

Sociology Department

**APPENDIX TO THE A-
LEVEL SOCIOLOGY
RESEARCH METHODS
BOOKLET**

**20 MARK METHODS IN
CONTEXT EXAM TIPS,
EXAMPLES AND
EXEMPLARS**

Questions & Answers

Methods in context question: applying your knowledge and understanding of sociological research methods to the study of a particular issue in education

Pupils

Theoretical issues can be explained in terms of the problem of the researcher being seen as a 'teacher in disguise' by the pupil so that data may lack validity. For example, pupils may be reluctant to discuss their true feelings on teacher labelling or parental support in an interview as they may be afraid that this will get back to teachers or their parents. They may give socially desirable answers as they do not want to be put in a detention or be grounded! The language used in primary methods such as questionnaires and interviews will need to be kept simple and 'student friendly' in order to obtain valid data. For example, younger students may have problems understanding complex questions and sociological concepts such as cultural deprivation. For the Hawthorne effect and observations of lessons students could either behave better than usual to get on their teacher's 'good side' or be more disruptive so they can get a teacher they dislike into 'trouble'. Develop points by comparing how different students may prefer different types of methods. An interview may be easier than a self-complete questionnaire for a student with learning difficulties so that more valid data is obtained. Practical issues such as the questionnaires being too long may mean that pupils get bored or do not want to fill them in if they have to be completed out of lesson time. In terms of ethical issues, pupils are a vulnerable group so as well as needing parental consent there is the issue of whether they are mature enough to give informed consent. Will Year 5 pupils really understand the purpose of the research even if it is explained to them? Sociologists will also need to be mindful of causing harm such as the potential negative impact on pupils' education. For example, pupils involved in an interview are likely to be missing out on lesson time at the very least.

Teachers

In a similar way, teachers may see the researcher as 'Ofsted in disguise' so this raises the theoretical problem that responses may lack validity. Teachers may be afraid of losing their job if they give honest answers in interviews or questionnaires on issues such as racism in schools. Again, with lesson observations explain how the Hawthorne effect may come into play. Teachers who are knowingly sexist will not want to display their usual unfair treatment towards female students as they will be concerned that this will get back to their head teacher. There are several practical issues that can be discussed in researching teachers such as timetable constraints and teachers being 'overworked and busy people'. These factors may make it difficult for a researcher to arrange an interview or get a good response rate from a questionnaire. In terms of observations, teachers may be reluctant to allow the researcher access to 'their classroom' and have the additional task of providing the researcher with a lesson plan.

Parents

It is possible that parents may see the researcher as just another teacher or even 'social worker in disguise', again leading to theoretical issues. Their responses to questionnaires and interviews may lack validity due to them not wanting to be seen as a 'bad parent'. The biggest practical problem with researching parents is access, as they are not usually in school! A good research opportunity for sociologists is a parents' evening. However, as middle-class parents are more likely to attend, the sample may not be representative. Even if they attend, working-class parents who possess 'anti-school' attitudes may be reluctant to participate in an interview or open up if they see the researcher as middle class. In addition, parents from ethnic minority backgrounds may have language barriers which may affect the validity of responses.

