible later stage of full commitment, attitudes to illegitimacy = more tolerant, attitudes to gay and lesbian relationships have become more tolerant, more focus on the needs of the individual, divorce seen as routine.

Life expectancy

More people today survive into old age. Many couple households are 'empty nest', many single-person households = elderly women, put off marriage and childbirth until later, more cohabiting couples, birth rate has also declined, resulting in a high proportion of small families.

Single-parent families

1993, 22% of families with dependent children were headed by lone parent, in past, most = death of one parent. Different pattern now. Number of children born to single teenage mothers has fallen.

Other important changes

The number of **reconstituted families** has risen. Asian families tend to be larger than other ethnic groups. Black families have a higher proportion of lone-parent families.

IMPLICATIONS OF THESE CHANGES - THEORETICAL PERSPECTIVES

New Right = threat to the traditional family, resulting in many social problems.

Feminists = changes as a liberating influence on women's lives.

New Right/Neo-liberal perspectives

Changes = worrying challenge to the best family form - the traditional nuclear family. Increase in promiscuity, cohabitation, divorce, illegitimacy, single-parent families all = detrimental to the family. Easier divorce and abortion etc. are seen as threatening. Feminism/ equal rights = undermining traditional roles of men and women. State support = costing too much and encourages welfare scrounging and reducing individual responsibility. Single parent families are seen as a 'defective' form of family that cannot function properly. Lack of traditional family structure = inadequate socialisation resulting in educational failure, juvenile delinquency and drug abuse. Contributes to creating an underclass.

Feminist Perspectives

Women have less to gain from marriage. Divorce = escape from conflict. Problems more likely to be due to poverty. Lone-parenting may now be a matter of positive choice. Little 'incentive' in the low income and poor housing provided by the state.

Postmodernists – the individuation thesis

Individuals are increasingly make relationships that reflect their individual needs, relationship ties are not as strong; old ideas of duty no longer have as much hold on people. Marriage tie less strong, women can build their own careers outside the family and traditional gender roles, serial monogamous relationships are more likely.

Does this point to the disintegration of the family?

Ways in which the family is still strong e.g. many single parent families have 'committed' fathers, cohabitation and births outside marriage conceal stable nuclear families, most reconstituted families = two parents and a small number of children, with long-term commitment, fewer rushed marriages.

RESEARCH METHODS: FULL REVISION NOTES

KEY IDEAS ABOUT RESEARCH METHODS

Research methods – Key concepts

Why are these important ideas?

Reliability, representativeness and validity are important because they are ideas that help you to assess the usefulness of a particular research method. You can assess and organise an analysis of any method in terms of how reliable and representative it is and how valid the data it creates is.

You can get exam questions - especially at A level - on the differences between quantitative and qualitative research and about the comparative usefulness of primary and secondary data.

So you need to understand what each of these ideas means and be ready to apply this in any question about sociological research.

RELIABILITY

- Replicable
- Same results from re-testing
- Common system of measurement
- Objective measurement of behaviour
- Scientific

REPRESENTATIVENESS

- Generalisable to a larger group from smaller sample
- Typical of whole group
- Cross-section of whole group
- Proportionately similar social characteristics to whole group

VALIDITY

- Statement of meanings social groups hold
- Authentic data
- Accurate data
- Measures what it seeks to measure

Structured research techniques such as structured interviews, surveys/questionnaires, structured observation and official statistics are usually considered to be high in reliability and representativeness but low in validity.

Unstructured research techniques such as unstructured interviews, participant observation, personal documents are usually seen as being high in validity but low in reliability and representativeness,

NB Methods usually considered high in representativeness are those listed under reliability.

Evaluation: this pattern can be challenged e.g. how valid is the data produced by a single participant observer - surely it is one person's interpretation of events?

EXAMINER GUIDANCE

You need to be able to apply the key concepts accurately in your answers. Many candidates confuse reliability and validity or validity and representativeness, or use them interchangeably. Even if you find these concepts difficult to understand, at least learn them and learn which methods are high/low in validity, reliability and representativeness.

PRIMARY RESEARCH METHODS

Quantitative Research can use: experiments (field and laboratory), structured observation, surveys (structured interviews and questionnaires).

Qualitative research can use: observation (overt, covert, participant), unstructured interviews.

Primary research can be:

Covert	or	Overt
Large-scale	or	Small-scale
Researcher-led	or	Research subject-led
Statistical	or	Descriptive
Structured	or	Unstructured

SECONDARY DATA

Quantitative secondary data comes from official statistics, existing quantitative sociological research, non-official statistics.

Qualitative secondary data comes from public documents, personal documents (diaries, memoirs, letters etc.)

THE TWO METHODOLOGIES: POSITIVISM and INTERPRETIVISM

Key Issues

- What does 'methodology' mean?
- What are the two methodologies in sociological research?
- Which methods are related to each methodology and why?

What does 'methodology' mean?

Methods refer to the actual research techniques used by sociologists.

'Methodology' refers to the ideas behind the choice of method. Does the sociologist think it is more important/useful to collect quantitative or qualitative data?

The two methodological approaches in sociology are:

Positivism/Quantitative sociology
and
Interpretivism/Non-Positivism/Qualitative sociology

Each of the 'two methodologies' is based on a set of assumptions about the nature of society, the most appropriate type of data to collect etc. These sets of assumptions then determine which research methods the sociologist is most likely to find useful in their research.

Positivism

Quantitative research and surveys, structured interviews, structured observation experiments and official statistics

The main questions are:

- Why do Positivist sociologists want to collect quantitative data?
- Why do they then prefer to use surveys, structured interviews, experiments and official statistics in their research?

Positivism: main assumptions

- Social world, like the physical world, has an objective reality, external to individuals
- External social forces direct behaviour
- These forces are revealed through patterns in human behaviour
- The aim of research is to identify these patterns
- This will reveal the social forces and cause-and-effect relationships behind them.
- Uncovering patterns of behaviour means collecting data which can be analysed for patterns and trends
- This data will have to be quantitative

Impact on choice of method

- For positivists, research methods have to be systematic, objective and replicable, creating data concerning patterns of behaviour.
- Positivists want research techniques and sources of data that generate statistical evidence.
- The methods that create this kind of data are experiments, social surveys, structured observation and structured interviews. In terms of secondary data, official and other pre-existing statistics are appropriate sources of data.

Why?

Social surveys - whether structured interviews or self-completion questionnaires - employ fixed lists of questions often of a limited response type that enables the researcher to easily convert responses into quantitative form. Surveys also tend to make use of samples which are as representative as possible so that the results can be generalised to the whole population. Furthermore, the survey approach can be replicated by other researchers to verify the original results. Other methods - experiments, officially generated statistics, quantitative content analysis - all follow similarly formal approaches and therefore meet the demands of structuralist sociologists.

Interpretivism

Qualitative research and participant observation, unstructured interviews and documents

The main questions are:

- Why do Interpretivist sociologists want to collect qualitative data?
- Why do they then prefer to use participant observation, unstructured interviews and documents in their research?

Interpretivism: main assumptions

- The social world has no single objective reality
- Each social actor/group defines 'reality' differently
- The aim of research is to uncover the meanings held by individuals and social groups. This involves going to the groups and allowing them to act or speak openly
- The data this produces will be qualitative

EXAMINER GUIDANCE

For both Positivism and interpretivism, it is very useful if you can explain the logic behind each approach's choice of method. With an essay question asking about the usefulness/strength/limitations of a method, it is a very effective way to start an answer by explaining why Positivists and interpretivists do/do not prefer to use that method.

Why do Interpretivists prefer to use participant observation, unstructured interviews and documents in their research?

Participant observation involves the researcher in joining a group, with their research intention either known or not known to them, and through joining in their activities, observing and understanding their 'universe of meaning'. By immersing themselves in a social group, the participant observer has the opportunity to share and learn the sets of meaning held by group members. The researcher can see at first hand what the group actually does rather than what they might claim to do. In other words, the researcher can get behind the public face of the group and understand their real feelings, values and motives.

Unstructured interviews give the respondent the opportunity to speak freely, expressing themselves in their own words and having more influence over the direction of research.

These interviews are much more free-flowing and may allow respondents to 'open up' to the researcher and the range of questions asked is more flexible.

The unstructured is focused, as Interpretivists wish, on the search for the meanings social groups attach to events.

Documents written by research subjects for their own purposes would mean that their personal meanings are more likely to be expressed.

CHOICE OF RESEARCH METHOD

What influences a sociologist's choice of research method?

Sociologists are influenced in their choice of method by **three** considerations.

- **theoretical/methodological preference of the sociologist**
- **practical considerations**
- **ethical issues**

All three play a role in determining choice of methods - but which is the most important?

1 Methodological preference

How the sociologist sees the social world and what to them constitutes appropriate 'knowledge' is their 'methodological preference'.

Positivists want to create quantitative data to test hypotheses

Interpretivists prefer to use qualitative data that reveals the meanings people attach to the world.

(See previous section on Positivism and Interpretivism)

Methodological concerns determine the kind of data the researcher wants to generate. Their first consideration is going to be the type of data that they think is most appropriate for the issue/social group they are examining.

A researcher makes a positive choice based on their methodological preference then this is restricted by practical and ethical limitations.

2 How do practical considerations affect choice of method?

Time available affects choice of method and scale of research. Participant observation studies and unstructured interviewing take more time per research subject than social surveys. Would a sociologist base their choice of method solely on how much time they had?

Finance affects the size of a research team, the number of respondents who can be contacted and the time available for research to be carried out in. Postal questionnaires tend to be the most cost-effective form of research with unstructured techniques requiring more time and training to be carried out effectively.

Source of funding Research is sponsored by government, local government, businesses, voluntary organisations etc. and will inevitably reflect the concerns of these funding bodies. Few researchers have a completely free hand in the design and practice of their research.

Personal concerns of the sociologist. Careers, family commitments and personal interests all may have some bearing on the research process. For example, long periods 'in the field' carrying out participant observation may place an enormous strain on an individual researcher particularly if they are trying to sustain a covert research role. Not everyone is personally suited to this kind of stress.

Nature of the research subject Sociologists have to exercise a high degree of sensitivity towards research subjects. Every social actor and social group has both a public and a private face and some may not welcome intrusion into the latter.

Research opportunity If the research is planned well in advance, any method could be used. Sometimes a research opportunity suddenly appears so the researcher is likely to employ open-ended approaches, 'going with the flow' of the research opportunity.

3 Ethical issues

Informed consent Research subjects should know they are involved in a research study and what the aim is of that study. It might be difficult to get the informed consent from certain groups especially vulnerable groups.

Informed consent may also be needed from 'gatekeepers' - those with a responsibility for the research group or setting.

Getting informed consent is harder for certain methods such as covert methods. Not getting informed consent is sometimes justified as being necessary to avoid the Hawthorne effect.

Anonymity Research subjects have the right to have their anonymity protected to avoid any negative effects on them. Some methods are easier to protect the identity of the research subjects e.g. postal questionnaires.

Impact on research subjects Being part of a research study – especially into a sensitive issue – can have negative effects on those involved. These can result in psychological damage e.g. Milgram or affect their life chances e.g. the Oak School experiment. Even if individuals are protected, publication of a study into the activities of a group may have legal or economic consequences.

CHOICE OF RESEARCH TOPIC

1 **The funding body** will determine the topic to be researched. As they are paying for the study, they are likely to have a major influence on the direction of research.

2 **The theoretical perspective** of researchers is likely to affect whether a researcher is prepared to work on a particular research project e.g. feminist researchers are more likely to want to study issues affecting women.

3 **Practical issues** - especially time and access - may limit what issues can be studied.

4 **Contemporary social and political values** affect what is seen as currently important in society and worth investigating.

5 **Researchers career** - they will choose where possible, the research topics most likely to lead to enhancing their careers.

EXPERIMENTS

Experimental technique

- Method of the natural sciences
- Researcher identifies variables which can affect the outcome of the experiment
- Researcher controls variables that affect the experiment's outcome
- Interaction of variables observed
- Researcher identifies cause-and-effect relationships between variables
- The key to the experiment is the element of control exercised by the researcher.

Should sociologists try to use experiments?

Some sociologists argue strongly that social research should copy the natural sciences. Positivists argue for the use of research techniques that are reliable and representative. However, there are so many problems with trying to 'put society in the laboratory', that even positivist sociologists rarely attempt to apply the laboratory experiment to the study of social behaviour. They also argue that field experiments are not particularly scientific.

Interpretivists argue that because people have free will and consciousness, they cannot be studied in the same way as inanimate objects. The laboratory is an artificial situation and lacks ecological validity.

Laboratory Experiments

Problems with laboratory experiments in sociological research

Artificiality The laboratory is a highly artificial situation and it is doubtful whether experimental results apply to the real social world. How people react to the artificially constructed authority in a laboratory as Milgram attempted, may tell us little about the way they respond to authority in real life situations.

Identifying and controlling variables The laboratory experiment only works if all variables that could influence the outcome of an interaction can be identified and controlled. There are simply too many variables in social life, some cannot always be identified and others cannot be controlled.

Ethical problems Most mislead people as to the real purpose of the experiment (to avoid this knowledge affecting responses) so informed consent has not been given. Some have used very young children in experiments which expose them to violent stimuli and this could have negative after-effects. Most experiments involve some form of manipulation of those involved. There is also potential for harm to participants e.g. many in Milgram's experiment experienced psychological damage (although some then reflected on themselves as a result)

'Experimental effect'/Hawthorne Effect Even if research subjects are misled as to the real purpose of an experiment, the knowledge that they are involved in an experiment is likely to have an effect on their behaviour. The result is damaging to the validity of the experiment as essentially the researcher is measuring laboratory rather than natural behaviour.

