RESEARCH METHODS KNOWLEDGE ORGANISERS

The information contained in this knowledge organiser pack is drawn from a range of sources and studies commonly used in AQA A Level Sociology for the compulsory topic of research methods. The studies used in this pack align with the tutor2u Research Methods checklist. This constitutes neither compulsory studies that students must know, nor an exhaustive list: students may wish to use alternative sources that they have encountered in their studies.

The knowledge organisers cover material set out in the AQA A Level Sociology specification, that was first used for teaching in 2015, and reflects the the first part of following specification points which is often taught earlier in the course:

3.1.3 Theory and 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

RESEARCH DESIGN

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Research design is all about how sociologists plan and carry out their research. A good design helps make the research valid, reliable, and ethical. Research design also reflect a researcher's choice of data, how they select a sample, the use of pilot studies, operationalising variables and the different stages of collecting and analysing data. These are detailed below:

Primary vs Secondary Data

Primary Data is information collected first-hand by the researcher (e.g. interviews, questionnaires).

Strengths:

- Researcher has control over how data is collected.
- Can be designed to suit specific aims of the research.
- Often more up-to-date.

Limitations:

- Time-consuming and expensive.
- Harder to access large samples.

Secondary Data is information that already exists (e.g. government statistics, historical documents, media reports).

Strengths:

- Quick and cheap to access.
- Useful for studying trends over time.
- Allows comparison with other research.

Limitations:

- May not be relevant to the researcher's question.
- Could be biased or outdated.
- Researcher has no control over how it was collected.

Exam Gold:

Different elements of research design applied to conducting research in education can enhance MiC questions - e.g. referring to characteristics of sample.

Quantitative vs Qualitative Data

Quantitative Data is data in number form (e.g. stats, percentages).

Strengths:

- Easy to analyse and compare.
- Useful for identifying patterns and trends.
- Seen as more scientific and reliable.

Limitations:

- Lacks depth and context.
- May miss the meanings behind behaviour.

Qualitative Data is descriptive data (e.g. interview transcripts, observations).

Strengths:

- Rich in detail – helps understand people's experiences and meanings.
- Good for studying sensitive topics or hard-to-reach groups.

Limitations:

- Harder to analyse and compare.
- Can be seen as subjective or biased.
- Smaller samples – harder to generalise.

The Use of Pilot Studies

A pilot study is a small-scale version of the real study. It helps test whether your method works in practice.

- Helps spot problems with questions or procedures.
- Allows the researcher to make changes before the full study.
- Can improve reliability and validity.

Sampling Methods

Sampling is how researchers choose participants from the population.

Random Sampling – Everyone has an equal chance of being selected.

✅ Unbiased

❌ Hard to do in large populations

Stratified Sampling – The population is divided into groups (e.g. age, gender), and people are randomly chosen from each group.

✅ More representative

❌ Time-consuming and needs background data

Snowball Sampling – Existing participants refer new participants (often used for hard-to-reach groups).

✅ Useful for hidden populations (e.g. drug users)

❌ Not representative

Systematic Sampling – Selecting every nth person from a list.

✅ Easy to carry out

❌ Could miss patterns or be biased if the list has a pattern

Quota Sampling – Researcher selects people to fill pre-set categories (e.g. 50% men, 50% women).

✅ Can reflect target population

❌ Researcher bias may influence who is chosen

Operationalising Concepts

To operationalise a concept means to turn an abstract idea into something measurable.

For example:

- Studying **social class -** Sociologists often use receipt of FSM in education, but does this accurately reflect class distinctions? Alternatively we could use occupation or income to measure it**.**
- Studying **educational achievement a sociologist may use GCSE grades, but is this an accurate measure of all students educational attainment?**

✅ Helps ensure clarity and consistency of measurements.

❌ Can be difficult with complex ideas like religiosity or identity.

PRACTICAL, ETHICAL AND THEORETICAL ISSUES IN RESEARCH

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Practical issues
These are concerned with the logistics of conducting a piece of research.

Time:
How long will the research take to conduct? Will they need to undergo training beforehand? How long will it take to analyse data?

Research opportunities:
Is the researcher able to conduct research in this area? Are they well placed to research specific areas – e.g., criminal behaviour. Do they need specialist support?

Access:
Is the researcher able to access participants for their research? How might they obtain access to institutions or groups? Who might stop them gaining access? What might they have to do to gain access?

Money:
How are they going to fund the research? Do they need to purchase specialist equipment? How much will material cost? What budget do they have to conduct research?