Schools

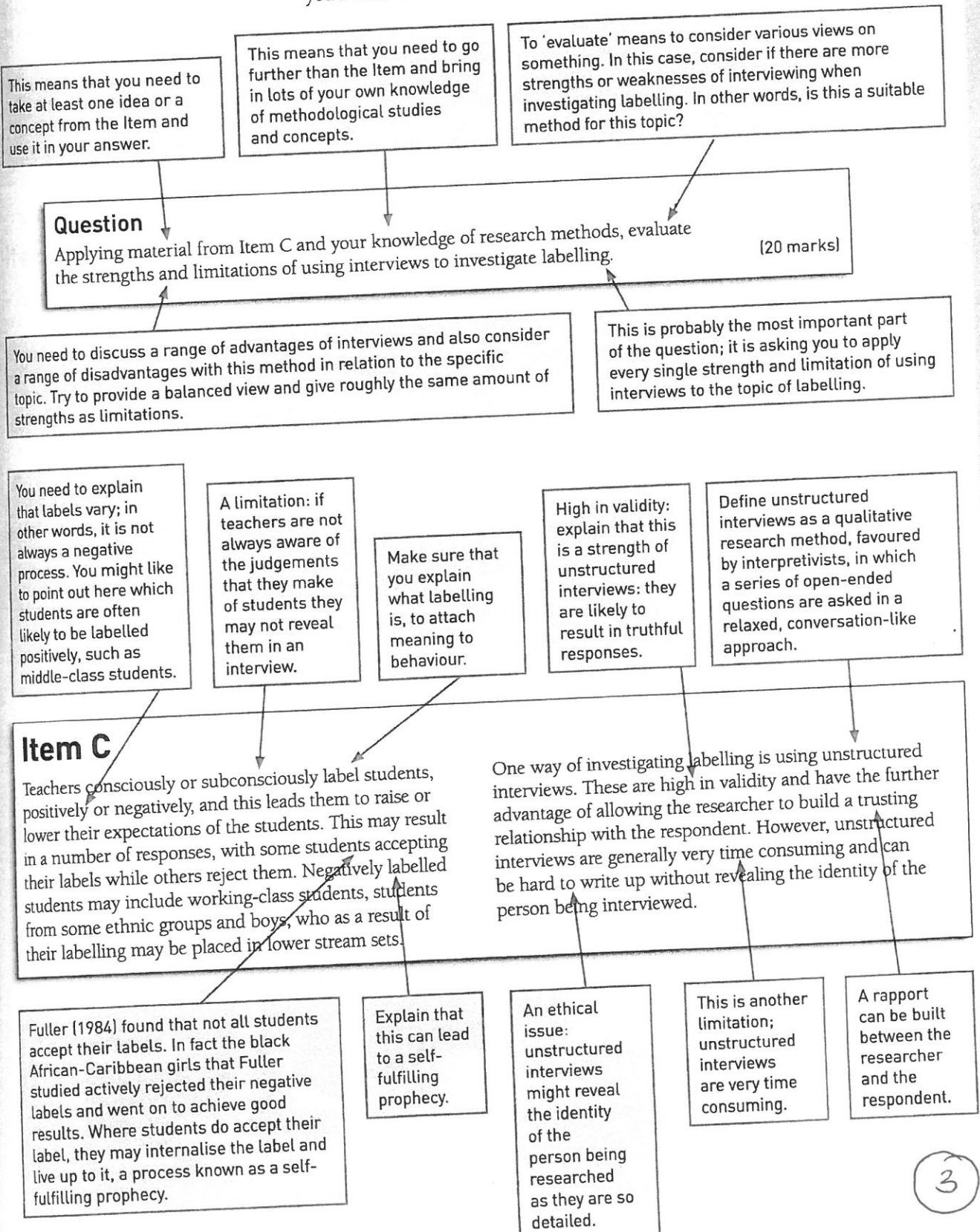
One of the main problems facing a sociologist when studying schools is the practical issue of access. Consent needs to be obtained from gatekeepers such as the head teacher or school governors for the research to go ahead. Even if this is achieved, head teachers may deny access to certain areas of the school or certain times of the year such as during exams. Researchers may not be allowed to observe teachers perceived by head teachers as 'poor' as they may be concerned that this may reflect badly on the image of the school. However, once access is gained, sociologists have the major practical strength of having a captive audience and having a ready-made sample stratified by year groups. Pupils are used to filling out questionnaires and as they feel they will get in trouble if they do not complete them, a high response rate can be obtained. Group interviews can be arranged relatively easily but schools are busy places and there may be problems with finding classrooms to use for interviews. In terms of documents and official statistics, there is a wide range of information available. Schools have to provide certain information by law, such as on attendance, and statistics such as exam results and documents like Ofsted reports are in the public domain and easily available via the internet. However, schools have a duty of care towards their pupils and access to documentation such as school reports may be denied. Theoretical problems of lack of validity can be applied to education statistics, such as schools manipulating truancy rates in order to boost their position in the 'education market'.