Narrow focus on one issue e.g. teacher expectations, means these are not seen in a wider context (e.g. all classroom interactions).

Humans are not objects They're not like inanimate objects, they have the ability to make their own

decisions so 'cause-and-effect' explanations are more difficult to make.

Lack of representativeness Laboratory experiments are necessarily small-scale so they are unlikely to be representative. Nor can they study large-scale social issues such as changes to family structure.

Inability to study the past It is impossible to know or influence variables in past situations.

Examples of studies to refer to:

- **Milgram** on obedience to authority
- **Mayo's** Hawthorne study
- **Zimbardo** on prison/authority

Field experiments in sociological research

Field experiments take place in the real world, amending existing real life situations for research purposes. Apart from the research team, those involved are usually unaware that an experiment is taking place. The aim of field experiments is to combine some element of control whilst avoiding the artificiality of the laboratory context.

Strengths of field experiments

- **More 'real' than laboratory** As it is taking place in a real-life situation, field experiments have greater validity.
- **Controlling a single variable** is relatively easy.

Limitations of field experiments

- **Lack of scientific credibility** They do not meet the rigorous criteria of the laboratory experiment as all variables are not identified and controlled. For example, **Rosenthal and Jacobson** had no idea of what other factors - home, media, cultural - may have influenced the academic achievement of the students they observed.
- **Ethical problems** Usually no consent is obtained (in order to avoid contaminating the results). Some of the ethical problems of laboratory experiments also apply to field experiments.
- **Limited scope** They can only be applied to a limited range of social issues/situation. Usually this is confined to measuring a single issue in a single context – discrimination, superstition etc. Sociologists interested in large-scale social movements find little use for field experiments.
- **Interpretation** of responses is problematic - researchers cannot always be certain why people responded in the way they did.

Examples

- **Studies of racial discrimination** in which applications to real jobs were made either by actors or the research team presenting 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.
- **Rosenthal and Jacobson's** 'Pygmalion in the Classroom' study used a real school situation and planted ideas in the minds of some of the teachers about how well students would perform in the future. They then measured whether this prediction turned into reality - which would indicate how far teacher expectations influenced achievement.
- **Rosenham's** study placed researchers in psychiatric hospitals as real patients where they acted normally but still were treated as mentally ill.

The Comparative method

Sometimes called a 'thought experiment', there is no actual experimentation on people.

It compares groups of people that are similar in all ways except one (e.g. their religion, gender, class). Any differences in outcome are put down to that difference in characteristic.

Durkheim's study of suicide established this approach.

It avoids artificiality and most ethical problems and can be used to study the past (can only be so used).

However, there is no control over variables - so can it even be considered to be an experiment?

EXAMINER GUIDANCE

Questions on experiments invariably ask for their limitations in sociological research. Check the question to see if it specifies laboratory or experiments in general. If the latter, then refer to all forms of experiments.

SOCIAL SURVEYS - QUESTIONNAIRES

What is meant by a social survey and what forms can it take?

The social survey is one of the most important research techniques used in sociology.

- Structured research tool
- Large-scale research
- Generates quantitative data
- Representative/Generalisable
- Reliable
- Face-to-face as structured interview or as self-completion questionnaire.

Types of questions

Fixed response questions

- Researcher decides response categories
- Limited range of response categories
- Quantitative data
- Everyone asked same questions
- Respondent has to choose a response category

Why do fixed response questions generate quantitative data?

Response categories are fixed by the sociologist so every answer given must fall into a limited range of responses. These responses can then be 'counted' and indicated in percentage terms

Open-ended questions

- No fixed response categories
- Respondent decides how to respond
- Unlimited range of responses
- Respondents asked different questions
- Qualitative data
- More valid data

Why do open-ended questions not produce quantitative data?

Open-ended questions mean respondents can answer in whatever way they want so the range of potential responses is virtually limitless. Therefore cannot be placed in categories

Why do open-ended questions produce qualitative data?

Open-ended questions put no limits on responses so respondents can answer in own words, offering their view of an issue. Puts their meanings into words.

Problems with designing questions

Words are open to interpretation, some include technical terms, some may be too long or contain more than one question. Researchers may include 'leading questions'. With structured questions, creating meaningful response categories may be difficult.

Which are more useful, closed or open-ended questions?

Positivists tend to evaluate the usefulness of a method by reference to how well it meets the criteria of **reliability** and **representativeness**.

Interpretivist sociologists make their judgement in terms of the **validity** of the evidence generated. So the usefulness or otherwise of any method can be judged in terms of its reliability and the representativeness and validity of the data produced.

Closed/fixed response questions – why Positivists prefer them

The use of fixed response questions makes the whole process more reliable as this approach can be replicated by other researchers and the results verified.

By asking respondents the same questions in the same order with the same response categories, quantitative data can be generated.

Easily categorisable responses can show causal relationships/correlations between factors.

Closed/fixed response questions – why Interpretivists criticise them

They argue that fixed response questions create data that is lacking in validity.

There are several ways in which questionnaires fail to meet the criterion of validity.

Question design is problematic in several respects. Words used in questions may have different meanings to different individuals and groups. If different respondents use different interpretations then the reliability of the results is questionable.

Interpretivist sociologists have questioned the usefulness of questionnaires on the grounds that the data they generate does not accurately gather and communicate the meanings that respondents have about the issue being investigated. The data is therefore low in validity and this is seen as a fundamental flaw in this technique.

Most questions in 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.

EXAMINER GUIDANCE

It is always useful to keep relating strengths and limitations back to the Positivist-Interpretivist debate. This gives a strong theoretical edge to your answer. Don't just say that Positivists like closed-ended questions, explain what it is about them that leads Positivists to see them as more useful.

Open-ended questions – why Interpretivists prefer them

For a number of reasons, Interpretivists believe that data from open-ended questions is higher in validity.

Open questions allow respondents to explain their meanings in their own words

There are no constraints on their responses.

The respondent can introduce their own ideas and issues into the interview.

Open-ended questions – why Positivists criticise them

For a number of reasons, Positivists believe that data from open-ended questions lacks reliability.

Open questions mean that any responses can be given - these 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.

SAMPLING

How do sociologists construct samples?

A 'sample' is a smaller part of the whole group (the research population) being studied.

This sample is often only a very small proportion of the whole group being investigated.

It is extremely impractical for sociologists to investigate all members of a target 'population'. Limited by time, money and other resources, sociological research is usually forced to a survey only a small proportion of the whole research population – a sample

The 'research population'

The 'population' in a research study is everyone in the group being researched. For example, if the subject of research is 'divorce' then all divorcees form the research population.

In practice, it is not so easy to define and identify your research population. For example, with 'divorcees' do we include those who have previously been divorced but have now remarried, how many times do we count those who have divorced more than once, etc.

'Sampling frames'

A 'sampling frame' is a full list of all those who make up the research 'population'. If the 'population' for a study is a particular community, then a suitable sampling frame would be a list of all those who live in that community.

It is rarely easy to find an accurate 'ready-made' sampling frame or to construct one yourself (time-

consuming).

Examples of a 'sampling frame' that may be used in sociological research include, the telephone directory, the electoral register, the Postcode Address File, a sampling frame purposefully created by the sociologist.

How important is representativeness?

'Representativeness' and generalisations

- Sociologists usually have to research only a small proportion of the whole group that is being investigated.
- Positivist sociologists want to be able to **generalise** about the whole group from this sample
- For this to happen, the sample has to be representative of the whole group.
- This means that the sample should have the same characteristics, in the same proportions, as the whole group.

Do all sociologists want to use samples which are representative? And if they do, is it always possible to create a representative sample?

Positivist sociologists want to be able to make statements that are true for a large social group. In other words, they want to make broad, general statements about social behaviour. They place a lot of emphasis on the need to have a representative sample.

However, not all sociologists place this degree of emphasis on creating a representative sample. Interpretivists are interested in the 'meanings' held by a social group. They usually study small social groups/interactions and are not trying to establish 'laws' of social behaviour which apply to large social groups/movements. So it is less important for them to study representative samples.

Even when the researcher wants to create a representative sample, it is not always practicable to do so.

Size and representativeness

It is sometimes assumed that a large research sample must be representative because it involves a large number of respondents.

However, representativeness depends more on the social characteristics of the sample reflecting those of the whole group being researched than on sample size. A large sample may include a disproportionate number of one type of people - elderly, white, middle class, or whatever - and this can make the sample unrepresentative.

What kind of samples are used?

- Random sample
- Stratified sample
- Opportunity/Snowball sample
- Quota sample
- Multi-stage sample
- Cluster sample
- Purposive sample

Postal Questionnaires – the mailed dimension

Strengths (and counter-limitations)

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. *However, there is no way of checking who has completed the questionnaire as it has passed out of the researcher's control.*

It also means that a **large** sample can be contacted cheaply and quickly. *But response rate is often low.*

This helps the researcher to create a **representative** sample from which generalisations can be made.

There is no face-to-face contact between researcher and respondent, **removing any 'interviewer bias'**. *However, this means no rapport can be built.*

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 validity is limited.*

EXAMINER GUIDANCE

Many candidates lose marks because when answering a questions on either the strengths or limitations of a method, either refer to both (as two lists) or only focus on whichever the question asks about. The best way to deal with such questions is to focus on whichever of strengths and limitations is in the question but then bring in as evaluation any relevant counter-strengths/limitations. That is why these revision notes are organised in the way they are – the way your answer should organise the knowledge.

Limitations (and counter-strengths)

As soon as the questionnaire has been mailed to potential respondents it **passes out of the researcher's control**. This produces a number of problems.

The most important, is the **low 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. *However, follow-up letters, telephone contact etc can boost the response rate.*

If the sample is **not representative**, then the capacity of the researcher to generalise from the responses is reduced.

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. *But respondents have time to contemplate the questions.*

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. *Follow-up interviews can get around this but are costly.*

Questionnaires: strengths and limitations

Strengths (and counter-limitations)

They have several **practical strengths**: they are cheap and quick to distribute and can be used to contact large numbers of potential respondents. There's no cost of training interviewers and data - pre-coded - can be cheaply and easily processed by computer. High quality software can identify complex correlations between factors very quickly. *However, there are potential problems with the response rate, especially if mailed out. This can be less than 10%.*

Testing hypotheses. These correlations are the basis for testing hypotheses about cause-and-effect relationships. For example, there may be correlations between health/ill-health and low-income households. This can lead to statements about the link between social class and health and this might allow us to identify the specific causes relating to low-income. Predictions of future patterns can be made and this might be used to inform social policy. *However, correlations can be accidental and don't usually tell us about the reasons behind them - this requires different data or stays at the level of informed speculation.*

Representativeness Positivists value representativeness and if a large enough sample which has the same characteristics of the whole research population can be created, then generalisations can be made. *However, certain types of people are more likely to respond to questionnaires so this might skew the sample and reduce representativeness.*

Reliability The same questions are asked, in the same order and with the same response categories. This allows for re-testing and verification. It also means that the questionnaire can be repeated elsewhere to produce comparative data.

Few ethical issues Because the questionnaire is returned voluntarily by the respondent and can be anonymous, then it is presumed they have given their informed consent for their responses to be used. There are no ethical issues of harm, right to withdraw etc *although there is a chance of some deception as to the purpose of some questions but this is unlikely.*

Detachment Positivists believe in the researcher keeping some distance from the research subject, maintaining objectivity and detachment - they don't get involved as this might corrupt the data they collect. Self completion questionnaires maintain such a distance. *But this means no rapport created.*

Limitations (and counter-strengths)

Response rate This can be low, especially if they are mailed out. People may have few reasons to return the questionnaire. Or those with time on their hands or with a particular axe to grind may be more likely to reply, thus distorting the sample. This can reduce the representativeness of the sample or worse, you may not be able to judge the representativeness of the sample. They also only offer a single snapshot of views. There's no sense of any dynamic with questionnaires. *However, the response rate can be higher when questionnaires are distributed and collected in by researchers in for example, school setting.*

Fixed questions Once the questions and response categories are decided, that's it, they are fixed and can't be altered without losing reliability. New issues, problems with the questions etc can't then be addressed. *However, using a pilot study can get around this weakness.*

Lack of validity There are several issues here. One is that it is the researcher who is determining the questions, answer categories, sequence etc - so whose meanings are you getting, the respondents or as filtered by the researcher? The lack of meaningful contact between researcher and researched also means that there is no rapport and the research subject feels no connection with the study. Questions can also be misunderstood and with no researcher present, there's no way of explaining them. *However, this is balanced by greater reliability and representativeness.*

Question types Both closed-ended and open-ended questions can be used in questionnaires. Positivists do not prefer the latter as there's no reliability.

Limited data To encourage people to reply, it is usually necessary to keep the questions brief and simple. This limits the quantity of data you receive. *This is good for getting basic information.*

Right answerism There are lots of reasons why responses may be inaccurate. People may not be fully honest, giving answers they think are the 'right' ones to give. They may try to guess the researcher's intentions from the questions and respond with that in mind.

INTERVIEWS

Types of interviews

Unstructured/Formal

Structured/Informal

Group

NB This is an oversimplification as some interviews combine formal and informal approaches whilst others may take the form of group interviewing or may develop into or from participant observation research situations.