Personal Characteristics:
How will their personal characteristics influence their research? Will there be status differences between them and participants? Will they need additional staff?

Ethical issues
This refers to the ability to conduct research within the moral and ethical guidelines set out by funding bodies and organisations.

Consent:
This is the extent to which participants have agreed to take part in the research and been informed of the aims of the research. Consent can be gained before or after the research. For children, adult consent may be required.

Deception:
This refers to the extent that the researcher has made their participants aware they are being researched. Under ethical guidelines, deception can be present if full knowledge of the research would significantly alter behaviour of individuals.

Confidentiality and Security:
Participants should be certain their personal data will not be published and stored in accordance with relevant legislation.

Protection from harm:
Researchers should minimise the potential physical and psychological harm to their participants and have a duty of care to signpost to services.

Withdrawal:
Participants have the right to withdraw themselves and data collected from them at any time during the research without penalty.

Theoretical issues
These are issues that are influenced by a sociologist's perspective of society and how they should conduct research.

Methodological preference:
Does the researcher prefer to use positivist or interpretivist methodologies? How will this influence their choice of methods and the type of data they wish to collect?

Type of Data:
Will the research collect quantitative or qualitative data? Will it be primary or secondary data? What impact will this have on the scale of the research and the findings? Is the data objective or subjective?

Validity:
Is the research measuring what it is supposed to? To what extent does the research represent real-life situations for individuals?

Reliability:
Can the research be repeated with similar results obtained? Does the structure of the research enable replication?

Ability to generalise:
Scale of research can impact on its ability to be generalised to wider population.

Value freedom:
Has the research been influenced by values of researcher or other agencies?

POSITIVISM

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Positivism is a methodological approach to studying society that focuses the use of scientific research methods in order to study human behaviour. Below are some of the features of positivism, methods commonly used by positivists and the position positivism takes in different sociological debates.

Features of Positivism

- Usually large scale research that examines broad social issues
- Preference for quantitative data that can be analysed scientifically
- Research adopts an objective viewpoint, reporting rather than interpreting social facts
- Preference for methods that are high in reliability and can be repeated at different time intervals

Positivist Methods:

Positivists generally use methods that are high in reliability and produce quantitative data.

- **Experiments**, both field and controlled experiments due to their ability to be repeated and the use of scientific methods
- **Pre-coded or closed questionnaires** that produce quantitative data, can be replicated and distributed widely
- **Statistics**, particularly official statistics that are conducted on a regular basis from which broad trends can be established
- **Structured observations** where researchers can be detached and record observable behaviours
- **Structured interviews** that consist of standardised questions and a rigid interview schedule

Can Sociology be Value-Free?

Sociology if studied scientifically **can be free from values**. The process of conducting research is more important than an individual theorist's personal view of society. **Researchers should be detached** from conditions and subjects of the research in order to **objectively analyse** the data that is presented to them.

Can sociology be a science?

Yes. Sociology adopts scientific methods of testing hypotheses and look to establish cause and effect relationships or correlational relationships. **Comte,** an early positivist, suggested that sociology is the **'science of society'** and looked to examine how individuals responded to external stimuli – in the same way natural sciences do. Furthermore, **Durkheim's study of suicide** looked to prove 'laws governing behaviour' were able to be discovered. It uses **deductive reasoning** and is open to **falsification.**

Should sociology inform social policy?

Early positivists such as **Comte and Durkheim** suggested that the purpose of studying society was to establish laws that governed behaviour and provide solutions to social issues through their analysis. As positivism has evolved to becoming based upon analysis of quantitative data, **governments have looked to use this data to formulate policy**, particularly if it was derived from large groups of society.

Sociological Approaches linked to Positivism

Functionalism is most closely linked to the use of positivist methodologies, particularly early functionalist thinkers such as **Durkheim.**

Marx argued for the use of positivist methodologies and many traditional Marxists used this methodology.

Some branches of feminism used quantitative methodologies in order to draw comparisons between males and females in wider society, but largely as a way of investigating further by using feminist methodologies.

Notable uses of positivist methodology

- **Durkheim's** use of comparative method in analysing suicide statistics from across Europe in the late 19th century is seen as a seminal piece of work in establishing the traditions of positivism.

Many other quantitative methodologies are routed in the work of positivism:

- **Census** – collating data on households through pre-coded questionnaires every ten years.
- **Education league tables** – based upon comparing results of public exams on an annual basis
- **Crime Survey of England and Wales** – crime statistics derived from structured interviews both face to face and over the telephone.
- **National Social Attitudes Surveys** - collecting a variety of opinions on attitudes of individuals to key social issues.