If the question is on a secondary method rather than a primary one, do not panic! You can use some of the points that refer to primary methods and discuss how official statistics and documents *do not* have these problems. For example, sociologists using official statistics do not have to go through the problems of access and gatekeepers, as they are secondary data and in the public domain.

Dave
O'Leary
continued

Sociology for A-Level Year 1, Bown, Poutney, Manic (Hodder: 2015) Example 1

Here is an example of an Item with a question. As you can see, the Item gives you a lot of clues about what you can write.



Thinking about Example 1

You could devise a quick comparison of strengths and weaknesses to help you with your planning:

STRENGTHS

- A positive rapport is created between the interviewer and student.
- This method creates valid data.
- Researcher can ask detailed questions about labelling.
- Allows new or unexpected findings to be uncovered.
- Allows the researcher to explore student's feelings in more depth.
- Enables the interviewer to observe body language of respondent.
- Enables the researcher to operationalise complex concepts – e.g. labelling.
- Allows researcher to explain difficult questions.
- Less chance of social desirability from the student if they feel that they can open up and talk about labelling issues.

WEAKNESSES

- Considerable skill is required to conduct an unstructured interview – especially as interviewer is asking personal and challenging questions about negative labelling.
- Hard to conceal identity of student or teacher when writing up the results.
- The research could have negative impact on teacher or student.
- Very time consuming – especially during the busy school day.
- Teacher and students may feel uncomfortable.
- Students may find it difficult to talk to an adult researcher about feeling negatively labelled if they see the researcher as an authority figure.

Decide if on balance the method has more strengths or weaknesses. Perhaps suggest another method that might be better if investigating labelling, such as observation, giving a reason why.



Example 2

Applying material from Item B and your knowledge of research methods, evaluate the strengths and limitations of using structured interviews to investigate the role of parents in pupils' achievement [20 marks]

Item B

Investigating the role of parents in pupils' achievement

Evidence suggests that there is a close correlation between parental involvement and pupils' achievement. Sociologists have identified a range of cultural and material factors such as attitudes to school and differences in parents' income levels. In relation to class and ethnic differences, the language spoken in the home and access to educational resources may affect pupils' achievement.

Structured interviews can be carried out relatively easily using a large number of students and teachers. The findings can also be used in order to establish patterns and trends in achievement in relation to factors such as how much support parents give. However, there may be practical problems in gaining access and some parents may feel that questions are too personal and that they are being judged.

06 Structured interviews (SI) are when a list of pre-prepared questions, usually closed, are read out to the respondent by a trained interviewer. Positivists would prefer to use SIs as they are reliable due to using standardised questions. They would argue that the quantitative data gained from the pre-coded questions could be used to test a hypothesis such as whether material deprivation causes working-class underachievement. Interpretivists, however, would argue that SI lacked validity. In the case of investigating the role of parents they would argue that unstructured interviews would be a much better method to use to gain *verstehen* on parents', teachers' and pupils' opinions on how this can influence underachievement.

As they are not in school parents would be more difficult to access. However, they may be more willing to take part in a SI at a parents' evening if the researcher can guarantee that it will only take a few minutes. This relates to another advantage of SI that it may have a higher response rate than questionnaires sent through the post as it is more difficult to refuse as it's face to face. A parent may be more willing to take part in an interview at a parents' evening as they may want to give the impression that they are concerned about their child's education. The issue that parents would not want to be seen as a 'bad parent' in a SI could however lead to a theoretical problem of lack of validity in terms of the support they give. Parents might not want to admit that they are not very involved in helping their child or that they don't have time to support them. As a result socially desirable answers may be given such as saying that they spend two hours a night helping with homework when in fact they have to work a night shift in their factory job.

