**Godalming College**

Booklet Checked by: \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_

Grade: U/S 1 2 3

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**Sociology Department**

INTRODUCTION TO RESEARCH METHODS



WORKBOOK 1 - RESEARCH METHODS FOR PAPERS 1 AND 3

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| **Name:** | **Set:** | **Group:** |

**What the specification says**

|  |
| --- |
| AQA SpecificationResearch Methods Students must examine the following areas: * quantitative and qualitative methods of research; research design
* sources of data, including questionnaires, interviews, participant and non-participant observation, experiments, documents and official statistics
* the distinction between primary and secondary data, and between quantitative and qualitative data
* the relationship between positivism, interpretivism and sociological methods; the nature of ‘social facts’
* the theoretical, practical and ethical considerations influencing choice of topic, choice of method(s) and the conduct of research.
 |

*Use this box as a check list for use in your revision*

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| **Topic area** | **Know and understand****✓** | **Revised****✓** |
| The distinction between primary and secondary data |  |  |
| The distinction between quantitative and qualitative data |  |  |
| Practical and ethical issues when planning and conducting research |  |  |
| Key concepts: Validity, Reliability, Representativeness, generalisability |  |  |
| The relationship between Positivism, Interpretivism and sociological methods |  |  |
| The difference between micro and macro approaches to studying the social world.  |  |  |
| Methodological pluralism and triangulation |  |  |
| Operationalisation of concepts |  |  |

**WHAT IS SOCIOLOGICAL RESEARCH?**

One of the main differences between sociology and "common-sense" is that sociology is based on carefully collected evidence. In order to be able to develop theories or explanations of the world, sociologists have to collect this evidence, which is often called data.

**What different types of data are there?**

Primary data is gathered "first hand" by the sociologist, perhaps by asking people questions or watching them behave. Secondary data is data which has been collected by somebody else and published or written down, for example government statistics or newspaper articles.

The form data takes may also differ. Some appears as numbers or statistics and is called quantitative data. Other data takes a written form and provides a more personal account of the social world. This is known as qualitative data.

The collection of data to answer questions about society and the way people behave is achieved by using research methods. Using pp. 120-121 *Sociology in Focus 2nd ed.*

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
|  | **DEFINTION** | **EXAMPLE** |
| **PRIMARY DATA** |  |  |
| **SECONDARY DATA** |  |  |
| **QUANTITATIVE DATA** |  |  |
| **QUALITATIVE DATA** |  |  |

**What research methods are there?**

The most common methods of sociological data collection are:

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| **Questionnaires** | Simply lists of questions, which may be closed or open ended. The respondent (person answering) writes the answers themselves, a process known as self-completion. |
| **Interviews** | Questions asked and answers given verbally. |
| **Observation** | People's behaviour is watched. in participant observation the researcher, to some extent, joins in. |
| **The analysis of secondary data** | Examining already existing material such as official statistics or historical documents |
| **Experiments** | Are not typically used within sociology. They test a hypothesis and attempt to isolate and manipulate variables. |

Whether quantitative or qualitative data, or a combination of both, is collected will depend on the way the method is used by the sociologist, as the table below shows.

**Task 🖉**

Complete the following table using the answers listed below.

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
|  | **Quantitative** | **Qualitative** |
| **Questionnaires** |  |  |
| **Interviews** |  |  |
| **Observation** |  |  |
| **Secondary data** |  |  |

1. Structured observation usually involves an "observation schedule so the observer can note the number of times certain events occur.
2. In structured interviews the interviewer asks closed questions which have a fixed number of possible answers.
3. The analysis of official statistics for example
4. Closed questions give the respondent a fixed number of choices.
5. Open questions leave respondents with space to write their answers.
6. The use of historical documents or novels for instance.
7. In unstructured or informal interviews questions are phrased in such a way as to encourage the respondent to talk at length.
8. In participant observation the observer aims to understand behaviour by joining in and feeling what it is like first-hand.

**Factors influencing choice of method: PET**

Given the wide range of methods available, sociologists need to select the right one for their research. Different methods and sources of data have different strengths and limitations in terms of **practica**l, **ethical** (moral) and **theoretical** issues.