INTERPRETIVISM

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Interpretivism is a methodological approach that examines qualitative data that looks to gain an insight (verstehen) into the experiences of individuals. Below are some of the features of interpretivism, methods commonly used by interpretivists and the position interpretivism takes in different sociological debates.

Features of Interpretivism

- Interpretivist methods usually produce **qualitative data** that is higher in **validity** than other methods.
- Tendency to be conducted on a **smaller scale** focusing on **meanings and motivations** of individuals and groups
- Researcher tries to view social issues **through the eyes of those being researched (verstehen)**
- Suggest that individuals will have own interpretations of events and that behaviour is a result of that understanding of society
- **More subjective** in nature

Interpretivist Methods:

Interpretivists prefer methods that are higher in validity and produce qualitative data:

- **Participant observations** – these allow researchers to experience events and emotions first hand
- **Unstructured interviews** – Allow researchers to uncover the meanings and motivations behind actions
- **Secondary qualitative sources** – diaries, photographs, videos – these enable researchers to see the world through the eyes of others.
- They may also use other methods, particularly those that produce quantitative data in order to **triangulate** their findings and apply them to the general population.
- May also use **mixed methods** to gain further insight.

Can Sociology be Value-Free?

Sociology cannot be value free as those who are being researched provide their subjective or **value-laden viewpoints** of events surrounding them. Furthermore, researchers' priorities are to report on these subjective viewpoints and as such will interpret actions in ways that **cannot be removed from their own personal values**.

Can Sociology be a Science?

Sociology is different to natural sciences as individuals have **agency** in their reactions to external stimuli. Sociology is a **commentary on the human condition** rather than a study of behaviour. Interpretivists move away from using scientific methods in their research in order to **show empathy** with their research subjects. Furthermore, interpretivism draws findings from their methods that are not able to be falsified.

Sociological Approaches Linked to Interpretivism

Largely used by i**nteractionists, labelling theorists** and other **social action** approaches. Interpretivist methodologies have also been used by more **contemporary Marxists and neo-Marxists**. Many ideas had been adopted into **feminist methodologies** also.

Should sociology inform social policy?

Those using interpretivist methodologies largely see themselves as commentators on what occurs in society, rather than proposing solutions to social problems. Furthermore, they see the role of sociology as creating discussion over **sociological rather than social issues**. Interpretivist research is not often utilised by governments due to its **small scale**, but can be used as a starting point for further research.

Notable uses of interpretivist methodology

Interpretivist methodologies have largely been used by theories that fall under the banner of social action theories.

Garfinkel's Breaching Experiments – as part of developing ethnomethodology, he set out to challenge people's perceptions of social norms through altering norms and values.

Largely used inside education, with **group and unstructured interviews** particularly common in contemporary research in schools for example studies by **Archer et al, Reay, Mac An Ghail and Ward** all utilised interpretivist methodologies.

Observations, particularly with niche groups, such as **Winlow's research** into Sunderland nightlife.

Paul Willis's Learning to Labour – using mixed methods to observe anti-school subcultures as did **Mirza** when examining teacher's racialised attitudes to pupils.

FIELD EXPERIMENTS

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Field experiments are experiments that are conducted in the natural environment of the participants. As with lab experiments, researchers manipulate one variable **(the independent variable)** and measure another **(the dependent variable).** However, other variables (**extraneous variables**) are not controlled.

Key Terms:
Operationalising variables: This refers to the process of making the different factors involved in the experiment able to be manipulated and measured.
Extraneous variables: These are factors that the researcher is unable to control, such as environmental and personal factors.

Use in Sociological Research:
Field experiments were used by early ethnographers in what Garfinkel called 'breaching experiments' where people would deviate from social norms and measure the reactions of others to their actions. Garfinkel's lodger experiments, took qualitative measurement of how parents reacted to their children when they assumed the role of a lodger.

Use in Education – MiC Link
Rosenthal and Jacobsen – Pygmalion in the Classroom is a famous example of a field experiments in education. They manipulated teachers' expectations of pupils and found those falsely identified as 'high flyers' improved their performance due to teachers' more positive interactions with them. Rosenthal and Jacobsen manipulated teachers' expectations, then measured student performance **quantitatively.**

Strengths of Field Experiments:

Practical Strengths:
- Broader range of participants in field experiments (although many are unaware they are taking part in an experiment)
- Less chance of the Hawthorne effect occurring in the field than a lab setting

Ethical Strengths:
- Participants may be debriefed on the purpose of the experiment.
- Consent for use of data, can be obtained after the experiment

Theoretical Strengths:
- As it can be repeated it has higher **reliability** than other methods
- Can produce both **quantitative and qualitative** data depending upon the reactions of individuals which means it is can be used by both **positivist and interpretivists**
- Tasks are taking place in a natural environment for the participants, meaning they are more likely to act in a manner that is true to their personality, increasing **validity**.