Structured/formal Interviews characteristics

- Fixed list of questions
- Verbal, face-to-face delivery of a questionnaire
- Set range of response categories
- Resulting data can be presented in quantitative form
- Data can be analysed for trends and statistical correlations
- Preferred by Positivists

Positivists favour this kind of interview because standardised questions and responses meet their need for reliability. Pre-determined responses create statistical data from which patterns and cause-and-effect relationships can be seen. More people can be interviewed so increasing the chances of creating a representative sample.

EXAMINER GUIDANCE

Many candidates lose marks because when answering a questions on either the strengths or limitations of a method, either refer to both (as two lists) or only focus on whichever the question asks about. The best way to deal with such questions is to focus on whichever of strengths and limitations is in the question but then bring in as evaluation any relevant counter-strengths/limitations. That is why these revision notes are organised in the way they are – the way your answer should organise the knowledge.

Strengths (and counter-limitations)

- Training interviewers is straightforward and inexpensive because there is no scope for interviewers to deviate from the set questions. *However, this means there is little scope to develop a rapport with interviewees.*
- Good for collecting basic information e.g. age, employment status etc. *However, researchers want to go beyond this sort of basic information.*
- Larger numbers can be interviewed because are quicker than unstructured interviews. *This has to be put against getting less depth of response.*
- High in reliability/replicability because are standardized with same questions asked in same order. Can re-test. *However, validity is lost as questions and pre-coded answers limit the responses interviewees can offer.*
- Fixed response categories produce quantitative data.
- Pre-coded questions enable patterns, trends and statistical correlations can be identified from the data. *However, these do not usually give much insight into the reasons behind these trends.*
- The limited role of the interviewer reduces 'interviewer effect'. *However, this isn't fully eradicated as a social interaction still takes place.*

Limitations (and counter-strengths)

Still some interviewer effect - the interviewee's perceptions of the person asking the questions may well affect their responses. However, this is limited as the questions are fixed.

Interpretivists question the validity of the data generated as there is no scope for interviewees to fully explore their thoughts. However, what is lost in validity may be gained in reliability.

The sociologist is imposing their views through question and answer design on the interviewee' However, this is the only way to generate quantitative data.

Response categories can be limited, overlap or be open to interpretation.

Fixed response questions also suffer from language issues and there is no way the interviewer can explain these to interviewees.

Statistical data does not necessarily give any indication of the meanings individuals attach to events.

What people say they do may not be an accurate reflection of what they actually do. This is true of all forms of interview.

EXAMINER GUIDANCE

Take care when reading a question on interviews. Does it state interviews in general? Or is a particular form of interview specified? If it is, then keep a clear focus on that kind of interview. You can refer to other types of interview but only as evaluation using link phrases such as '...in comparison to unstructured interviews, structured approaches...'

Unstructured/informal Interviews Characteristics

- Open-ended
- Free-flowing
- Unstructured so interviewees can raise issues they feel are important
- Interviewees respond in own words
- Qualitative data, personal and vivid in tone.

Interpretivists favour this kind of interview because open-ended questions and responses meet their need for validity.

Open-ended questions allow interviewees to say what they like in their own words which gives us an insight into the meanings they hold.

Feminists favour these interviews because they empower the interviewee and reduce gender power differentials.

Strengths (and counter-limitations)

- Interpretivists consider the evidence generated to be high in validity. However, there may be a consequent loss of reliability.
- The rapport between interviewer and interviewee generates more honest responses, trust created may allow research into sensitive subjects. They may well then be more prepared to open up about their true feelings. However, this increases the likelihood of the interviewer effect happening with interviewees amending their views to meet what they think the researcher wants to hear.

- Respondents are given the opportunity to reply in their own words, expressing their feelings and attitudes in ways which are meaningful to them. But this is then very difficult to categorise.
- The informal interview can uncover the meanings held by social groups rather than collect so-called 'facts' about them.
- Leads can be followed up, the respondent can take the interview in the direction they want. On the other hand, this makes the data difficult to analyse.
- Can check that interviewees have understood the question and can ask follow-up questions.
- Flexibility means they can explore what the interviewee feels is important or can explore topics that are unfamiliar to the researcher. However, the interviewee is more likely to go off at a tangent and the interview lose direction.

Limitations (and counter-strengths)

- Positivist sociologists see the data created as low in reliability as there is nothing standardized about the questions so each interview takes a different route. *However, this increases the possibility of more valid responses.*
- Training needs to be more comprehensive as open-ended interviewing requires substantial skills.
- The data cannot be converted into statistics and cannot be analysed as the process is different in each interview. *However, it means the data may give greater insight into reasons behind behaviour.*
- Time-consuming approach which reduces representativeness. Therefore samples used tend to be small and unrepresentative generalisations cannot be made from the research results. *But not a problem if the aim is to obtain insights into meanings held.*
- May not be as high in validity as is sometimes claimed - different researchers may interpret responses in different ways. *But at least meanings are uncovered and explored.*
- Interviewer bias can seriously affect the direction of the interview and the responses given.

Social interaction

- **Interviewer bias** Interviews are not a neutral social occasion and how the respondent sees the interviewer (their social class, accent, gender etc.) can affect the responses they give. They may say that they think the researcher wants to hear or give negative replies. This reduces validity.
- **Status and power inequalities** - gender, class, age, etc - affect the way interviewees respond.
- **Artificiality** those involved know it's an interview and it can never be like a normal situation.
- **Social desirability** affects responses whereby the interviewee tries to meet what they see as the interviewer's, or their own, needs.

Group interviews

Advantages

- Can uncover group dynamics
- Meanings/attitudes can be clarified
- Can interview more people in less time
- Less artificial situation – more like a conversation
- More relaxed – more likely to open up

Disadvantages

- One or two individuals might dominate
- Difficult to quantify responses
- Easy to move away from research issue
- Cannot verify individual responses

DIFFERENT TYPES OF OBSERVATION

Key Issue

There are different types of observation in sociological research, what are the advantages and disadvantages of each type?

EXAMINER GUIDANCE

You need to read the question very carefully. If it is about observation, what form of observation is stated in the question? If it is observation in general then cover all the different forms it takes. If it specifies one form e.g. participant observation then don't stray from that into other forms of observation.

Different types of observation in sociological research

Observation can be classified according to how it meets these questions:

- Is it participant or non-participant?
- Is it structured or open-ended?
- Is it covert or overt?

Each approach to observation has different advantages and disadvantages and you need to know these different strengths and weaknesses. Depending how a question is worded, you need to tailor your knowledge accordingly.

- **'Participant observation'** – in which case your answer has to examine observation where the sociologist participates in the activities of the research group – and this include both covert and overt approaches.
- **'Non-participant observation'** – where the focus is on observation when the researcher stands back from and does not get involved with the research group.
- **Does the question specify covert or overt observation?** If neither then you need to cover both; if one is specified, then that is what you have to focus on.
- **'Structured observation'** – this is when the observer records in some systematic fashion what they see going on in the research group.

Participant Observation

- Sees what they do rather than what they say they do.
- Researcher immerses themselves in a social group
- Studies group 'from within'
- Shares their experiences

Strengths of Participant Observation

Interpretivists argue that participant observation has a number of characteristics that contribute towards the creation of data which is high in **VALIDITY**.

PO and Validity

- This is a **naturalistic** approach to the collection of evidence. Interpretivists argue that valid data is most 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, the researcher is able to observe the group in a way that does not affect their behaviour – if covert. *However, this raises ethical concerns about deception and lack of informed consent.*
- Observing a group's normal social routines is likely to produce a more **authentic** account of their world-view than asking questions. It is often said that in PO studies, you see what a group does rather than what it says it does. When you ask questions, you never know if the respondent is being truthful.
- It is also an **open research process**. Participant observation is a fluid, flexible approach in which the research process is directed less by the researcher and more by the researched. The researcher 'goes with the flow' of research allowing it to unfold and in this process, observers often find any early preconceptions being contradicted by actual experience. *However, this means there is no structure to the study.*
- Participant observation offers the kind of sociological **insight**, which is not always found in surveys. 'Insight' refers to the perceptions a sociologist can make when the layers of social norms and conventions are peeled back. It is argued that only by sharing the experiences of a group can the sociologist achieve the necessary degree of insight and provide meaningful data. *Can you rely on the interpretation of usually a sole observer?*

Other advantages

- **Taking advantage of a research opportunity** Sometimes a research opportunity will suddenly offer itself. PO is flexible enough for this kind of opportunity to be taken up (e.g. **Patrick**). *There's no way of knowing how representative the study is – it is just a chance event.*
- **Less planning required** Unstructured research like PO does not require the extensive planning that surveys need. *So there's no structure and organization.*

Limitations

Doesn't really achieve validity

- There is a case for arguing that even participant observation studies find it difficult to create truly valid data. Even a skilled observer can mis-interpret events.
- 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 and thus the advantage of naturalistic research is partly lost. *This is fairly limited with covert research.*
- 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. *But the observer will be aware of this danger and can prepare for dealing with it.*
- 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? *Through repeated observation.*

Lacks reliability and not replicable

- Positivists consider PO studies to be fundamentally flawed because they are not replicable, nor would they necessarily produce the same results if carried out by different researchers. *But they don't impose the researcher's values.*
- There are no fixed rules of research and no common agreed systems of measurement which means that the study cannot be replicated. Participant observation gives control over the research process to the subject group and in so doing removes any chance of the data being considered reliable. *But this increases the likely validity of the research.*

Unrepresentative/cannot generalise

Few participant observation studies make any attempt at being representative of a wider research population. They are very much 'one-off' studies 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.

Costly/Time-consuming

It often takes a long time to study a social group in this way. Some PO studies take years to carry out. This creates a time-delay and makes it very intensive for the observer. Keeping observers 'in the field' is costly. *Some PO is relatively short-lived – a few weekends for example.*

Difficulties in joining groups/sustaining covert roles

Some groups are secretive, involved in deviant activities etc and may be suspicious of new members. The observer has to maintain their role within the group at all times or else raise suspicions about their motives and this is not easy over a long period of time.

Covert Observation

Advantages

- Does not disturb the normal behaviour of the group – leading to more valid data
- Allows the observer to dig deeper into the group's behaviour because of their status as a group member
- Access to certain areas of the groups' behaviour may be only be possible in secret

Disadvantages

- If the real purpose of the observer is uncovered, the whole research may be jeopardised
- Ethical issues of trust, lack of informed consent etc. are raised by covert approaches
- Recording behaviour is difficult without raising suspicions
- Hard to sustain over any lengthy time period
- There may be an element of danger in trying to maintain a secret identity
- There may not be a suitable role for the observer to occupy

Overt Observation

Advantages

- Can openly ask questions to clarify meanings
- Ethically sound approach because the observer gains the informed consent of those involved
- The observer may have more freedom in being able to join in or not join particular activities

Disadvantages

- Knowing the observer's true identity/purpose may affect the group's behaviour, reducing the validity of the data created
- Some aspects of the group's behaviour may be closed to overt researchers
- The group may refuse access

Structured observation

This is when the researcher records behaviour in a systematic way, usually using some form of record sheet. What is going on in the observed situation is recorded by ticking appropriate boxes at regular, established time intervals. This is often used in classroom observation.

Advantages

- Creates quantifiable data
- Patterns and trends in behaviour can be identified
- Less time-consuming than unstructured observation
- Replicable
- Verifiable – two or more observers recording the same interaction to check each other's results
- Much more reliable than unstructured observation

Disadvantages

- Difficult to carry out in a covert manner
- Can only really be done if the observer does not participate in the group's activities – hard to maintain this distance
- Overt observation may change the behaviour of those observed
- How valid is the data created? Recording in this way says little about meanings, motives etc.
- Categorising observed behaviour in this way still depends upon the interpretations made by researchers – different researchers may categorise the same event differently
- The categories used may overlap
- Deciding how to classify behaviour every few seconds or so is mentally demanding

EXAMINER GUIDANCE

It is unlikely that you will get a question solely on structured observation. However, if you get a question on observation techniques in general, make some reference to structured observation. As it is the only observational technique favoured by Positivists, structured observation is a good counter-balance to NP, CPO etc.

SECONDARY DATA

OFFICIAL STATISTICS

What are official statistics?

- Created by government departments and agencies.
- Data about a wide range of social behaviour/issues.
- Collected and presented in a quantified form.
- Sometimes the product of monitoring the day-to-day activities of government, agencies e.g. the Department of Education collects statistical data about the number of schools, numbers of pupils on roll, attendance, examination performance etc. as a matter of course.
- Government departments also carry out their own surveys using standard sociological methods e.g. the Census, carried out every ten years and completed by virtually every household in the country. This survey gathers data about household relationships, occupational and employment status, etc.

Using official statistics in sociological research

Official statistics are useful to the sociologist because

- provide background information
- generate research hypotheses
- representative
- data is collected in a reliable way
- comprehensive
- published regularly
- already in existence
- cheap
- large samples
- usually pre-analysed

How do sociologists use official statistics?