**Task 🖉** Using your own knowledge, p.93 of the *AQA A Level Book One,* Webb, p.122-127of *Sociology in Focus 2 ed.* to help you and, complete the boxes below, summarising the different practical, ethical and theoretical issues which influence a choice of research method

|  |
| --- |
| **Practical issues** |
| Access to those being studied | Time and funding |
| Availability of data | Values and beliefs of the researcher |
| Values of society | Personal skills and characteristics of the researcher |

|  |
| --- |
| **Ethical issues** |
| Informed consent  | Confidentiality/anonymity/privacy |
| Deception & covert research  | Safety of the participants |
| Findings reported accurately and honestly | Vulnerable groups/sensitive information |
| **Theoretical issues** |
| Sociologists’ choice of method and topic is also influenced by their methodological perspective – their view of what society is and how we should study it. Often sociologists have a theoretical approach to studying society which influences the method they choose.  |
| **POSITIVISM****Positivists** sees the process of studying society as a science, repeating research, generating statistics, numbers, trends, ratios and comparisons that are high in **RELIABILITY** and OBJECTIVITY. Durkheim, a positivist argued we can observe social facts- society is ‘out there’. These findings can then be turned into LAWS just like scientific ones and the researcher can remain VALUE FREE and objective. Therefore, society can be understood, predicted and controlled. This is a MACRO approach, which aims to use large samples to generalise to the target population. **Key issues for Positivists:****Quantitative methods** - Positivists tend to use quantitative methods – the research focuses on measurement and the collection of numerical data (statistics and number crunching) that reflect their belief in a scientific approach. Also, by using scientific quantitative data the researcher can generate CAUSE and EFFECT relationships.**Reliability** – the extent to which a test or procedure produces similar results under constant conditions or all occasions. Data is reliable when different researchers using the same method, or the same researcher using it at another time, obtain the same results. * For example, if one person tests the temperature of water at boiling point, then another person does it a week later, you would expect the results to be the same i.e. reliable - as long as the data collection instrument (i.e. the thermometer) is trustworthy.
* A survey using structured questionnaires tends to be reliable. The same results should be gained, regardless of who is asking the questions. This is particularly so with regard to simple structured questions (for example, a person’s age or gender).

**Representativeness / Generalisability*** This is related to sampling technique (see later booklet). How far is the individual or group under study typical of the research population?
* If they are typical, then what is true of them is also true of others. We can therefore *generalise* from this sample.
* Researchers who use quantitative data can use complex statistical tools to enable them to see how representativeness their sample is.
* Research based on in-depth qualitative methods must always be questioned in terms of representativeness because they tend to involve very few people.
 | **INTERPRETIVISM****Interpretivists**  argue that the study of society as a science is not possible as the things in it (**people**) are not identical and cannot be treated as the same. Therefore, a different approach is needed in order to gain a ‘true’ understanding; to discover an individual’s meanings, experiences and reasons for behaviour, an in-depth enquiry as to why the individual behaved as they did. This will produce more VALID findings. Interpretivists favour a MICRO approach, which prefers in-depth data from small scale research. The aim is to explore people’s lived experience in depth to understand them from their point of view. **Key issues for Interpretivists:****Qualitative methods** – Interpretivists tend to use qualitative methods - the research focuses on interpreting meaning and feelings and is expressed in words rather than numbers.**Validity** – the ability of the method to provide a true picture or mirror image of what is being studied. * The real aim of sociological research should be to experience the social world of the people you are studying; to develop EMPATHY with them and put yourself in their ‘shoes’ (sometimes referred to as VERSTEHEN).
* Qualitative methods (such as unstructured interviews) tend to produce valid data since the interviewer can spend time probing and questioning the respondent and really make them think about their answers.
* Structured questionnaires tend to be low in validity because they are often a measure of what people think they ought to say and think, rather than what they actually do – social desirability. Also, people do not spend much time thinking about answers; the closed-ended nature of questions may restrict all possible answers / maybe ambiguous in meaning.

**Realism**These researchers adopt a positivist and interpretivist approach by combining quantitative and qualitative methods. They use a mixed method approach to gain the advantages of both approaches, such as gaining data that is both reliable and valid. Increasingly sociologists are taking this approach because it allows them to triangulate their data to check for accuracy, and allow for a more holistic understanding of their respondents |

**Summarise these key terms below**

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| Validity | Reliability |
| Representativeness | Generalisability |

**Task 🖉**

***Complete the missing words below from the list underneath.***

**Positivism**

These sociologists believe that social phenomena are as real as \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_ phenomena. This means that they should study what they can see (empirically) objectively, \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_, and count. Therefore, they claim society should be studied \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_avoiding any personal involvement. In turn, this use of \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_ data can then generate statistics, numbers, \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_, ratios and comparisons. Social facts can then be established.

**Interpretivism**

\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_ phenomena are different to natural phenomena. People are active, conscious beings who act with intention and purpose. People have passions and \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_ and cannot therefore be studied the same way as \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_or atoms. Sociologists need to uncover \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_ :shared understandings and truthful detailed reasons as to why people might behave the way they do. \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_ data is useful for giving the researcher a ‘feel’ for what something is like with descriptions and depth.