Limitations of Field Experiments:

Practical Limitations:
- As field experiments may require specialist equipment to be brought into the field this can be a costly method to conduct.
- Variables may be difficult to operationalise, particularly the reactions of individuals.
- Extraneous variables are not controlled.

Ethical Limitations:
- Participants may be unaware they are taking part in an experiments and so **informed consent** is not gained.
- Manipulating the independent variable to create a false condition is a form of deception – although this is often necessary to see how individuals would react.
- Potential for psychological or physical harm is increased if safeguards are not put in place for researcher or participants.

Theoretical Limitations:
- Small scale research due to costs and nature of field experiments mean they are less likely to be generalised to population.
- Due to the presence of extraneous variables, field experiments can only provide a **correlational link** between two variables

How are they conducted?
Field experiments take place in a familiar environment to the participants (the field). Researchers will look to manipulate the dependent variable and then observe the reactions of participants (who are often unaware they are in an experiment) and make a judgement. Depending upon the methodological preference of the researcher this can be measured **quantitatively or qualitatively**.

LAB EXPERIMENTS

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Lab or controlled experiments are a research method where a researcher looks to **manipulate variables** to see if it causes a change in behaviour. These are conducted in controlled conditions. They are a source of **primary data** and usually produce **quantitative data**.

Key Terms:
Variable: A variable is any factor in an experiment that can change or be manipulated.
Independent variable: The independent variable is the factor that researchers look to manipulate to see if it will cause a change in behaviour
Dependent variable: The dependent variable is what is measured once the independent variable has been manipulated
Ecological validity: This is the measurement of how true to life the experiment is, considering it is conducted in artificial settings.
Hypothesis: This is the informed prediction of how participants will act in the experiment
Hawthorne effect: This is the belief that people change their behaviour when they are being observed by others.

Use in Sociological Research
Limited use in sociological research, however psychological research, particularly into effects of media (Bandura) is used. Notable social psychological research includes: Asch, Milgram, Zimbardo.
Use in Education – MiC Link
Lots of experiments into how people learn, but limited usage in schools where field experiments are more likely to be used.

Strengths of Lab Experiments:

Practical Strengths:
- Greater control over variables than in field experiments as it is conducted in controlled environment.
- More likely to obtain funding as it is a **scientific** method of research.

Ethical Strengths:
- Participants **consent** to taking part in an experiment but may not always be informed of the purpose of the experiment.
- Participants are able to be **debriefed** and support offered through follow-ups on their well-being offered as part of the process of the experiment

Theoretical Strengths:
- Control over variables means that **cause and effect** relationships can be established
- Scientific method that is favoured by **positivist** sociologists
- Produces **quantitative data** which can be used to establish trends in behaviour
- Can be repeated and the results checked. If similar findings are observed, this improves the **reliability** of the research.

Limitations of Lab Experiments:

Practical Limitations:
- Small sample sizes means that it may be time-consuming to gain enough representative data on the population.
- Can be expensive to conduct with the need for specialist equipment and facilities

Ethical Limitations:
- While consent is usually given, it may be necessary to **deceive** participants of the true nature of the experiment in order to obtain valid results.
- Experiments may cause **physical or psychological harm** to participants (as evidenced by Milgram and Zimbardo's research)

Theoretical Limitations:
- Participants may act differently when they are in artificial environments (**ecological validity**) which could impact on the validity of the experiment
- Participants may be aware of being observed and change their behaviours (the **Hawthorne effect**) which would impact on validity of research
- **Interpretivists** would suggest that experiments do not indicate why people act the way they do, only predict what they will do.

How are they conducted?
Researchers will select a sample of participants and design an experiment to test their hypothesis. They do this by manipulating one variable (**the independent variable**) whilst controlling all other variables in the environment. They then measure changes in participants' behaviour (the **dependent variable**) to see if it supports or rejects their hypothesis.