- It may not be the main focus of the study but it can provide a number of insights on which further research might be based. Official statistics show trends of interest to the sociologist. For example, the recent trend towards comparative male underachievement in education was identified by the analysis of educational performance as recorded by the Department for Education and Employment.
- Large-scale data. Surveys based on large samples – far larger than sociological research could afford. In the case of the Census this is as complete a sample that can possibly be created. In other cases, for example divorce, marriage, births, deaths, morbidity, the sample is also a more or less complete one - at least according to the application of official definitions.
- Surveys by government departments meet sociological criteria. Question design, sampling, etc. all follow the same guidelines as sociological research.
- The state is involved in many areas of social life creating data about areas such as education, crime, population, health, employment etc. all of which may be of use to the sociologist.

Problems with official statistics in sociological research

Lack of control by the researcher

The sociologist is not involved in producing official statistics and this means that they will have had no control over the process by which the data has been gathered.

- Based on official definitions
- Data presented in form needed by government depts
- Structured to meet official aims/objectives
- Interpreted in terms of government aims

It is unlikely that official definitions match those of the sociologist

- e.g. how the government defines and measures unemployment may well be different to that of the sociologist or the subjects of research. This makes it difficult for the sociologist to compare their own material with that of officially produced data.
- e.g. Official definitions of social class are based on occupational groups whilst some sociological definitions relate class to ownership of the means of production.

The social construction of official statistics

Interpretivists argue that official statistics are socially constructed. Although often presented as objective 'facts', official statistics are created through a social process of negotiation.

At each point in this process, social actors and groups make decisions that affect whether the act moves towards being classified as a 'crime'. The official statistical picture of criminal activity is the result of a complex process of social interaction that results in a 'dark figure' of unrecorded crime. The true level of crime is this 'dark figure' plus reported crimes, yet it is only the latter which is presented as the real level of crime. The implication here is that official statistics do not accurately identify the social characteristics of a phenomenon.

Political bias in official statistics

Marxists argue that official statistics are politically biased.

- Definitions employed
- Presentation of data
- Recording of data
- Areas of social life investigated

Examples of political bias

- Suppression of data e.g. Black Report into health inequalities.
- Changing official definitions/categories e.g. definition of unemployment was altered nearly twenty times in the 1990s, with all but one change removing a group from the official level of unemployment.
- How official data is presented can perform political functions e.g. the very selective recording of crime by ethnic group and its selective presentation through the media to create an image of a 'black crime wave'.
- The recording of data can meet political ends e.g. school league tables that make no consideration of social class variations between school populations.

Evaluation

- **'Hard statistics'**: some official statistics are simple 'head counts' e.g. births, deaths. These do not have the same problems as other types of 'soft' official statistics such as unemployment counts or crime statistics.
- Official statistics have often been the focus of research itself e.g. the nature of official data about suicide - on which Durkheim based his classic study - has itself been examined by interpretivist sociologists looking at the role played by coroners, police, witnesses and others in how a death is or is not defined as suicide.

Documents

- Personal and historical documents are an important source of secondary data.
- Documents come in many forms and each type has its own specific uses and problems.
- These sources of secondary data are mainly qualitative in nature although some may be analysed in such a way as to be presented in statistical form.
- Although secondary data of these kinds tends to have a fairly limited application to sociology, they do have their uses in specific research contexts. As with any research data, they also have their problems.

Types of documents

- media reports
- personal documents
- oral histories
- historical documents
- documents researchers ask people to create (these may be considered primary data)

Personal documents - advantages

- Fairly high degree of validity – especially if the author writes them without any foreknowledge of their possible sociological use (e.g. diaries and letters).
- Insight – they tell about events from those ‘on the inside’.
- Sometimes personal documents are the only records of a particular group or activity, especially those that operate in secrecy.

Personal documents - disadvantages

- All personal documents are written with an audience or audiences in mind so they are likely to contain some bias.
- There is no way of knowing how representative a particular document is - some social groups leave few personal documents partly because of differential literacy levels and partly as a result of the way they may see their lack of social importance.
- It may be difficult to evaluate the accuracy and validity of a document.
- Some documents are written some time after the events they are referring to. Politician’s memoirs often fall into this category and may be written with the benefit of ‘20-20 hindsight’!

Historical documents

Sometimes an historical perspective is useful in a sociological study especially as it tends to remind us that we often wrongly assume some social activity to be a recent development. **Geoffrey Pearson’s** study of the history of football hooliganism was a useful antidote to the view often presented in the British media during the 1970s that it was a new form of social delinquency. Historical documents have their problems particularly in terms of their representativeness, accuracy, language and interpretation.

Media reports

The two main ways of analysing media reports are quantitative and qualitative investigation. The first measures the amount of coverage given to a particular issue, the number of repeated images, etc. whilst the latter attempts to uncover the meanings attached to particular words and images.

Advantages

- Media material is very comprehensive.
- Britain’s mass media represents a wide range of opinion.
- Media reports can be fairly easily organised into systematic data of use to the sociologist; for example, children’s literature can be analysed in terms of the gender representation of characters and news reports can be quantified in terms of the amount of time or space given to particular points of view e.g. Glasgow Group studies

Disadvantages

- Media reports are essentially biased. All the main daily newspapers in Britain have a political slant.
- Quantitative measurement of the content of media reports is limited in its usefulness in that it might identify patterns but cannot explain them. Simply measuring content gives little indication of why media reports may be biased.
- There are great problems with exploring the meanings carried by words and images. The issue here is interpretation. To get to the meaning of an image involves interpreting it and any interpretation is going to be open to challenge, being itself a value judgement.

LONGITUDINAL STUDIES

Characteristics:

- Carried out over a lengthy period of time
- Same research sample - representative
- Measure changes in their attitudes and behaviour
- Usually quantitative data
- Usually uses surveys - reliable

- Direct comparison of changes in attitudes and behaviour over time.
- Some participant observation research can be described as longitudinal
- Used mainly by positivists

Examples

- Child Health and Education Survey which followed every child born between 3-9 March 1958
- Studies of voting behaviour at General Elections

Advantages

Comparative data Survey approach, fixed response questions, interviewing respondents regularly, allow the sociologist to make comparisons, identify trends, changes and continuities in attitudes and behaviour.

Same sample Using the same sample reduces 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.

Tracking 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.

Attitude changes over time The alternative way of tracking attitudes over time is to use oral history. It is much more preferable to ask people about their behaviour at the time rather than years later.

Reliability Usually survey-based, often asking similar questions at each stage of the study etc. meets the criteria of reliability.

Representativeness Often use large sample, carefully selected e.g. all babies born in Britain during a particular week (Child Health and Education Survey).

Disadvantages

'Sample attrition' Keeping in contact with the same sample over a long period of time is a problem - sample members may die, emigrate, opt out etc. A shrinking sample 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.

Maintaining representativeness The demographic composition of a society may change over time leaving the original sample partially unrepresentative. For example, any 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 focus of research can change over the whole period of the longitudinal study. For example, there has been more interest in the experiences of the disabled, women and ethnic minority groups in the last twenty years than in the preceding twenty. 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 over-elaborate responses or ones which 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 respond.

Cost There are relatively few longitudinal studies primarily because of the cost involved in this approach. Researchers have to be highly committed if the work is taking place over a long period of time.

Structured research Longitudinal studies using structured research techniques like surveys, suffer from the problems associated with them. In particular, the data can be criticised for lacking validity.

Comparing the usefulness of primary and secondary data in sociological research

Primary and Secondary Data

How are they different?

Primary data is collected first hand by the sociologist, usually employing 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.

Secondary data is material which is already in existence prior to the research programme 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.

The usefulness of primary data

Advantages

- Creating data specifically relevant to the research aims.
- Control over question design/structure/format
- Clear focus on the research purpose.
- Choice over which methods to use - quantitative, qualitative, a combination
- The researcher can also create their own conceptual definitions
- Deciding the most appropriate ways to put concepts into measurable forms.
- Control over the research sample to be studied.
- More able to interpret and present the data.
- Can take up chance research opportunities
- No useable secondary data exists for some groups/issues

Disadvantages

- Time consuming - limiting material collected
- Problem of gaining enough funding
- The source of funding exerts an influence over what is researched and what methods are used.
- Difficulties with the creation of the type of sample required.
- Each method of primary data collection has its own specific disadvantages.

The usefulness of secondary data

Advantages

- Already in existence
- Often comprehensive
- Readily available
- Easy to access
- Cheap
- Sometimes pre-analysed
- Often in a format which allows for comparative analysis
- Often based on a very large sample making it more representative
- Secondary evidence is sometimes the only material available.

Disadvantages

- Can be very patchy in coverage.
- Qualitative documents in particular vary greatly in coverage and are unlikely to be representative.
- The focus of study and the choice of methods lie outside the control of the researcher.
- The concepts employed and their operationalisation is beyond the sociologist's control.
- The interpretation and presentation of material also are the result of the work of others. Official statistics, the source of much secondary data, have particular problems
- Each source of secondary data has its own specific strengths and weaknesses.

RESEARCH METHODS: REDUCED REVISION NOTES

KEY IDEAS ABOUT RESEARCH METHODS

Research methods – Key concepts

Why are these important ideas?

Reliability, representativeness and validity help assess the usefulness of a particular research method. You can assess and analysis of any method in terms of how reliable and representative it is and how valid the data is.

RELIABILITY

Replicable, same results from re-testing, common system of measurement, objective measurement of behaviour, scientific.

REPRESENTATIVENESS

Generalisable to a larger group from smaller sample, typical of whole group, cross-section of whole group, proportionately similar social characteristics to whole group.

VALIDITY

Statement of meanings social groups hold, authentic data, accurate data, measures what it seeks to measure.

Structured research: structured interviews, surveys/questionnaires, structured observation and official statistics = high in reliability and representativeness, low in validity.

Unstructured research: unstructured interviews, participant observation, personal documents are usually seen as being high in validity but low in reliability and representativeness, NB Methods high in representativeness are those listed under reliability.

Evaluation: this pattern can be challenged e.g. how valid is the data produced by a single participant observer - = one person's interpretation of events?

PRIMARY RESEARCH METHODS

Quantitative Research can use: experiments (field and laboratory), structured observation, surveys (structured interviews and questionnaires).

Qualitative research can use: observation (overt, covert, participant), unstructured interviews.

Primary research can be:

Covert – Overt Large-scale-Small-scale Researcher-led - subject-led Statistical-Descriptive
Structured - Unstructured

SECONDARY DATA

Quantitative secondary: official statistics, existing quantitative sociological research, non-official statistics.

Qualitative secondary: public documents, personal documents (diaries, memoirs etc.)

THE TWO METHODOLOGIES: POSITIVISM and INTERPRETIVISM

What does 'methodology' mean?

Methods = research techniques used by sociologists. **'Methodology'** = ideas behind the choice of method. Does the sociologist think it is more important/useful to collect quantitative or qualitative data?

The two methodological approaches in sociology are:

Positivism/Quantitative and Interpretivism/Qualitative sociology

Each of the 'two methodologies' is based on a set of assumptions about the nature of society, the most appropriate type of data to collect. This determines which research methods are chosen.

Positivism

Quantitative research and surveys, structured interviews, structured observation, experiments and official statistics.

- Why do Positivist sociologists want to collect quantitative data?
- Why do they then prefer to use surveys, structured interviews, experiments and official statistics in their research?

Positivism: main assumptions

- Social world has an objective reality, external to individuals
- External social forces direct behaviour
- These forces revealed through patterns in human behaviour
- Identifying these patterns reveal social forces and cause-and-effect relationships.
- Uncovering patterns of behaviour means quantitative collecting data which can be analysed for patterns and trends

Impact on choice of method

- Research methods have to be systematic, objective and replicable, creating data concerning patterns of behaviour.
- Positivists want research techniques and sources of data that generate statistical evidence.
- The methods that create this kind of data are experiments, questionnaires, structured observation and structured interviews. In terms of secondary data, official and other pre-existing statistics are appropriate sources of data.

Social surveys use fixed lists of questions + limited response categories convertible into quantitative form. Samples = representative so results can be generalised. Plus can be replicated to verify results. Other methods - experiments, officially generated statistics, quantitative content analysis - all follow similarly formal approaches.

Interpretivism

Qualitative research = participant observation, unstructured interviews and documents

The main questions are:

- Why do Interpretivist sociologists want to collect qualitative data?
- Why do they then prefer to use participant observation, unstructured interviews and documents in their research?

Interpretivism: main assumptions

- Social world has no single objective reality
- Each social actor/group defines 'reality' differently
- The aim = uncover meanings held by individuals and social groups. This involves going to the groups and allowing them to act openly.
- Produces qualitative data.

Why do Interpretivists prefer to use participant observation, unstructured interviews and documents in their research?

By immersing themselves in a social group, the participant observer sees, shares and learns the meaning held by group members. Seeing at firsthand what the group actually does rather than what they might claim to do, getting behind the public face and understand their real feelings, values and motives.

Unstructured interviews: respondents speak freely, expressing themselves in own words.

= more free-flowing and allow respondents to 'open up', the range of questions asked is more flexible.

The unstructured is focused on the search for the meanings social groups attach to events. Documents written by research subjects for their own purposes would mean that their personal meanings are more likely to be expressed.

CHOICE OF RESEARCH METHOD

What influences a sociologist's choice of research method?

- **theoretical/methodological preference of the sociologist**
- **practical considerations**
- **ethical issues**

How important are each?

1 Methodological preference

How the sociologist sees the social world and constitutes appropriate 'knowledge' is their 'methodological preference'.

Positivists want quantitative data to test hypotheses

Interpretivists prefer qualitative data revealing the meanings people hold.