**Qualitative \* measure \* meanings \* natural \* trends \* chemicals \* social \* emotions \* quantitative \* scientifically**

**Research methods video- ‘Understanding Sociology’** estream

1. Why is theory important to sociological research?
2. Outline the key features of positivism
3. What problems can be identified with positivism?
4. Outline the key features of interpretivism
5. Outline the key features of real

**The range of methods**

It may not be useful to think of research methods as falling into 2 completely separate compartments. It is better to think of them as being on a scale, as shown below:

Numbers involved

 Many

Structured questionnarire

Structured inteviews

Unstructured interviews

Overt Observation

Participant observation

 Few

 Low High

 Personal involvement of researcher

|  |
| --- |
| **Fitness for purpose** this means that researchers will select the method(s) most suitable for the collection of the data they require, and as long as the method fits what they need (the purpose) it really does not matter if it produces quantitative or qualitative data. The idea of mixed methods it that it enables the researcher to break free from the qualitative / quantitative divide, thus allowing greater flexibility. |
| The theoretical approach of the researcher will influence their choice of topic and how the research is conducted.Consider the following scenarios:

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| Topic/issue | Positivists | Interpretivists |
| Studying male underachievement |  |  |
|  | Problems with this approach: | Problems with this approach: |
| Victims of domestic violence |  |  |
|  | Problems with this approach: | Problems with this approach: |
| Studying division of housework between men and women |  |  |
|  | Problems with this approach: | Problems with this approach: |

 |

**Stages of research-** taken from p.177 of *Sociology for AQA Volume 1*

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| **Stage**  | **Explanation / examples** |
| Choosing a topic- fitness for purpose for studying the group | Some topics lend themselves more to qualitative data collection methods, for example deviant groups (school truants, football hooligans) would probably not want to answer a questionnaire. A social survey is appropriate when the researcher wants to gather large amounts of quantitative data. |
| Formulating an aim or hypothesis or **research question** | **Hypothesis:** An idea you guess might be true, but which hasn’t yet been tested e.g. exposure to video games makes you more violent. **Research question:** pose questions on areas that interest you e.g. why are boys more likely to fail in the education system? |
| Selecting the **method** | Will be influenced by the topic, practical, ethical and theoretical position of the researcher |
| **Operationalisation of** concept | A concept is an abstract idea or theory, like social class, which is difficult to define in only one way. In order to explore concepts in social research it is necessary to clearly define them so that they can be measured, this is what is meant by operationalisation. This is particularly important in quantitative methods where concepts are measured. For example, in terms of class, the concept could be operationalised by defining this issue based on household income.  |
| *How would you operationalise educational achievement for example?* |
| Identifying the **target population** to be surveyed  | When conducting research, you need to decide on the group/people to be studied.A target population includes the group/people to be studied.  |
| Selecting the **sample** | It is not possible to study everyone in the target population for practical reasons, so a sample is selected. Positivists want large representative samples, whereas interpretivists favour samples that will provide in depth information on the topic.  |
| **Accessing** the sample and **ethical** issues related to this group | Issues related to the nature of the sample e.g. studying students could be challenging because researchers would need to gain access to schools. Once access is achieved, researchers must adhere to ethical guidelines, such as informed consent |
| Carry out a **pilot study** | Carry out a practice of the method to assess any unforeseen theoretical or practical difficulties. Evaluate the results and make changes e.g. a questionnaire might be worded in a way that confuses people, leading to unreliable responses.  |
| Carry out the research | Collect the data and record results |
| Analyse the results | Explain and interpret your results- what do they show you?Positivits- will be looking for patterns and trends, and casual relationships between data.Interpretivists- will be looking to explore the meaning behind people’s responses and select what is found to be most significant.  |
| Prepare a report | Draw up conclusions and evaluate your research. What did you find? Did you fulfil your aims? What would you change for next time? |

**Mixed methods**

It is important that the distinction between quantitative and qualitative traditions is not over-stated. It may well aid our understanding of this topic to think in terms of a qualitative / quantitative divide, but the reality in terms of practical social research is the tendency to use a mixture of qualitative and quantitative techniques as part of a triangulation or methodological pluralism approach. The multiple or mixed methods approach has generally been used in two broad ways although the reasons for using each approach often overlap

1. **Methodological pluralism** – this is where the researcher employs more than one method of research in order to build up a fuller and more comprehensive picture of social life.
2. **Triangulation** – this refers to the use of multiple or mixed methods to cross-check and verify the reliability of a particular research tool and/or the validity of the data collected. E.g. using diaries to check the information collected in unstructured interviews. Triangulation could involve combining quantitative and qualitative methods in order to check on the accuracy of the data gathered by each method. For example, questionnaire responses might be checked by carrying out interviews with key respondents. Laud Humphrey’s study of the Tearoom Trade (1970) used questionnaires, unstructured interviews and participant observation to check the reliability and validity of his data.