Interpretivists would also argue that SI lack validity due to their inflexible nature and the imposition problem. The researcher has decided what is important in terms of the parents' role in achievement in advance and this may not coincide with what the interviewee may think. For example, the set questions asked may not reflect the parents' experiences of supporting their child with school work but it is impossible for them to raise an issue such as the importance of their local Sure Start centre in developing their parenting skills. Similarly, a teacher will know more than the researcher about internal factors in school such as student subcultures that influence a pupil's achievement. Students may also see researchers as 'teachers in disguise' so may not be willing to give valid answers in structured interviews. The language used in the questions in the SI would need to be simple as students may struggle to understand sociological concepts.

There are relatively few ethical issues with SI as the participant can control whether they want to answer. However, the researcher still needs to ensure anonymity and obtain informed consent. As well as obtaining consent from parents the researcher will have to consider whether the students are mature enough to understand what the research is about. It may be that discussing sensitive issues such as how much support they get from their parents may cause students harm. If the question in the SI is about how often their parents go to parents' evenings they might be too embarrassed and upset to tell a researcher that the answer is never.

20/20 Range of P, E, T analysis with three developed examples of how the method can be applied to the topic in the question and the item.

Example 3

06 One of the main strengths for using structured interviews within schools is that it is easy to quantify the results, so they are easy to understand and compare. Quantitative data is data that can be counted, as in the word quantity, and is used in questionnaires, and structured interviews. However, structured interviews can be also qualitative, as the question could be open or closed. Closed questions have restricted yes/no categories, so you cannot elaborate your answers, while open questions can have long answers, with a lot of detail, and a more truthful view. Structured interviews tend to be a favoured method of positivists. Positivists believe that sociology can be studied as a science, with quantitative data.

e A reasonable start in terms of knowledge on the method but the candidate has not followed the WWWE outlined in Template 1. No application of the method to studying education or the topic of role of parents.

One of the main strengths is the high response rates; this is shown through the study by Young and Willmott (1962), who used structured interviews to research into the extended family in east London. Out of 987 people approached only 54 refused. This shows that it is harder to turn down a face-to-face interviewer than, for example, a questionnaire through the post. Although this was a success in 1962, in today's society there is a greater reluctance to take part in a structured interview in the street as people are too busy.

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e The candidate makes a good point about structured interviews and response rates but this is not applied to the question. Listing the 'detail' on studies is generally not a good strategy and is not required for the Methods in context question. This study does not even relate to education.

When investigating the role of parents in pupils' achievement, structured interviews are easy and quick to carry out and are therefore also cheap. Other methods, such as unstructured interviews, can take a lot longer to do and you may only get a small group that is very unrepresentative of the topic. Questions within the structured interviews could include questions on home language and access to educational resources.

e A good attempt at comparative analysis via the use of unstructured interviews; however, there is still no application. The last sentence at first appears to be an attempt at application but is just copied from the item so does not score.

However, with structured interviews, closed questions might not present a true image of the parents' involvement. Parents might be asked questions that they feel are too personal, that they are being judged, and may give false data. Also, there may not be enough information within closed questions to get a true representation of a parent's involvement. This is a theoretical criticism that interpretivists would make of structured interviews that the data gained lacks validity.

e Again, the second sentence is just copied from the item! A strength, however, is that the student has categorised the problem of lack of validity as theoretical and located it within a methodological perspective by referring to interpretivism.

As the item suggests a major problem will be access. Permission from gatekeepers such as the head teacher (to gain access to the school) and parents (to gain consent to speak to their children) would be required. Teachers usually are very busy during the school day and researchers would need to work around the teacher's timetable. Parents are also likely to give socially desirable answers so their responses will not be valid.

e The student has some good examples of application to the research characteristics of studying schools via reference to gatekeepers and timetable constraints. However, these are listed rather than being developed and are not linked into the topic of the role of parents. The last sentence does not score in terms of application as socially desirable answers could be given by any group of respondents. In order to gain marks for L3 application the candidate would need to specifically explain why parents might give such answers in relation to their role in their child's achievement (see Student A's answer).