Methodological concerns are the first consideration - the type of data that they think is most appropriate. ***A researcher makes a positive choice based on their methodological preference then this is restricted by practical and ethical limitations.***

2 How do practical considerations affect choice of method?

- **Time** - PO and unstructured interviewing take more time than social surveys.
- *Would a sociologist base their choice of method just on time?*
- **Finance** Postal questionnaires = most cost-effective = with unstructured techniques requiring more time and training.
- **Source of funding** Research is sponsored by and reflects the concerns of these funding bodies. Few researchers have a completely free hand.
- **Personal concerns** of the sociologist, careers, family commitments, personal interests and covert research roles are limitations.
- **Nature of the research subject** Sociologists have to exercise sensitivity - social groups may not welcome intrusion into the latter.
- **Research opportunity** Sometimes a research opportunity suddenly appears so the researcher is likely to employ open-ended approaches.

3 Ethical issues

- **Informed consent** Research subjects should know they are involved in a research study - not easy to get permission from certain, especially vulnerable, groups. May also need this from 'gatekeepers'. Getting informed consent is harder for covert methods. Not getting informed consent sometimes justified to avoid the Hawthorne effect.
- **Anonymity** Right to anonymity to avoid any negative effects. Some methods are easier to protect the identity of the research subjects e.g. postal questionnaires.
- **Impact on research subjects** Being part of a research study can have negative effects on those involved e.g. psychological damage e.g. Milgram or affect their life chances e.g. the Oak School experiment. May have legal or economic consequences for the group.

CHOICE OF RESEARCH TOPIC

1 Funding body - they are paying for the study, so will have a major influence on the research.

2 Theoretical perspective affects whether a researcher is prepared to work on a particular research project e.g. feminist researchers are more likely to study issues affecting women.

3 Practical issues - especially time and access - may limit what issues can be studied.

4 Contemporary issues - what is seen as currently important in society.

5 Researchers career.

EXPERIMENTS

Experimental technique

= method of natural sciences, variables identified and controlled, cause-and-effect relationships, key = control exercised by the researcher.

Should sociologists try to use experiments?

Positivists want research techniques that are reliable and representative. But can't 'put society in the laboratory' - even positivists rarely attempt to apply the laboratory experiment.

Interpretivists: people have free will and consciousness, they cannot be studied in the same way as inanimate objects. The laboratory lacks ecological validity.

Laboratory Experiments

Problems with laboratory experiments in sociological research

Artificiality = highly artificial situation, do results apply to the real social world? May tell us little about the way they respond in real life situations.

Identifying and controlling variables = only works if all variable can be identified and controlled. Too many variables in social life for this to happen.

Ethical problems Most mislead people so informed consent not given. Some have used very young children, most experiments involve some form of manipulation. Potential for harm to participants e.g. Milgram psychological damage.

'Experimental effect'/Hawthorne Effect Knowing they are involved in an experiment affects behaviour. Damages validity of the experiment as essentially researcher is measuring laboratory not natural behaviour.

Narrow focus on one issue e.g. teacher expectations.

Humans are not objects - have ability to make own decisions so 'cause-and-effect' explanations are more difficult to make.

Lack of representativeness = small-scale so unlikely to be representative. Nor can they study large-scale social issues.

Inability to study the past.

Examples of studies to refer to:

Milgram on obedience to authority, **Mayo's** Hawthorne study, **Zimbardo** on prison/authority.

Field experiments in sociological research

Field experiments = amending existing real life situations for research purposes. Those involved usually unaware that an experiment is taking place. Field experiments combine some element of control whilst avoiding the artificiality of the laboratory context.

Strengths of field experiments

- **More 'real' than laboratory** Real-life situation = greater validity.
- **Controlling a single variable** is relatively easy.

Limitations of field experiments

- **Lack of scientific credibility** All variables not identified and controlled. **Rosenthal and Jacobson** had no idea of what other factors - home, media, cultural - may have influenced academic achievement.
- **Ethical problems** Usually no consent is obtained .
- **Limited scope** can only be applied to a limited range of social issues/situation = confined to single issue in a single context – discrimination, superstition etc.
- **Interpretation** of responses - researchers cannot always be certain why people responded in the way they did.

Examples

- **Studies of racial discrimination** applications to real jobs.
- **Rosenthal and Jacobson's** 'Pygmalion in the Classroom' study used a real school situation and planted ideas in the minds of some of the teachers.
- **Rosenham's** study placed researchers in psychiatric hospitals as real patients.

The Comparative method

A 'thought experiment' - no actual experimentation.

Compares groups of people that are similar in all ways except one (eg their religion, gender, class). Any differences in outcome are put down to that difference in characteristic e.g. Durkheim's on suicide. It avoids artificiality and most ethical problems and can be used to study the past. But no control over variables – is it an experiment?

SOCIAL SURVEYS - QUESTIONNAIRES

What is a social survey and what forms can it take?

The social survey is one of the most important research techniques used in sociology.

Structured, large-scale research, generates quantitative data, representative/generalisable, reliable, face-to-face as structured interview or as self-completion questionnaire.

Fixed response questions

Researcher decides response categories, limited range of response categories, quantitative data, everyone asked same questions, respondent has to choose a response category

Open-ended questions

No fixed response categories, respondent decides how to respond, unlimited range of responses, respondents asked different questions, qualitative data, more valid data, cannot be placed in categories

Problems with designing questions

Words are open to interpretation, technical terms, too long or contain more than one question, 'leading questions'. Which are more useful, closed or open-ended questions?

- Positivists tend to evaluate method on **reliability** and **representativeness**.
- Interpretivists make their judgement on **validity**.

Closed/fixed response questions – Positivists prefer them

- = more reliable as can be replicated and results verified.
- Same questions in the same order with the same response categories generates quantitative data.
- Show causal relationships/correlations.

Closed/fixed response questions – why Interpretivists criticise them

- Low validity.
- Questions have different interpretations mean poor reliability.
- Data generated does not communicate meanings respondents hold.
- Fixed response categories limit the ways in which the respondent can answer. They can fall between two categories not fall into any. The research subject ends up giving responses in the words of the questionnaire designer and this reduces validity.

Open-ended questions – why Interpretivists prefer them

- Interpretivists believe that data from open-ended questions is higher in validity.
- Open questions allow respondents to explain in their own words
- No constraints on responses.
- Respondent can introduce own ideas and issues.

Open-ended questions – why Positivists criticise them

- Positivists: data from open-ended questions lacks reliability.
- Any response can be given - 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.

SAMPLING

How do sociologists construct samples?

A 'sample' is a smaller part of the whole group (the research population), often a very small proportion of the whole group, impractical to investigate all members of a target 'population' = usually forced to survey a small proportion. *The 'research population'*

The 'population' = everyone in the group being researched. Not so easy to define and identify e.g. 'divorcees.

'Sampling frames'

A 'sampling frame' is a full list of all those who make up the research 'population', rarely easy to find an accurate 'ready-made' sampling frame or to construct one yourself (time-consuming).

How important is representativeness?

'Representativeness' and generalisations

- Sociologists usually have to research only a small proportion of the whole group that is being investigated.
- Positivist sociologists want to be able to **generalise** about the whole group from this sample
- For this to happen, the sample has to be representative of the whole group.
- This means that the sample should have the same characteristics, in the same proportions, as the whole group.

Do all sociologists want to use samples which are representative? And if they do, is it always possible to create a representative sample?

- Positivist sociologists place a lot of emphasis on the need to have a representative sample.
- However, interpretivists are interested in the 'meanings' held by a social group. They usually study small social groups/interactions and are not trying to establish 'laws' =less important to study representative samples.
- Even when researcher wants a representative sample, it is not always practicable.

Size and representativeness

Sometimes assumed a large research sample must be representative but representativeness depends more on the social characteristics of the sample reflecting those of the whole group being researched than on sample size.

What kind of samples are used?

Random, stratified, opportunity/snowball, quota, multi-stage, cluster, purposive.

Postal Questionnaires – the mailed dimension

Strengths (and counter-limitations)

Geographically dispersed sample whereas with face-to-face method, is costly and impracticable. *But no way of checking who has completed the questionnaire - out of researcher's control.*

Large sample contacted cheaply and quickly. *But response rate is often low.*

This helps the researcher to create a **representative** sample.

No face-to-face contact **removing any 'interviewer bias'**. *However, this means no rapport can be built.*

Standardised, pre-coded questions - presentable in statistical form and can then **analysed** for patterns and correlations. **Comparisons** between social groups and over time can be made.

More **reliable** - can be **replicated** and results **verified**. *But validity is limited.*

Limitations (and counter-strengths)

Once questionnaire mailed, **passes out of researchers control**.

Low response rate - can be as low as a few per cent of the total posted. Difficult to identify the representativeness of the survey - may well be that some kinds of individuals are more likely to return postal questionnaires. *However, follow-up letters, telephone contact etc can be used to boost the response rate.*

Ability of researcher to generalise from the responses is reduced.

Words used in questions may have different meanings to different individuals and groups. *But respondents have time to contemplate the questions.*

Because **researcher not present** when questionnaire completed, no way of knowing who filled in the responses. Do not know how well the respondent understood the questions. *Follow-up interviews can get around this but are costly.*

Questionnaires: strengths and limitations

Strengths (and counter-limitations)

Several **practical strengths**: cheap and quick to distribute, can contact large numbers. No cost of training interviewers and data pre-coded - can be cheaply and easily processed. Identify complex correlations between factors very quickly. *However, problems with response rate, if mailed out. This can be less than 10%.*

Testing hypotheses. These correlations are the basis for testing hypotheses about cause-and-effect relationships. Predictions of future patterns can be made and used to inform social policy. *However, correlations can be accidental and don't tell us about the reasons behind them.*

Representativeness If a large enough sample with same characteristics as whole research population, generalisations can be made. *However, certain types of people are more likely to respond to questionnaires so skews sample, reduces representativeness.*

Reliability Same questions asked, same order and same response categories = re-testing, verification and comparative data.

Few ethical issues questionnaire is returned voluntarily and anonymous, have given informed consent. No ethical issues of harm, right to withdraw etc *although chance of some deception as to the purpose of some questions but unlikely.*

Detachment Positivists believe in the researcher keeping some distance from the research subject, maintaining objectivity and detachment - they don't get involved as this might corrupt the data they collect. Self completion questionnaires maintain such a distance. *But this means no rapport is created.*

Limitations (and counter-strengths)

Response rate Low, especially if mailed. People with time on their hands or with axe to grind more likely to reply = reduce representativeness of the sample. Only a snapshot of views. *However, the response rate can be higher when questionnaires are distributed and collected in.*

Fixed questions - can't be altered without losing reliability. New issues, problems with the questions etc can't be addressed. *However, pilot study can get around this.*

Lack of validity There are several issues here. It is the researcher who is determining the questions, answer categories, sequence etc - so whose meanings are you getting? No rapport. Questions can also be misunderstood and with no researcher present, there's no way of explaining them. *However, this is balanced by greater reliability and representativeness.*

Question types Both closed-ended and open-ended questions can be used.

Limited data Necessary to keep questions brief and simple. This limits the quantity of data you receive. *However, this is good for getting basic information.*

Right answerism People may not be fully honest, giving answers they think are the 'right' ones to give guessing the researcher's intentions.

INTERVIEWS

Types of interviews

Unstructured/Formal - Structured/Informal - Group

NB Some interviews combine formal and informal approaches.

Structured/formal Interviews characteristics

Verbal, face-to-face delivery of fixed list of questions, set response categories, data in quantitative form, analysed for trends and correlations, preferred by Positivists

Positivists: standardised questions and responses are reliable and create statistical data, cause-and-effect relationships can be seen. More likely to be representative.

Strengths (and counter-limitations)

- Training interviewers inexpensive because interviewers can't deviate from the set questions. *However, this means there is little scope to develop a rapport with interviewees.*
- Good for collecting basic information eg age. *However, researchers want to go beyond this sort of basic information.*
- Larger numbers can be interviewed because are quick. *Less depth of response.*
- High in reliability/replicability, standardised same questions asked in same order. Can re-test. *However, validity is lost as questions and pre-coded answers limit the responses interviewees can offer.*
- Quantitative data.
- Pre-coded questions reveal patterns, trends and statistical correlations. *However, these do not usually give much insight into the reasons behind these trends.*
- The limited role of the interviewer reduces 'interviewer effect'. *However, this isn't fully eradicated as a social interaction still takes place.*

Limitations (and counter-strengths)

- Still some interviewer effect - interviewee's perceptions. *However, this is limited as the questions are fixed.*
- Interpretivists question the validity of the data generated as no scope for interviewees to fully explore their thoughts. *However, what is lost in validity may be gained in reliability.*
- Sociologist is imposing their views through question and answer design. *However = only way to generate quantitative data.*
- Response categories can be limited, overlap or be open to interpretation.
- Interviewer can't explain questions to interviewees.
- Statistical data - no indication of the meanings individuals attach to events.
- What people say they do may not be an accurate reflection of what they actually do.

Unstructured/informal Interviews Characteristics

Open-ended, free-flowing, interviewees can raise issues they feel are important and respond in own words = qualitative data, personal and vivid.

Interpretivists favour this - open-ended questions meet need for validity. **Feminists** favour these interviews - they empower the interviewee and reduce gender power differences.