QUESTIONNAIRES

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Questionnaires are a series of questions given to participants comprised of both open and closed questions. These are often standardised so that all respondents answer the same questions. There are different methods of distribution referred to in exams, with focus on written, self-completion and mailed questionnaires referred to in previous AQA A level Sociology exams

Key Terms:
Open Questions: These are questions with an infinite number of responses that respondents can give. These usually provide qualitative data.
Closed Questions: These are questions with a finite number of responses that are usually pre-coded by a researcher so they can be turned in quantitative data.
Imposition Problem: This occurs when a researcher decides the range of responses a respondent can give, imposing their ideas of possible answers onto a question.
Leading Questions: These are questions that imply the respondent should give a particular response.
Response Rate: The number of responses returned to researchers, especially for mailed and self-completion questionnaires.

Strengths of Questionnaires:
Practical Strengths:
- Costs less than other methods and can produced and distributed to large sample sizes.
- If **pre-coded questions** are used they can be analysed and trends and patterns can be analysed easily.
- If researcher is present, they can clear-up any **ambiguous questions** that respondents have.

Ethical Strengths:
- **Less intrusive** method than interviews as respondents can give their responses without fear of judgement.
- Can easily be **anonymised** and the data can be recorded **confidentially.**

Theoretical Strengths:
- Preferred by **positivists** due to the quantitative data they provide.
- **Standardised format** of questionnaires means that they can be easily replicated and this increases **reliability**

Limitations of Questionnaires:
Practical Limitations:
- **Low response rates** to questionnaires that are sent out or completed away from researchers.
- With no researcher present, questions may be misunderstood.
- **Imposition problem** as the researcher decides the responses in advance, limiting the respondents choices.

Ethical Limitations:
- Need to secure all data that is recorded in accordance with guidelines (e.g. GDPR) and with large scale of research could be costly. All respondents personal data should be stored correctly in locked files or password protected computer drives.

Theoretical Limitations:
- May lack **validity** due to the standardised nature of questions meaning other responses cannot be recorded. Furthermore, people less likely to be truthful and give **socially desirable** responses.

Use in Sociological Research:
Commonly used in large-scale sociological research. **The Census** is a prime example of a large scale survey that uses pre-coded responses to gather information on households in the UK every ten years. Other examples include the **LGBTQ survey** by the UK government in 2017 into the experiences of people in the LGBTQ community. Questionnaires are also used frequently in mixed methods approaches, such as longitudinal studies and the formation of most official statistics.
Use in Education – MiC Link
Halsey, Heath and Ridge used closed questionnaires in analysing the destinations of students from different social classes. **Sullivan** also used closed questionnaires when investigating levels of cultural capital that children had, asking about the cultural activities they took part in at home and comparing these to their level of achievement in education.

Exam Gold:
In contemporary research questionnaires usually have a combination of open and closed questions which enables researchers to obtain both **quantitative and qualitative** data. Based on wording of question, students can develop this point to show more sophisticated knowledge of research methods.

STRUCTURED INTERVIEWS

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Structured interviews are a list of set questions that are standardised and verbally asked to a respondent by a researcher. They are very similar to researcher-present questionnaires and can be conducted face to face or via telephone. They are administered by researchers asking respondents a series of questions in the same order and recording their responses. As the researcher is detached from the process – simply reading out questions – this reduces **interviewer bias.**

Key Terms:

Open questions: These are questions with an infinite number of responses that respondents can give. These usually provide qualitative data.

Closed questions: These are questions with a finite number of responses that are usually pre-coded by a researcher so they can be turned in quantitative data.

Interview schedule: This is the list of questions that respondents are asked. In structured interviews, there is no deviation from this and they are always asked in the same order.

Interviewer bias: This refers to the possibility that interviewers can influence the responses given by the respondent.

Social desirability bias: This refers to respondents providing answers that they believe will show them in a positive light.

Pilot study: Researchers conduct small scale interviews beforehand to check reliability and validity of questions.

Strengths of Structured Interviews:

Practical Strengths:

- As less training is required for those conducting the interview, these can be a **low cost method** for collecting data.
- **Response rates are higher** than questionnaires due to the presence of a researcher.
- Researcher is on hand to clarify any mistakes or misunderstandings.
- Less time taken to **analyse findings** with closed questions

Ethical Strengths:

- Researcher can obtain informed consent through directly asking respondent.
- Researcher can provide support or signpost to relevant agencies If the respondent shows distress at any of the questions.

Theoretical Strengths:

- Preferred by **positivist** sociologists, particularly if closed questions are asked.
- Provides large amounts of **quantitative data**
- As the questions are **standardised**, this allows the interviews to be replicated with other samples and has **higher reliability**.