In conclusion, structured interviews can be useful in investigating the role of parents in pupils' achievements due to the quantitative data that they gain. However, as interpretivists argue, this data lacks validity.

e While there is an attempt at a conclusion it is simply a recap of points already made and therefore adds nothing to the response.

e 13/20 marks awarded. Overall the student has outlined some reasonable knowledge on the method and has some brief analysis and good use of theory. There are some stated examples of L2 application on the context of studying education. However, there is no L3 application on the topic of investigating the role of parents in pupils' achievements.

e Total score: 34/60 marks = a low grade C

Example 4

Here is another example of a methods in context Item and question with some suggestions of how you might use the Item and break the question down. This time there is a student's response to the question, with a commentary.

Define this concept: a lack of the things that money can buy, which results in poorer educational achievement.

Strength: this means that trends and correlations can be uncovered.

Limitation: this is referring to interpretivists, who say questionnaires on material deprivation would lack validity.

Item C

Investigating the effects of material deprivation on educational achievement.

Some sociologists claim that material deprivation is the main cause of educational underachievement. Some sociologists use questionnaires, given to students, in order to find out the effects of material deprivation, claiming that they enable large-scale research. Questionnaires are also useful because it is possible

to identify the impact of different variables, such as class and ethnicity.

However, questionnaires are criticised by some sociologists who claim that they fail to uncover deeper meanings. For example, they might not explain the causes of material deprivation. Also, students might not be aware of their parents' income, meaning that the results may be inaccurate.

There are also other causes, such as cultural deprivation.

Strength: means greater representativeness.

Limitation: again, low validity.

Bring in a study, concepts and theoretical ideas.

Make sure you define this concept.

Applying material from Item C and your knowledge of research methods, evaluate the strengths and limitations of using questionnaires to investigate the effects of material deprivation. (20 marks)

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Student A's answer

School results show that working-class students do not do as well as middle-class students. Sociologists argue that there are many reasons for this, for example, processes in the school such as teachers labelling working-class students negatively, meaning that they are less likely to do well, as well as cultural and material deprivation outside the school. An example of material deprivation is that students cannot afford school uniform and so they might get bullied, leading them to miss school.

The student has correctly identified that there are many causes of class differences in educational achievement. However, it fails to address the question, which is about how to carry out research on the effects of material deprivation. It fails to define material deprivation.

Questionnaires are standardised sets of written questions that are sent by post or carried out electronically. They are usually anonymous and contain closed questions with preset answers for the respondents to choose from. In terms of investigating the effects of material deprivation, questionnaires are useful because the students don't have to write their name on the questionnaire and so they are private. They are also quite quick and easy for the researcher to analyse the results and identify the kinds of effects that material deprivation has. Positivists would favour this method, arguing that it is high in reliability, which means that if the researcher were to repeat the research they would get similar results.

This is a better paragraph because it links the method to the issue, as well as identifying two strengths of questionnaires. The student also links questionnaires to the positivist theoretical perspective.

Questionnaires have the strength of enabling the researcher to break down all of the different parts of the effects of material deprivation, and makes sure that diet, poor housing and educational equipment are investigated. It would be hard to get this sort of detail using another method such as observation.

This is a good paragraph because it compares questionnaires to other methods and also refers to specific types of effects of material deprivation; therefore it is making the issue relevant to the method.

However, there are a number of problems with using questionnaires to study the effects of material deprivation, such as that they lack depth. Questionnaires do not give students the chance to express themselves in more detail about the different effects of material deprivation. Students might lie about the effects of material deprivation because they are embarrassed about them; validity or lack of truthfulness is a problem in questionnaires. There might also be a low response rate, meaning that the findings are not representative.

This is a good paragraph as it connects the issue to the method. However, the student could have suggested a method that would give the students greater opportunities to express themselves, such as unstructured interviews. Some methodological concepts are well used here.

This method has the strength that it avoids the problem of bias found in other methods; for example, in an interview the interviewer might influence the respondent. It also avoids the social characteristics of the researcher affecting the research. For example, a middle-class interviewer might make a working-class student feel intimidated or embarrassed. However, the closed questions in questionnaires do not allow the respondent to develop their answers and ideas, and the questions could be biased or ignore other effects of material deprivation that could be overlooked.