Strengths (and counter-limitations)

- Interpretivists - high in validity. *However, consequent loss of reliability.*
- Rapport generates more honest responses, trust created may allow research into sensitive subjects. *However, increases likelihood of the interviewer effect happening.*
- Respondents reply in own words. *But this is then very difficult to categorise.*
- The informal interview uncovers meanings held.
- Respondent can take the interview in the direction they want. *On the other hand, this makes the data difficult to analyse.*
- Can check that interviewees have understood the question - follow-up questions.
- Flexibility - can explore topics unfamiliar to the researcher. *However, the interviewee is more likely to go off at a tangent.*

Limitations (and counter-strengths)

- Positivists see the data as low in reliability - nothing standardized, each interview takes a different route. *However, this increases the possibility of more valid responses.*
- Open-ended interviewing requires substantial skills.
- Cannot be converted into statistics and analysed. *However, data may give greater insight into reasons behind behaviour.*
- Time-consuming approach reduces representativeness. Tend to be small and unrepresentative. *But not a problem if the aim is to obtain insights into meanings held.*
- May not be as high in validity as is sometimes claimed - different researchers may interpret responses in different ways. *But at least meanings are uncovered and explored.*
- Interviewer bias can seriously affect the responses given.

Social interaction

- **Interviewer bias** Interviews are not a neutral social occasion and how the respondent sees the interviewer (their social class, accent, gender etc.) affects response. This reduces validity.
- **Status and power inequalities** - gender, class, age, etc - affect the way interviewees respond.
- **Artificiality** those involved know it's an interview and it can never be like a normal situation.
- **Social desirability** affects responses whereby the interviewee tries to meet what they see as the interviewer's needs.

Group interviews

Advantages

Uncover group dynamics, clarify meanings, interview more people in less time, less artificial situation, more relaxed.

Disadvantages

Individuals dominate, difficult to quantify, move off issue, cannot verify responses.

OBSERVATION

Key Issue

What are the advantages and disadvantages of each type of observation?

Participant - non-participant, structured - open-ended, covert – overt.

Participant Observation

Strengths

Interpretivists argue participant observation = high in **VALIDITY**.

PO and Validity

- This is a **naturalistic** approach. Valid data comes when a group is studied in its normal social setting. Researcher observes group in a way that does not affect their behavior – if covert. *However, ethical concerns about deception and lack of informed consent.*
- More **authentic** account of their world-view than asking questions - you see what a group does rather than what it says it does.
- It is also an **open research process** - fluid, flexible, research process directed more by the researched. The researcher 'goes with the flow'. *But no structure to the study.*
- Sociological **insight** when the layers of social norms and conventions are peeled back. Only by sharing the experiences of a group can the sociologist achieve the necessary degree of insight. *Can you rely on the interpretation of usually a sole observer?*

Other advantages

- **Taking advantage of a research opportunity** PO is flexible enough for an opportunity to be taken up (e.g. **Patrick**). *There's no way of knowing how representative the study is – it is just a chance event.*
- **Less planning required** *So there's no structure and organization.*

Limitations

Doesn't really achieve validity

- Even a skilled observer can mis-interpret events.
- The presence of an observer affects behaviour. Even in CPO the presence of a new member of the group can still affect its activities. *This is fairly limited with covert research.*
- The observer is also going to be affected by the group, identifying with them or not. *But the observer will be aware of this danger and can prepare for dealing with it.*
- Ultimately, all observation is limited by what the observer sees and how they interpret actions.

Lacks reliability

- Positivists - PO fundamentally flawed because not replicable. *But they don't impose the researcher's values.*
- There are no common agreed systems of measurement so cannot be replicated. *But this increases the likely validity of the research.*

Unrepresentative/cannot generalise

PO = 'one-off' studies, no way of knowing how representative, can't generalise.

Costly/Time-consuming

Some PO takes years to carry out – very costly and intensive for the observer. *Some PO is relatively short-lived – a few weekends for example.*

Difficulties in joining groups/sustaining covert roles

Some groups are secretive - suspicious of new members. The observer has to maintain their role within the group - not easy over a long period of time.

Covert Observation

Advantages

- Does not disturb the normal behaviour of the group = valid data
- Observer as member dig deeper into the group's behaviour.
- Access to certain areas of the groups' behaviour may be only be possible in secret

Disadvantages

- Real purpose of the observer is uncovered = the whole research ends.
- Ethical issues of trust, lack of informed consent etc
- Recording behaviour difficult
- Hard to sustain
- Some danger in maintaining secret identity
- May not be a suitable role for the observer

Overt Observation

Advantages

Can ask questions - clarify meanings, informed consent, freedom to join in.

Disadvantages

Knowing observer's identity affects behaviour, reducing validity, some aspects of group closed to overt researchers, group may refuse access.

Structured observation

= behaviour recorded systematically way on record sheet, ticking appropriate boxes at regular time intervals e.g. classroom observation.

Advantages

Quantifiable data, patterns can be identified, less time-consuming, replicable, verifiable.

Disadvantages

Difficult to be covert, hard to maintain distance from group, overt observation changes behavior, lack of validity, depends upon interpretations, categories used may overlap.

SECONDARY DATA

OFFICIAL STATISTICS

What are official statistics?

- Created by government departments and agencies.
- Data about a wide range of social behaviour/issues.
- Collected and presented in a quantified form.
- Sometimes the product of monitoring the day-to-day activities of government, agencies.
- Government departments also carry out their own surveys using standard sociological methods e.g. the Census.

Using official statistics in sociological research

Official statistics are useful the sociologist because they provide background information, generate research hypotheses, representative, data is collected in a reliable way, comprehensive, published regularly, already in existence, cheap, large samples, usually pre-analysed.

How do sociologists use official statistics?

- May not be the main focus of the study but it can provide ideas for further research e.g. trend towards comparative male underachievement in education was identified by the the Department of Education.
- Large-scale data- far larger samples than sociological research could afford. Census = as complete a sample as possible. Ditto divorce, marriage, births, deaths.
- Surveys by government departments meet sociological criteria.
- The state is involved in many areas of social life creating data about areas such as education, crime, population, health etc. all of which may be of use to the sociologist.

Problems with official statistics in sociological research

Lack of control by the researcher

The sociologist has no control over the process by which the data has been gathered = based on official definitions, data presented in form needed by government depts, structured to meet official aims/objectives, interpreted in terms of government aims.

Unlikely that official definitions match those of the sociologist e.g. Official definitions of social class are based on occupational groups whilst some sociological definitions relate class to ownership of the means of production

The social construction of official statistics

Interpretivists argue that official statistics are socially constructed. Although often presented as objective 'facts', official statistics are created through a social process of. Official statistical picture of criminal activity is the result of a complex process of social interaction that results in a 'dark figure' of unrecorded crime. The true level of crime is this 'dark figure' plus reported crimes, yet it is only the latter which is presented as the real level of crime.

Political bias in official statistics

Marxists argue that official statistics are politically biased through definitions employed, presentation of data, recording of data, areas of social life investigated e.g suppression of data e.g. Black Report into health inequalities, how official data is presented can perform political functions e.g. the very selective recording of crime by ethnic group, recording of data can meet political ends e.g. school league tables that make no consideration of social class differences.

Evaluation

- **'Hard statistics'**: some official statistics are simple 'head counts' e.g. births, deaths. These do not have the same problems as other types of 'soft' official statistics.
- Official statistics have often been the focus of research itself e.g. the nature of official data about suicide - on which Durkheim based his classic study.

Documents

Personal and historical documents = important source, = Many forms and each type has its own specific uses and problems, = mainly qualitative in nature, = tends to have a fairly limited application to sociology, they do have their uses in specific research contexts.

Types of documents: media reports, personal documents, oral histories, historical documents, documents researchers ask people to create (these may be considered primary data).

Personal documents - advantages

Fairly high degree of validity – especially if the author writes them without any foreknowledge of their possible sociological use, insight – they tell about events from those 'on the inside', sometimes = only records of a particular.

Personal documents - disadvantages

All personal documents are written for an audience so some bias, no way of knowing how representative a particular document is, difficult to evaluate validity, some documents written some time after the event.

Historical documents

Sometimes an historical perspective is useful = wrongly assume some social activity to be a recent development e.g. **Pearson's** study of the history of football hooliganism was a useful antidote to media view during the 1970s that it was a new form of social delinquency.

Historical documents have their problems = representativeness, accuracy, language and interpretation.

Media reports

The two main ways of analysing media reports are quantitative and qualitative investigation. The first measures the amount of coverage given to a particular issue, the number of repeated images, etc. whilst the latter attempts to uncover the meanings attached to particular words and images.

Advantages media material = comprehensive, = wide range of opinion, fairly easily organised into systematic data of use to the sociologist e.g. news reports can be quantified in terms of the

amount of time or space given to particular points of view e.g. Glasgow Group studies

Disadvantages

Media reports = biased e.g. daily newspapers have a political slant. Quantitative measurement of the content might identify patterns but cannot explain them. Problems with exploring the meanings carried by words and images. The issue here is interpretation.

LONGITUDINAL STUDIES

Characteristics:

Lengthy period of time, same research sample, measure changes, usually quantitative, usually surveys, reliable, comparisons over time, used mainly by positivists.

Advantages

Comparative data survey approach = comparisons, trends, changes and continuities

Same sample reduces the possibility of a change in responses being due to different samples

Tracking large-scale social movements useful in tracking large-scale patterns of social behaviour e.g. relationship between social class and health

Attitude changes over time preferable to ask people about behaviour at the time rather than years later.

Reliability asking similar questions at each stage of the study

Representativeness often large sample, carefully selected

Disadvantages

'Sample attrition' Keeping same sample over a long period of time - members die, emigrate, opt out etc. - can affect representativeness of the sample - the data will become distorted.

Maintaining representativeness The demographic composition of a society may change leaving the original sample partially unrepresentative.

Changing research interests The focus of research can change over the whole period of the longitudinal study.

Sample membership and their responses Being aware that they are part of an on-going research project may affect the way people respond.

Cost few longitudinal studies because cost involved - researchers have to be highly committed.

Structured research

Comparing the usefulness of primary and secondary data in sociological research

Primary and Secondary Data

Primary data is collected first hand by the sociologist - can be quantitative or qualitative.

Secondary data is already in existence and which may be of use to the sociologist - both quantitative and qualitative.

Primary data

Advantages

Specifically relevant to research, control over question design, choice over methods to use, own conceptual definitions and measurement, control over sample, chance research opportunities, no secondary data exists for some issues.

Disadvantages

Time consuming - limiting material collected, gaining funding, funding bodies control, each primary method has specific disadvantages.

The usefulness of secondary data Advantages

Already exists, often comprehensive, easy to access, cheap, pre-analysed, comparative analysis, often based on a very large sample, sometimes the only material available.

Disadvantages

Can be very patchy, qualitative documents unlikely to be representative, outside the control of researcher, interpretation of material the result of others, each source of secondary data has own specific weaknesses.

RESEARCH METHODS: FURTHER REDUCED REVISION NOTES

KEY IDEAS ABOUT RESEARCH METHODS

Research methods – Key concepts

Reliability, representativeness and validity help assess the usefulness of a particular research method.

RELIABILITY: replicable, re-testing, common measurement, objective, scientific.

REPRESENTATIVENESS: Generalisable to a larger group from smaller sample, cross-section, proportionately similar.

VALIDITY: meanings held, authentic, measures what it seeks to measure.

Structured research: structured interviews, surveys/questionnaires, structured observation and official statistics = high in reliability and representativeness, low in validity.

Unstructured research: unstructured interviews, participant observation, personal documents = high in validity but low in reliability and representativeness,

PRIMARY RESEARCH METHODS

Quantitative Research: experiments (field and laboratory), structured observation, surveys (structured interviews and questionnaires).

Qualitative research: observation (overt, covert, participant), unstructured interviews.

Primary research can be: Covert – Overt Large-scale-Small-scale Researcher-led - subject-led Statistical-Descriptive Structured - Unstructured

SECONDARY DATA

Quantitative secondary: official statistics, existing quantitative research.

Qualitative secondary: public documents, personal documents (diaries, memoirs etc.)

THE TWO METHODOLOGIES: POSITIVISM and INTERPRETIVISM

Methods = research techniques used by sociologists. **'Methodology'** = ideas behind the choice of method. Does the sociologist think quantitative or qualitative data is best?

The two methodological approaches in sociology are:

Positivism/Quantitative and Interpretivism/Qualitative sociology

Each of the 'two methodologies' is based on a set of assumptions about the nature of society, the most appropriate type of data to collect. This determines which research methods are chosen.

Positivism

Quantitative research and surveys, structured interviews, structured observation, experiments and official statistics.

Positivism: main assumptions

Social world has an objective reality, external social forces direct behaviour, seen in patterns in human behaviour, these show cause-and-effect relationships, need quantitative data.

Impact on choice of method

Need systematic, objective, replicable, statistical from experiments, questionnaires, structured observation and structured interview, official and other pre-existing statistics. These use fixed questions/categories convertible into Statistics; samples = representative.

Interpretivism

Qualitative research = participant observation, unstructured interviews and documents

Interpretivism: main assumptions

Social world has no single objective reality, each social actor/group defines 'reality' differently, aim = uncover meanings by going to the groups, qualitative data.

Why do Interpretivists prefer to use participant observation, unstructured interviews and documents in their research?

Immersing themselves in group, experience first-hand what group does rather than what they might claim to do, getting behind the public face. Or, unstructured interviews - respondents speak freely, expressing themselves in own words. Documents written by research subjects for their own purposes - their personal meanings are more likely to be expressed.

CHOICE OF RESEARCH METHOD

What influences a sociologist's choice of research method?