Limitations of Structured interviews:

Practical Limitations:

- To obtain a large sample, the researcher may have to recruit others to gain enough data.
- Researcher can **impose their views** onto the respondents by asking a fixed set of questions.
- Fixed responses means that researchers are **unable to probe** for further explanations if something interesting is uncovered.
- Lack of open or follow-up questions means **meanings and motivations may not be disclosed**

Ethical Limitations:

- Storage of large amounts of data can be costly and time consuming
- Less likely to obtain **socially sensitive information** due to detached nature of the questioning and/or the presence of a researcher.

Theoretical Limitations:

- May lack validity if researchers are focused solely on closed questions. Respondents would be giving a pre-determined response.
- Respondents may respond differently due to **social desirability bias**. They would look to give what they thought was a correct answer.

Use in Sociological Research:

Widely used in sociological research (as well as market research). Can also be conducted by telephone and form the basis of many opinion polls. **Young and Willmott (1957)** – Used structured interviews in their study of family life in East London. They are also used in many longitudinal studies, such as the **Millennium Cohort Study** to measure opinions. They are also used in the **Crime Survey of England and Wales**.

Use in Education – MiC Link

Becker used structured interviews when discussing the characteristics of the 'ideal pupil' with high school teachers in the USA. **Sharpe** also used structured interviews when comparing girl's aspirations for the future in 1976 and 1994. The ability to use a standardised set of questions and repeat these gives the researcher greater **reliability.**

UNSTRUCTURED INTERVIEWS

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Unstructured Interviews are conservations between a researcher and a respondent that have a limited or flexible list of questions that allows the researcher to ask follow-up questions and probe deeper. They take the form of a guided conversation. The researcher looks to establish a **rapport** with the respondent and put them at ease.

Key Terms:
Open questions: These are questions with an infinite number of responses that respondents can give. These usually provide qualitative data.
Interviewer bias: This refers to the possibility that interviewers can influence the responses given by the respondent.
Social desirability bias: This refers to respondents providing answers that they believe will show them in a positive light.
Rapport: This refers to the researcher developing a personal connection with the person they are interviewing.
Verstehen: The ability to understand the experience of others and gain an insight into their lives.
Status differences: Refers to the difference in **social and cultural** standing between the interviewee and the researcher which can impact on how open the interviewee is with their responses.

Strengths of unstructured interviews:
Practical Strengths:
- **Higher level of response** to unstructured interviews
- Can **clarify questions** that are not understand by the respondent and reframe these questions to make them more easily understood
- Can **monitor body language** and other non-verbal cues that may demonstrate an individual's motivations.

Ethical Strengths:
- **Rapport** can be developed putting the respondent at ease. They can also be conducted in familiar environments.
- Researcher is able to **reframe questions if respondent shows distress** or change line of questioning.

Theoretical Strengths:
- Provides large amounts of **qualitative data** that allows researchers to interpret an individual's meanings and motivations behind actions.
- Preferred by **interpretivists** as it enables researchers to obtain an insight (verstehen) into the experiences of others, which increases validity.

Limitations of unstructured interviews:
Practical Limitations:
- Dependent on **researcher's skills** as interviewer.
- **Time** is required to transcribe and analyse the interviews.
- **Status differences** between researcher and respondent may lead to information not being disclosed.

Ethical Limitations:
- **Confidentiality** between researcher and respondent may be tested if the respondent discloses illegal activities or activities that may cause harm to others.
- Potential for **psychological harm** if questioning too personal.

Theoretical Limitations:
- As they are small-scale unlikely to be able to be **generalised** to a larger section of population.
- As unstructured interviews are **not standardised,** they lack reliability as unlikely to be replicable.
- **Positivists would argue they lack objectivity** as researcher may influence findings (**interviewer bias**) or be **subjective** in their reading of the respondent.

Use in Sociological Research:
Widely used in contemporary sociological research. **Feminist methodology** utilises this method to show empathy with respondents and signpost them to services and other agencies that can assist. E.g. **Oakley** on the Conventional Family. **Carlen** used this method in *Women, Poverty and Crime* with women who had offended.
Use in Education – MiC Link
Widely used with parents, teachers and pupils. Examples include **Archer's** research into pupil identities, **Shain** with teachers and Muslim girls and **Vincent et al** with middle-class black parents. When considering the use of unstructured interviews in MiC questions, students should refer to specific characteristics of those being interviewed, e.g. working- class pupils and how this will impact on their interactions with researchers when questioned about specific topics.

GROUP INTERVIEWS/FOCUS GROUPS

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Group Interviews are interviews that take place with more than one respondent. Sometimes referred to as focus groups they are used to gather a range of opinions in a short space of time. One or more researchers will select a sample of respondents to discuss a particular theme. They may use an interview schedule to structure the interview, but will have the ability to ask follow-up questions of respondents.