This paragraph is good because it compares questionnaires with interviews, pointing out strengths and limitations of both, which are relevant to studying material deprivation.

Finally questionnaires are anonymous and therefore more ethical than other methods. They are relatively cheap and easy to collect. This means that there can be a larger sample.

This paragraph is referring to the method rather than the method in relation to the specific issue. The student could have gone on here to develop these issues in relation to the specific issue. For example, how might the researcher gain his or her sample, or to point out that younger/less-able students might not be able to read the questionnaire. The student might have referred to a study of education using questionnaires to demonstrate how larger samples can be used, for example Caroline Benfield (2007) used a large sample of around 25,000 when she studied women's pay following graduation.

In conclusion, questionnaires are useful for gaining data on the effects of material deprivation as they are easy to produce, cheap and quick. It is possible to operationalise the concept of material deprivation and, as mentioned in the Item, isolate variables to work out what the possible effects are. However, the results lack meaning and may not provide enough detail about the full effects felt by the respondents.

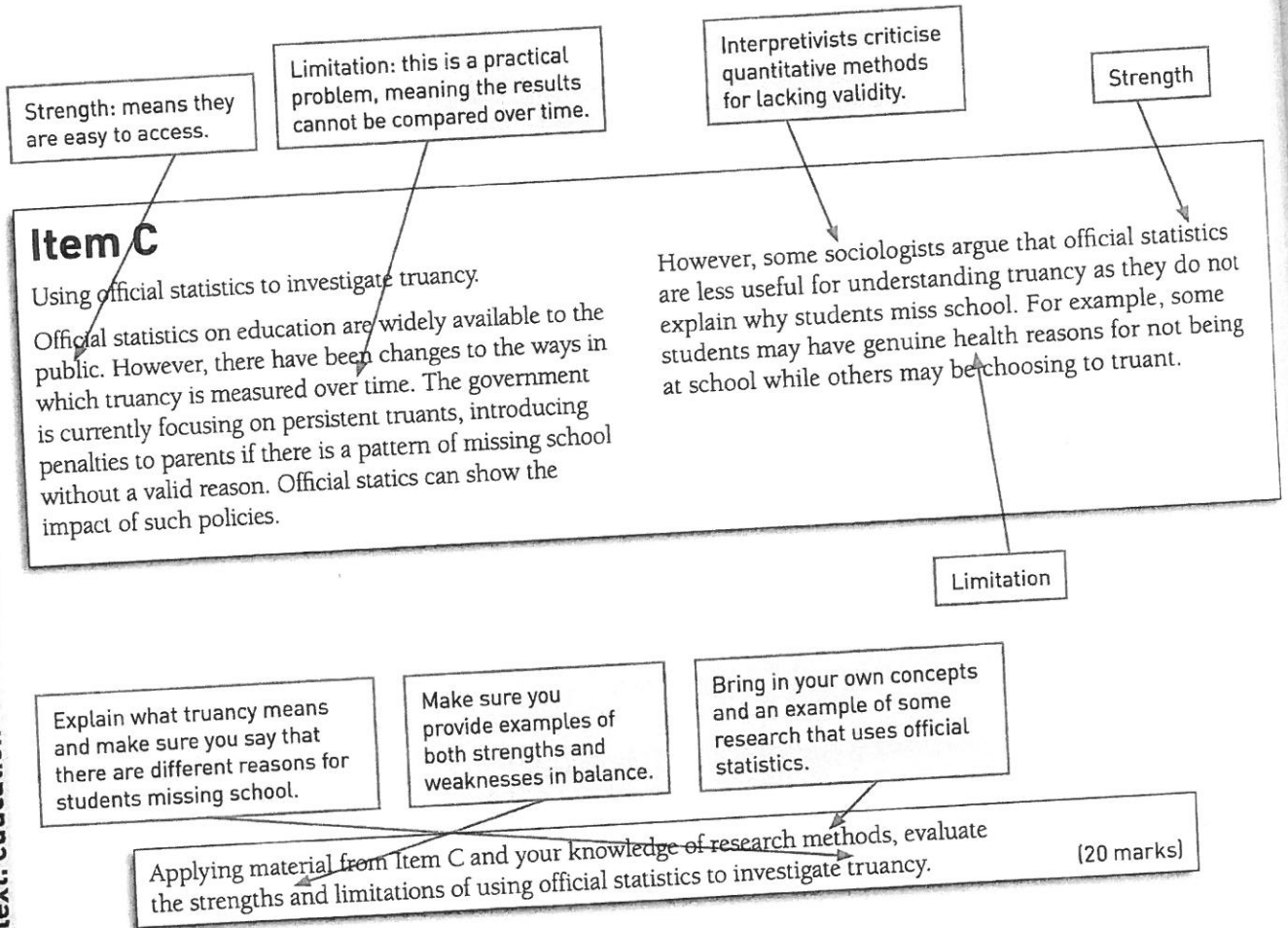
It is good that the student has referred to the Item here, and they use methods concepts well. They could have used the Item more in their response, however, for example where they discuss theoretical perspectives on questionnaires.