**What strategies for research are there?**

Often sociologists will use a general approach, or strategy, within which a combination of methods will be chosen.

Some commonly used research strategies are:

**The social survey**

The aim of a survey is to make general statements about a particular population based on interviewing and/or giving questionnaires to a sample of that population. The data produced is usually quantitative.

**Ethnography**

This approach aims to understand the "way of life", or culture of a particular group in society. It is associated with a social action approach as it concentrates on understanding the group from their own point of view. It often involves observation of the group in question and typically produces qualitative data.

**Longitudinal Study**

Longitudinal studies follow the same group of respondents over a period of time. This allows attitudes, values and behaviour to be monitored and changes to be analysed and explained. Longitudinal studies try to avoid the pitfalls of more conventional “snapshot” studies.

**Case Study**

Sometimes the sociologist wishes to investigate a single example in depth, possibly a place of work, area or school. This approach is known as a case study.

**Triangulation**

All methods have their strengths and weaknesses. A questionnaire can be giver to a large sample of people, but it does not usually produce "in-depth" information for example. Triangulation involves a variety of methods being used so that the strengths of one make up for the limitations of another, and to get a more holistic understanding of those being studied.

**Appendix**

**POSITIVISM & INTERPRETIVISM: A COMPARISON**

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
|  | **POSITIVISM** | **INTERPRETIVISM** |
| **View of Society** | *Society acts as a constraint on individuals, it is therefore necessary to examine these social structural constraints, involving a macro or large scale approach* | *Individuals and groups play an active role in creating society it is therefore necessary to understand their individual meanings and motivations, involving a micro or small scale approach* |
| **The job of the sociologist is to ...** | *Look beyond what human beings think they do and observe actual behaviour* | *Uncover the meanings and motives behind behaviour* |
| **Data must be ...** | ***Reliable*** *- in the pursuit of “hard facts” reliability is essential. Sociologists should be able to replicate and verify existing studies.* | ***Valid*** *- it should be a “mirror image of reality. Statistics are not enough in uncovering underlying meanings.* |
| **Preferred Data** | ***Quantitative data****. Statistical data can be analysed and conclusions drawn. Generalisations can be made applicable to a wide range of social life, if sample is representative.*  | ***Qualitative data****. Unless meanings are explored, statistics on their own can be meaningless or even misleading. Generalisations are less important than looking at reality in depth.* |
| **Preferred Methods** | *Social Surveys (questionnaires, structured interviews) experiments.* | *Observation, unstructured interviews, some kinds of experiments* |
| **Preferred secondary sources** | *Official statistics, surveys* | *Life documents* |

|  |
| --- |
| **REALISM**Focuses on what is practical and realistic in researchIs concerned with measurable behaviour but seeks to link this to motives for that behaviour and less obviously visible social forcesLooks to achieve the best possible combination of reliability and validity with dataUse mixed methods to gain holistic and verifiable results |

**Formative Assessment**

****Key Terms:

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| KEY TERM | DEFINITION |
| Primary Data |  |
| Secondary Data |  |
| Quantitative Data |  |
| Qualitative Data |  |
| Positivism |  |
| Interpretivism |  |
| Micro |  |
| Macro |  |
| Triangulation |  |
| Validity |  |
| Reliability |  |
| Representativeness |  |
| Operationalisation |  |
| Sample |  |
| Pilot Study |  |

**Exam practice:**

**In paper 1 and 3 you could have a 10 mark question on methods (this could also be a theory question). Paper 1 also includes a methods in context question. Paper 3 could also have a 20 mark question that asks you to look at an issue with a research method.**

Examples:

Outline and explain two practical factors that may influence a sociologists’ choice of research topic [10]

Outline and explain two ethical issues researchers should consider before carrying out a sociological study [10]

Outline and explain two factors that are important for interpretivists to consider when conducting research [10]

Outline and explain two factors that are important for positivists to consider when conducting research [10]

|  |
| --- |
| **20 mark questions** |

Examples:

Outline the view that practical issues have the biggest impact on sociological research [20]

Outline the view that quantitative approaches offer the most practical approach for sociological research [20]

Outline the view that ethical issues have the biggest impact on sociological research [20]

Outline the view that a sociologist’s theoretical position is the most influential factor in the choice or a research approach [20]

**In Paper 1, question 6, there is a 20 mark ‘methods in context’ question on the use of a method for studying a topic in education**