Key Terms:
Conformity: Members of a group may conform to the ideas of more dominant personalities in a group even if those ideas conflict with their own.
Semi-structured interviews: These have an interview schedule but enable researchers to ask follow-up questions if something is revealed.
Interviewer effect: This is the impact that interviewers can have on individuals, particularly if they have a different status from those being interviewed. This could cause individuals to refrain from disclosing information.
Group dynamics: Refers to the interactions between individuals being questioned. The presences of others may inhibit responses from all members. Conversely, being supported by peers with similar ideas might reduce status differences between researchers and those being interviewed.

Strengths of Group interviews
Practical Strengths:
- Allows researcher to obtain large amounts of information from a range of respondents in a relatively quick time.
- Using a **semi-structured format** allows the researchers certain flexibility to ask follow-up questions.
- Can observe the **group dynamics** between individuals and pick up on non-verbal cues.

Ethical Strengths:
- Group interviews can help to establish a rapport
- One set of data is recorded rather than the data from individual interviews
- Researcher can obtain informed consent through directly asking respondents.

Theoretical Strengths:
- Can obtain both **quantitative and qualitative** data depending upon the nature of the questions.
- Wider range of respondents means that it may be more representative of wider society.
- Usually favoured by **interpretivists if obtaining qualitative data.**
- Can be used as part of a **mixed methods approach to triangulate data** that has been presented.

Limitations of Group Interviews:

Practical Limitations:
- Presence of others **may limit the responses** that others give. Conversely, the need to **conform to more dominant views** in the group may lead people to give false views.
- **Status differences** between the researcher and the respondents may be amplified by the presence of others

Ethical Limitations:
- Discussion of **socially sensitive** issues is less likely in the presence of other individuals as people may feel exposed.
- **Confidentiality** of group needs to be maintained by all persons being interviewed.

Theoretical Limitations:
- **Validity** of information disclosed may be influenced by the presence of others.
- Unlikely to be a **reliable measure** due to the wide range of responses, meaning it is less likely to be replicated.
- **Positivists** may criticise the method if open questions are used as they would be open to **subjective interpretation** by researchers.

Use in Sociological Research:
Increasingly used in sociological research, particularly in education given the time constraints on schools. Usually used as part of a mixed methods approach as a follow-up to observations or statistical data.

Use in Education – MiC Link
Used in research by **Willis** into anti-school subcultures to follow-up on his observations (*Learning to Labour*). Also used by **Archer et al** when looking at Nike Identities. Commonly used by **OFSTED** in education to find out about pupil's experiences of the school as part of an inspection

NON -PARTICIPANT OBSERVATIONS

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Non-Participant Observations are a research method where researchers observe the behaviour of individuals without taking part in their activities. They can be **structured or unstructured**, and conducted **covertly or overtly**. A researcher selects a sample of participants and observes their behaviour in a range of familiar settings. As they are non-participants, they do not interfere with the conduct of the group and merely observe their interactions.

Key Terms:

Covert non-participant observation: This is where those being observed are unaware they are part of a study. The researcher does not participate in their activities.

Overt non-participant observations: This is where those being observed are aware they are being observed but the researcher plays no part in their activities and observes from a detached position.

Structured observations: This type of observation relies upon researchers observing specific behaviours over set periods of time. It largely produces quantitative data.

Unstructured observations: These allow the researcher to observe what they see as relevant and follow the activities of individuals or groups as they see fit.

Objectivity: Ability of a researcher to remove themselves from the experiences of those being researched and make balanced judgements.

Strengths of Non-Participant Observations:

Practical Strengths:

- As researchers do not need to fit in with the group, this makes accessing the group's activities easier than participant observations, even if covert.
- As they are removed from the group, the actions of the researcher will be **less likely to influence others'** behaviour.
- Covert non-participant observations **reduce the impact of the Hawthorne effect.**

Ethical Strengths:

- Overt observations are able to gather **informed consent** and are unlikely to require deception on the part of the researcher.
- Non-participant observations are less likely to require the researcher to break the law or conduct immoral behaviour.

Theoretical Strengths:

- Being detached from the group and not taking part in activities allows the researcher to be more **objective.**
- Structured observations may provide **quantitative data** if behaviours are organised into categories. This means they are able to be replicated and have higher reliability. This is favoured by positivists.