- **theoretical/methodological preference of the sociologist**
- **practical considerations**
- **ethical issues**

1 Methodological preference

'Methodological preference' - Positivism vs Interpretivism?

Methodological concerns are the first consideration - the type of data that they think is most appropriate. ***This is restricted by practical and ethical limitations.***

2 How do practical considerations affect choice of method?

Time - PO and unstructured interviewing take more time than social surveys. *How important?*

Finance Postal questionnaires = most cost-effective

Source of funding Few researchers have a completely free hand.

Personal concerns of the sociologist, careers, family commitments etc.

Nature of the research subject - social groups may not welcome intrusion.

Research opportunity sometimes suddenly appears so

3 Ethical issues

Informed consent not easy to get especially vulnerable, groups, 'gatekeepers', harder for covert methods. Justified to avoid the Hawthorne effect?

Anonymity Right to anonymity to avoid any negative effects.

Impact on research subjects e.g. psychological damage e.g. Milgram. May have legal or economic consequences for the group.

CHOICE OF RESEARCH TOPIC

1 Funding body - they are paying for the study, so = major influence on the research.

2 Theoretical perspective e.g. feminist researchers likely to study issues affecting women.

3 Practical issues - especially time and access - may limit what issues can be studied.

4 Contemporary issues - what is seen as currently important in society.

5 Researchers career

EXPERIMENTS

= method of natural sciences, variables identified and controlled, cause-and-effect relationships, key = control exercised by the researcher.

Should sociologists use experiments?

= reliable and representative but can't 'put society in the laboratory'.

Interpretivists: people have free will and consciousness, laboratory lacks ecological validity.

Laboratory Experiments

Problems

- **Artificiality** = highly artificial situation, do results apply to the real social world?
- **Identifying and controlling variables** too many variables in social life
- **Ethical problems** Most mislead people so informed consent not given.
- **'Experimental effect'/Hawthorne Effect'** Damages validity
- **Narrow focus** on one issue e.g. teacher expectations.
- **Humans are not objects** - have ability to make own decisions
- **Lack of representativeness** = small-scale so unlikely to be representative.
- **Inability to study the past.**

Examples of studies to refer to:

Milgram on obedience to authority, **Mayo's** Hawthorne study, **Zimbardo** on prison/authority.

Field experiments in sociological research

Field experiments = amending existing real life situations for research purposes.

Strengths

- **More 'real' than laboratory** Real-life situation = greater validity.
- **Controlling a single variable** is relatively easy.

Limitations

- **Lack of scientific credibility** All variables not identified and controlled
- **Ethical problems** Usually no consent is obtained.
- **Limited scope** confined to single issue in a single context e.g. discrimination,
- **Interpretation** of responses

Examples

Studies of racial discrimination, Rosenthal and Jacobson, Rosenham.

The Comparative method

A 'thought experiment' - no actual experimentation. Compares groups of people that are similar in all ways except one e.g. Durkheim on suicide, Avoids artificiality and most ethical problems and can be used to study the past.

SOCIAL SURVEYS - QUESTIONNAIRES

The social survey = structured, large-scale research, quantitative data, representative/generalisable, reliable, structured interview or self-completion questionnaire.

Fixed response questions

Researcher decides response categories, limited range of response categories, quantitative data, everyone asked same questions, respondent has to choose a response category

Open-ended questions

No fixed response categories, respondent decides how to respond, unlimited range of responses, respondents asked different questions, qualitative data, more valid data, cannot be placed in categories

Problems with designing questions

Words are open to interpretation, technical terms, too long or contain more than one question, 'leading questions'. Which are more useful, closed or open-ended questions?

Closed/fixed response questions – Positivists prefer them

= more reliable as same questions in the same order generates quantitative data.

Closed/fixed response questions – why Interpretivists criticise them

Low validity, different interpretation, not communicate meanings respondents hold, limit the ways in which the respondent can answer = reduces validity.

Open-ended questions – why Interpretivists prefer them

Higher in validity, explain in their own words, introduce own ideas and issues.

Open-ended questions – why Positivists criticise them

Positivists: lacks reliability, impossible to categorise, open range of responses.

SAMPLING

Sample = smaller part of the whole group, can't investigate everyone, needs a sample.

Research population = everyone in the group being researched.

Sampling frame = full list of the research population.

'Representativeness' and generalisations

Can research only a small proportion of the whole group but want to **generalise** about the whole group so sample has to be representative of the whole group - same characteristics, in the same proportions, as the whole group.

Do all sociologists want to use samples which are representative?

However, interpretivists are interested in meanings = less important to study representative samples. Not always practicable either.

Size and representativeness

Sometimes assumed a large research sample must be representative but representativeness depends more on the social characteristics of the sample reflecting those of the whole group being researched than on sample size.

What kind of samples are used?

Random, stratified, opportunity/snowball, quota, multi-stage, cluster, purposive.

Postal Questionnaires – the mailed dimension

Strengths (and counter-limitations)

Geographically dispersed sample *but no way of checking who has completed the questionnaire - out of researcher's control.*

Large sample contacted cheaply and quickly. *But response rate is often low.*

Representative sample more likely.

Removes any 'interviewer bias'. *However, this means no rapport can be built.*

Standardised, pre-coded questions - statistical - analysed – comparisons.

Reliable - can be **replicated** and results **verified**. *But validity is limited.*

Limitations (and counter-strengths)

Once questionnaire mailed, **passes out of researchers control**.

Low response rate - difficult to identify how representative. *However, follow-up letters, telephone contact etc can be used to boost the response rate.*

Generalisability is reduced.

Questions open to interpretation *but respondents have time to contemplate the questions.*

Researcher not present - no way of knowing who filled in the responses. *Follow-up interviews can get around this but are costly.*

Questionnaires: strengths and limitations

Strengths (and counter-limitations)

Practical strengths: cheap and quick to distribute, contact large numbers. Identify complex correlations between factors very quickly. *However response rate can be less than 10%.*

Testing hypotheses. Test hypotheses about cause-and-effect relationships. Predict future behaviour. *However, correlations can be accidental and don't tell us about the reasons.*

Representativeness If a large enough sample generalisations can be made. *However, certain types of people are more likely to respond so skews sample.*

Reliability Same questions asked, same order and same response categories = re-testing, verification and comparative data.

Few ethical issues voluntary and anonymous = informed consent. No ethical issues of harm, right to withdraw etc *although chance of some deception.*

Detachment maintains objectivity and detachment - *but this means no rapport is created.*

Limitations (and counter-strengths)

Response rate Low, especially if mailed. Certain types more likely to reply = reduce representativeness. *However, the response rate higher when distributed and collected in.*

Fixed questions - new issues, problems with questions etc can't be addressed. *However, pilot study can get around this.*

Lack of validity Researcher determines questions, answer categories, sequence etc - so whose meanings are you getting? No researcher present = no way of explaining them. *However, this is balanced by greater reliability and representativeness.*

Question types Both closed- and open-ended questions can be used.

Limited data Questions brief and simple. This limits the quantity of data you receive. *However, good for getting basic information.*

Right answerism People may not be fully honest, 'right answerism'.

INTERVIEWS

Types of interviews

Unstructured/Formal - Structured/Informal – Group – combination.

Structured/formal interviews:

Verbal, face-to-face delivery of fixed questions, set response categories, data in quantitative form, analysed for trends and correlations, preferred by Positivists.

Positivists: standardised questions and responses are reliable and create statistical data, cause-and-effect relationships can be seen. More likely to be representative.

Strengths (and counter-limitations)

- Training interviewers inexpensive.
- Good for collecting basic information *however, this is very basic information.*
- Larger numbers can be interviewed because are quick. *Less depth of response.*
- High in reliability/replicability, standardised same questions asked in same order. *However, validity is lost as questions limit the responses interviewees can offer.*
- Quantitative data.
- Pre-coded questions reveal patterns and statistical correlations. *No insight.*
- Less 'interviewer effect'. *However, social interaction still takes place.*

Limitations (and counter-strengths)

- Still some interviewer effect. *However, limited as the questions are fixed.*
- Interpretivists question the validity as no scope for interviewees to fully explore their thoughts. *However, what is lost in validity may be gained in reliability.*
- Sociologist is imposing their views but = *only way to generate quantitative data.*
- Response categories can be limited, overlap or be open to interpretation.
- Interviewer can't explain questions to interviewees.
- Statistical data - no indication of the meanings individuals attach to events.
- What people say they do may not be an accurate reflection of what they actually do.

Unstructured/informal Interviews Characteristics

Open-ended, free-flowing, interviewees can raise issues they feel are important and respond in own words = qualitative data, personal and vivid.

Interpretivists favour this - open-ended questions meet need for validity. **Feminists** favour these interviews - they empower the interviewee and reduce gender power differences.

Strengths (and counter-limitations)

- Interpretivists - high in validity. *However, consequent loss of reliability.*
- Rapport, honesty, trust. *However, increases likelihood of the interviewer effect.*
- Respondents reply in own words. *But this is then very difficult to categorise.*
- The informal interview uncovers meanings held.
- Respondent can go in new direction. *But this makes data difficult to analyse.*
- Can check that interviewees have understood the question - follow-up questions.
- Flexibility - can explore unfamiliar topics. *However, the interviewee go off at tangent.*

Limitations (and counter-strengths)

- Positivists - low in reliability - nothing standardized *but more valid responses.*
- Open-ended interviewing requires substantial skills.
- No statistics. *However, data may give greater insight into reasons behind behaviour.*
- Small-scale and unrepresentative. *But aim is to obtain insights into meanings held.*
- Not as high in validity as claimed – interpretation of responses. *But at least meanings are uncovered and explored.*
- Interviewer bias can seriously affect the responses given.

Social interaction

- **Interviewer bias** reduces validity.
- **Status and power inequalities** affect way interviewees respond.
- **Artificiality** those involved know it's an interview so not like a normal situation.
- **Social desirability** - interviewee meets what they see as the interviewer's needs.

Group interviews

Advantages: group dynamics, clarify meanings, interview more people, less artificial.

Disadvantages: Individuals dominate, difficult to quantify, move off issue.

OBSERVATION

Participant - non-participant, structured - open-ended, covert – overt.

Participant Observation

Strengths

Interpretivists argue participant observation = high in **VALIDITY**.

- **Naturalistic** - group is studied in normal social setting. If covert, observes group + not affect their behavior. *However, deception and lack of informed consent.*
- More **authentic** account - you see what a group does rather than what it says it does.
- **Open research process** - fluid, flexible, 'goes with the flow'. *But no structure.*
- **Insight** - layers of social norms peeled back. Sharing the experiences gives insight. *Can you rely on the interpretation of usually a sole observer?*
- **Flexible** enough for opportunity to be taken (e.g. **Patrick**) - *is just a chance event.*
- **Less planning required** *So there's no structure and organization.*

Limitations

Doesn't really achieve validity

- Even a skilled observer can mis-interpret events.
- The presence of an observer affects behaviour. *Fairly limited in covert research.*
- The observer is also going to be affected by the group, identifying with them or not. *But the observer will be aware of this danger and can prepare for dealing with it.*
- Observation is limited by what the observer sees and how they interpret actions.

Lacks reliability

- Positivists - PO flawed non-replicable. *But don't impose the researcher's values.*
- Cannot be replicated. *But this increases the likely validity of the research.*

Unrepresentative/cannot generalise

PO = 'one-off' studies, no way of knowing how representative, can't generalise.

Costly/Time-consuming *Some PO is relatively short-lived – a few weekends.*

Difficulties in joining groups/sustaining covert roles Some groups are secretive.

Covert Observation

Advantages

- Does not disturb the normal behaviour of the group = valid data
- Observer as member dig deeper into the group's behaviour.
- Access to certain areas of the groups' behaviour may be only be possible in secret

Disadvantages

- Real purpose of the observer is uncovered = the whole research ends.
- Ethical issues of trust, lack of informed consent etc
- Recording difficult
- Hard to sustain - danger in maintaining secret identity
- May not be a suitable role for the observer

Overt Observation

Advantages

Can ask questions - clarify meanings, informed consent, freedom to join in.

Disadvantages

Knowing observer's identity affects behaviour, reducing validity, some aspects of group closed to overt researchers, group may refuse access.

Structured observation

= behaviour recorded systematically way on record sheet.

Advantages : Quantifiable data, patterns can be identified, less time-consuming, replicable.

Disadvantages

Difficult to be covert, hard to maintain distance from group, overt observation changes behavior, lack of validity, depends upon interpretations, categories used may overlap.

SECONDARY DATA

OFFICIAL STATISTICS

Created by government, wide range of social issues, quantified, = monitoring the day-to-day activities of government but some surveys using sociological methods e.g. the Census.

Using official statistics in sociological research

= background information, generate research hypotheses, representative, reliable, comprehensive, published regularly, already in existence, cheap, large samples, usually pre-analysed, large-scale data e.g. Census = as complete a sample as possible. Ditto divorce, marriage, births, deaths. The state involved in many areas of social life of use to the sociologist.

Problems with official statistics in sociological research

Lack of control by the researcher

= based on official definitions, data presented in form needed by government depts, structured to meet official aims/objectives, interpreted in terms of government aims.

It is unlikely that official definitions match those of the sociologist

Interpretivists argue that official statistics are socially constructed not = 'facts' but result of social processes. Crime stats = result of a process of social interaction that results in a 'dark figure' of unrecorded crime.