Overall comment

This response is accurate and focused on methods, however it tends to miss opportunities to apply methods knowledge to the issue of material deprivation. However this student does compare the strengths and weaknesses of questionnaires with other methods. This answer lacks the kind of detail needed for higher-level marks.

Example 5

In this example you need to read the Item, the question and Student B's answer. Note carefully where Student B has demonstrated a range of skills. Next, you need to suggest three ways in which you might improve this answer.



Student B's answer

Official statistics are a secondary form of quantitative data which, as the item suggests, has the advantage of being publically available and free to access, which is a practical advantage. Truancy means where students take time off school. Official statistics include data on truancy from all schools across the UK, so the data is high in representativeness. This makes it possible to generalise about truancy rates, and to find out at which age truancy is more of a problem. Official statistics are favoured by positivists because they are high in reliability.

Researchers and journalists often use official statistics to investigate patterns and trends, such as Anushka Asthana (2007) who carried out statistical analysis of exam results for girls at single-sex independent schools. In terms of truancy, using statistics can provide information on the amount of truancy in different areas of the country, which could provide quantitative information about truancy in different parts of the UK.

However, official statistics have the problem of lacking meaning. This means that although the statistics will give details of the extent of truancy, they do not give the reasons for truancy. An interpretivist would criticise official statistics, saying that they lack meaning and do not provide detail. One advantage however is that official statistics take data on different levels of truancy in different types of schools, so it is possible to identify different levels of truancy in academies or primary schools for example. A disadvantage of this is that official statistics do not include private school truancy figures. Also, there are different reasons for absence and these are not explained in any detail in the statistics. It is also difficult to know which kinds of students are likely to be truants so that possible solutions can be put into place to reduce the problem.

Official statistics may change in the way that they are measured, as referred to in Item C. Until recently, there was little information on truancy rates in different schools. This would make it very hard to be able to make historical comparisons or to see changes over time. Schools might also record information incorrectly and this can lead to further problems of validity with the data.

Official statistics have the advantage of avoiding ethical issues, as they avoid deception or harm, and so they are positive to use because of this. There are no costs to using official statistics. However it would be interesting to follow up the statistics, carrying out research to understand the reasons for truancy on a smaller scale. Interviews, for example, might give more detailed information about why individuals do not attend school.

Example 6

In this final example of a methods in context question, you are expected to plan and write your own answer.

Item C

Using observation to investigate student subcultures.

Student subcultures can tell sociologists a lot about students' attitudes towards education. A subculture is a smaller group with values which are different to the wider group. These can be pro-school or anti-school. Observation can be a very useful way of understanding subcultures, as it means that you can see how these groups operate in a naturalistic setting.

However, participant observation can be problematic as adult researchers are going to have problems gaining access to and participating in student subcultures. This could be due to the differences in age and possibly social class and ethnic group.

Applying material from Item C and your knowledge of research methods, evaluate the strengths and limitations of using observation to investigate student subcultures.

(20 marks)

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