Political bias in official statistics

Marxists = official statistics are politically biased e.g. definitions e.g. suppression of data e.g. Black Report into health inequalities, selective recording of crime by ethnic group, school league tables that make no consideration of social class differences.

Evaluation

- **'Hard statistics'**: some official statistics are simple 'head counts' e.g. births, deaths. These do not have the same problems as other types of 'soft' official statistics.
- Official statistics have often been the focus of research itself e.g. Durkheim/suicide.

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Comparing the usefulness of primary and secondary data in sociological research

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EXEMPLAR ANSWERS TO 10, 16 AND 20 MARK QUESTIONS

Families and Households

AS 10 mark question:

Outline and explain two explanations of the unequal gender division of labour in families.

(10 marks)

“One explanation of gender inequalities between couples is based on the idea that society is full of patriarchal norms and values. These are all-pervasive and they shape the expectations of gender roles in society. So women carry out housework, childcare and emotion work (the ‘triple shift’) because that is what society has socialised them into expecting to do. Men are socialised differently into taking on the breadwinner, instrumental role. Gershuny found that couples whose parents had a more equal relationship were themselves more likely to have a more equal relationship. This suggests that it is down to the norms and values we ‘inherit’ from seeing how our parents behave – and then copy them. Another way to look at this is to examine the attitudes towards the domestic division of labour by age group. Older people are more likely to have a traditional view whereas younger adults, having been exposed to alternative ways of approaching a relationship, are more likely to see equality as important. Most men also claim to do more housework than their father did – although that may not mean a great deal as many men in the past did little or no housework.

A second explanation is an economic one. This is the argument that logically, as women are likely to be paid less than men, it makes economic sense for them to take on the domestic tasks while men take on paid employment. There is some evidence that the more a woman earns, the less domestic work she does. However, whether this is a reflection of her increased economic position within the family or because the family can then afford to employ (usually female) domestic help, is not clear. It is hardly an advance towards equality if it is bought at the expense of other women. Ramos also found that when the woman is in full-time employment, the man does as much housework as she does. Interestingly, in lesbian couples, where one partner earned more than the other, they did less domestic work – suggesting that paid work is a major determinant of the way domestic labour is divided.”

Mark 10/10

Comments

There is no need for an introduction to this kind of question. It does require a piece of extended writing but it is not a full essay. The candidate takes the required number of explanations and does each in depth. There is a lot of explanation which will gain Analysis marks. Studies are not simply described but applied to the question and worked in with the explanations. This gains marks for Application. There is a little bit of evaluation at the end of the first explanation – you could achieve full marks without this but it is always useful to stay on the zone and evaluate as you go.

A Level 10 mark question:

Item A

About 40% of marriages end in divorce. The level of divorce in 2010 was about six times that of the 1961 level. Sociologists have suggested several explanations for this major trend in family relationships. Some have related a high level of divorce to changes to the place of women in society and the economy in general, or to challenges to a traditional view of marriage. It also possible that there is now greater access to divorce than in the past.

Applying material from Item A, analyse two explanations of increased divorce in the UK. (10 marks)

“As Item A says, there have been changes to the traditional view of marriage being a sanctified bond, an ‘until death us do part’ relationship. Some sociologists argue that in today’s society, traditional norms and values such as this are less powerful. This may reflect a change in how people view the aim of marriage – more as a means of satisfying the needs of the two individuals than for bringing up children or being the cornerstone of society. Individuals have more freedom to follow their own self-interest so if a marital relationship is not meeting the needs of one or both of the partners, then it is easier for it to end. It is almost like people act as consumers when entering a marriage and if it does not meet with approval, then it is acceptable to switch brands. To some extent as well, divorce is no longer stigmatised. The amount of divorce has normalised it. So not only have the bonds and social pressure to stay in marriage weakened, divorce itself has become ‘just one of those things’ in life. A further explanation is that ‘there is now greater access to divorce than in the past’. Put simply, divorce today is legally easier to obtain than it was in 1961. The grounds for divorce changed dramatically in 1969. Whereas before then, a guilty party had to be proven, the law now requires only irretrievable breakdown to be acknowledged. Other changes such as extending legal aid making divorce more accessible to women and reducing the minimum period of marriage before a divorce could take place, have all made divorce easier to obtain. A problem with this explanation is that just because something is legally easier to obtain doesn’t explain why people then take advantage of this situation. However, what may be the case is that legal changes making divorce easier have been part of changing social attitudes reflecting a trend away from seeing marriage as some kind of sacred bond.”

Mark 10/10

Comments

There is no need for an introduction to this kind of question. It does require a piece of extended writing but it is not a full essay. The candidate takes the required number of explanations and does each in depth. Crucially these are both taken from points made in the Item. The candidate is careful to point out at the start of each paragraph where in the Item the starting point for each explanation. This gains marks for Application. There is a lot of explanation which will gain Analysis marks. There is a little bit of evaluation at the end of the second explanation – you could achieve full marks without this but it is always useful to stay on the zone and evaluate as you go.

Applying material from Item A and your own knowledge, evaluate the reasons for, and the consequences of, the fall in the death rate since 1900.

(20 marks)

“Death rate refers to the number of death per thousand of population in a given year. It allows us to make comparisons between societies and within the same society over time. In Britain the death rate in 1900 was 19 per thousand but by the end of the century it had dropped to 10 per thousand. There are a variety of reasons for this but it is also interesting to study what impact a falling death rate has on society.

The most obvious reason for the fall in death rate relates to better medicine. In fact there are two different sides to this; one is the medical advances that have been made the other is the better provision of medical services. These two things combined have meant that we are much more healthy society than in 1900 and that is why we have seen the rapid fall in the death rate.

But not everyone thinks this is all down to medicine. McKeown argues that diet plays an even more important role in keeping people healthy and prolonging their life. Because better nutrition helps to strengthen our immune system it means we are able to fight off infections. Also if pregnant mothers have a better diet their children will be born stronger and there will be a reduction in infant mortality rate which will also reduce the death rate. This is why McKeown thinks diet rather than medicine is the key to explaining the fall in death rate.

It is also the case that we now have much better housing and sanitation. In the past people lived in slums with no running water or inside toilets and the streets were filthy and full of disease. As houses got better and the streets cleaner this cut down the number of people getting ill and dying from diseases in the home. We also have more health and safety rules and laws today and this helps to protect people.

So what are the consequences of all of this? People are living longer and we have more people than ever living to 100 and beyond. But the birth rate is also falling so what we get is what people call an ageing population where the amount of older people is greater than the amount of younger people. This can cause a great deal of expense because older people are more likely to be sick. This means more money is spent on doctors, hospitals and medicine. There are also more old people’s homes.

In order to pay for this the government has said people will have to work longer before they get their pension. It also means people have to pay more money in tax to pay for all the things that older people need. As well as this it might also mean we get more extended families as older people move in with their children and grandchildren when they get too old to look after themselves. This can be a good thing because it lets children spend time with their grandparents and gives them another adult to talk to and play with.

In conclusion there have been a number of factors which all led to a fall in the death rate. People disagree over which was more important; medicine, diet or housing. What the fall in death rate has produced is an ageing population which has given the government quite a few problems to face as they have to pay for all the things older people need.”

Mark 18/20

Comments:

Overall this is clearly a top band answer. All of the skills are demonstrated and there is a sustained focus on the question throughout. There is a good range of both reasons and implications identified although some of these remain underdeveloped. For this reason the answer does not gain full marks. To do so it would need to develop such points as what medical advances were made, how better health care was provided and what other impacts might a fall in death rate have?

Applying material from Item A and your own knowledge, evaluate the view that, in today's society, the family is losing its functions.

(20 marks)

"Functionalists believe the family has vital functions to perform. As can be seen in the Item, Parsons believes these roles are socialisation of children by teaching them the norms and values of society, and stabilisation of adult personalities. This is where the adults in the family give each other emotional support and the family becomes a haven from the pressures of the modern world.

Another sociologist called Murdock identified 4 key functions that families perform. One is sexual where behaviour is regulated and another reproduction where new members of society are produced. The third is education which is teaching norms and values whilst the fourth is economic where the family looks after its members and provides for them.

Some argue that the family is losing its functions. As the Item says, so many children now spend time in playgroups and nurseries that the socialisation function has been lost. But this is not always the case. Not all children go to these and even if they do it is still the parents who look after them and socialise them during the times that they are with them.

Other people argue that the Welfare State is responsible for the loss of functions. Things which used to be the responsibility of the family such as health, caring and education are now done by the specialist agencies set up by the welfare state. However this might not be so. It is still the family who looks after you when you are sick unless you are so bad that you need to go to the doctors. Sick children are still looked after by parents or even grandparents. It is also often grandparents who become the child-minder so the family is not losing that function because it is being done by other family members.

Some people say that the family is no longer doing its sexual function because there are a lot of affairs and divorce is high because people are not staying faithful to their partners. Against this most people who get divorced end up remarried and so families continue. People are not rejecting marriage as an institution but they will not stay in an unhappy one especially as it is now easy to get out of it and start again with someone else.

The stabilisation point of Parsons could be debated. Sometimes the family is not a happy place and women suffer domestic violence so his idea of a warm bath might work for men but not for women or even children who sometimes get neglected or even abused. Feminists like Fran Ansley would claim that men benefit from the family because they exploit women as unpaid servants. Other feminists have spoken about the dual burden women suffer and some have even called it the triple shift. But others would say people still get married in large numbers so they must be getting something good out of it. Also even if people are not in a family must people say they would like to be in one someday so it shows it is as popular as ever.

To conclude the claim that the family has lost its functions is not supported by everyone. Some of its functions have changed but families still do the same jobs they used to including the ones in the Item which are socialisation and stabilisation. Without these, society would find it hard to continue which is why Parsons called these basic and irreducible functions."

Mark 20/24

Comments:

Overall this is clearly a top band answer. All of the skills are demonstrated and there is a sustained focus on the question throughout. There is a good range of both reasons and implications identified although some of these remain underdeveloped. For this reason the answer does not gain full marks. To do so it would need to develop such points as what medical advances were made, how better health care was provided and what other impacts might a fall in death rate have?

Evaluate the problems some sociologists find with using postal questionnaires in their research.

(16 marks)

“Only some sociologists use postal questionnaires, others find that they have too many problems to be of any real use in research. Interpretivists argue that postal questionnaires simply do not produce results that are valid. The researcher decides on the questions and the answer categories. They also decide who will be asked to complete the questionnaire. So the power lies with the researcher and people filling in the questionnaire do not have the opportunity to say what they think in their own words.

Even positivists – who use postal questionnaires - see some problems with postal questionnaires, especially in terms of problems with their representativeness. They usually have a very low response rate. Sometimes below 5% of all the questionnaires sent out. This is because they are often seen as being ‘junk mail’ and of no importance so people receiving them simply bin the questionnaire. There are also problems of mail going to the wrong address. Maybe only a particular type of person replies. People with time on their hands, the elderly, the unemployed, or those who are particularly interested in the subject of the research, will reply. The result is that the researcher does not know how representative the respondents are of the whole population. However, because these questionnaires are delivered through the post, they can go to a country-wide range of people which helps to improve representativeness.

Another problem linked to this is that the researcher doesn’t know who has completed the questions and with what attitude. With no-one present when the questionnaire is being completed, the researcher does not know who has filled it in, whether they have just quickly ticked boxes without much thought and so on. So the questionnaire may be filled in by people of a different age group or gender to the one the sociologist wanted. There is an upside to this though, the absence of the researcher means that their presence is not affecting the respondent who therefore might give more honest answers. This improves the validity of the answers.

The absence of the researcher also has the problem of what happens if people filling in the questions do not understand what some of them mean? There is no-one there to help them to understand what the questions mean. This may be particularly a problem when the questionnaires are sent to people with literacy issues. They’re less likely to return them and this affects representativeness.

Some sociologists argue that the absence of the researcher means that there is no problem of people tending to give socially desirable answers. As there is no researcher in front of them, there is no social pressure on them. However, it can be argued that social desirability in answers never goes away completely as people work out from the wording of the question what the ‘correct’ answer is.

Interpretivists believe that postal questionnaires simply do not generate answers that are valid. They result in quantitative data which is easily analysed but there are problems over what the data actually means. With fixed questions and answers, there is no opportunity to hear the voice of the respondent. They have to force their values and attitudes to fit the answer categories of the researcher. Answer categories like ‘strongly believe’ can mean very different things to different people. However, this method does allow for large-scale research to take place over a wide geographical area.

Ultimately, sociologists from different backgrounds will come to different conclusions about whether this method has too many problems to be useful. Often it is numbers that count. Statistical data carries more power in society so even though postal questionnaires have problems, they create the type of data that most people want.”

Mark 16/16

Comments:

The answer opens with a great way to start a methods answer – set out the method’s “methodological location”. Paragraph 2 has a very sophisticated point. Most students see a method as simply favoured or opposed by positivists or interpretivists. In reality it is a bit more complicated and this student shows that in the first sentence. The rest of the paragraph explains the representativeness issue giving a range of reasons why there may be a lack of representativeness. There is also a little bit of evaluation at the end which uses strength of postal research to counter this problem. Paragraph 3 is a good example of how to use a strength of a method in a question asking you to focus on its problems. Marks here for evaluation. Paragraph 5 is unusual in that it starts with an apparent strength but then turns it into a problem – very effective. At the end, an attempt (rare!) to offer a real conclusion rather than just a summary of the essay.