Limitations of Non-Participant Observations:

Practical Limitations:

- Observations may rely upon **access** to certain institutions such as education which may require specialist training or qualifications if done covertly.
- Overt observations may be subject to the **Hawthorne effect,** where individuals change their behaviour as they know they are being observed.
- Observations can take a **long time** to gain the amount of data required to come to conclusions. This can be **costly.**

Ethical Limitations:

- May observe **illegal or immoral behaviour** and are duty bound to report this, which could limit their research.
- Covert observation relies upon **deception** and informed consent may not be able to be obtained from all those observed.
- Researchers must not disclose information that could identify those that they have observed.

Theoretical Limitations:

- Overt observations may have issues with **validity** if people alter their behaviour.
- May be too detached and unable to achieve **verstehen** favoured by **interpretivists.**

Use in Sociological Research:

One of the most famous non-participant observations was conducted by **Venkatesh** in *Gang Leader for a Day*, where he observed the behaviours of a drug gang in Chicago. Eventually he took part in some activities, but remained within ethical guidelines.

Use in Education – MiC Link

There have been many non-participant observations in schools. **Mirza (1992)** observed school teachers and pupils in *Young, Female and Black.* Others such as **Keddie (1973)** also observed school life to understand pupil experiences and teacher attitudes.

PARTICIPANT OBSERVATIONS

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Participant observations are a research method where the researcher takes part in the activities. These can be **overt or covert** and are seen as an important method in allowing researchers to gain **verstehen.** Both overt and covert observations are reliant upon researchers gaining access to a group that they wish to observe. They will then record the events of the group and take part in the daily activities that the group or individuals undertake.

Key Terms:
Covert participant observation: This is where the researcher becomes part of the group being researched without them being aware they are part of a research study.
Overt participant observation: This is where the researcher discloses their aims to the group and they are aware they are part of a research study.
Verstehen: The ability to understand the experience of others and gain an insight into their lives.
Bias: This is the extent to which the researcher becomes involved with the ideas of the group and sympathises with them, losing objectivity in the process.
Going native: Outdated term used to describe the process of researcher identifying with the norms, values of those they research, losing objectivity over time while conducting the research.
Verstehen: The ability to understand the experience of others and gain an insight into their lives.

Strengths of Participant Observations:
Practical Strengths:
- Researchers can observe the behaviour of individuals at close hand.
- It can provide an **insight into issues** that the researcher had not thought of initially and provide the basis for future research.
- Overt participant observation has the advantage of being **able to ask questions** when activities are occurring, gaining clarity over meanings and motivations behind behaviours.
- Covert observation avoids the Hawthorne effect
- Can gain access to hard to reach groups.

Ethical Strengths:
- Overt participant observations **avoid deception** and can obtain consent from those being researched.

Theoretical Strengths:
- Provides lots of **qualitative data** that can be analysed and further research commissioned.
- **High in validity**, particularly covert observations as people will act naturally.
- Preferred by **interpretivists** as it allows researchers to understand the meanings and motivations of their research subjects

Limitations of Participant Observations:
Practical Limitations:
- Covert observations require researcher to **adopt a false identity** and maintain that throughout the research to give them credibility in the eyes of the group. This can involve modifying their appearance.
- Researchers in covert observations are **limited in how they can record information**, particularly when infiltrating gangs or observing illegal behaviour.
- Overt observations may not be granted access if they are observing illegal or immoral acts or subject to **gatekeepers blocking access.**

Ethical Limitations:
- Covert observations **deceive** those that are being observed. Furthermore, observing illegal acts and being asked to participate in such acts breaches ethical guidelines for researchers.

Theoretical Limitations:
- Overt observations may lack validity if the **Hawthorne effect** takes place.
- **Researcher may influence the research** to fit their aims and objectives as they are taking part in research, lessening validity
- Researchers may sympathise with aims of the group and **lose objectivity** in their research.
- Low in **reliability** as unable to be replicated.

Use in Sociological Research:
Participant observations have been used extensively in sociological research. **Pearson** looking at football hooliganism, **Patrick** at gangs in Glasgow, and **Winlow** examining bouncers in Sunderland.

Use in Education – MiC Link
Ball participated in school activities when researching *Beachside Comprehensive,* taking part in school trips, staff vs pupils cricket matches and supervising pupils. **Mac an Ghail** also worked at schools where his research was conducted.

Exam Gold:
Exam questions sometimes leave methods open to the student's interpretation to allow them to fully explore a method. For example, discussing strengths of covert observations, without specifying if they are participant or non-participant.

OFFICIAL STATISTICS

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Official statistics are numerical data that is collected on behalf of the government by various agencies. They are available online and by request from the Office of National Statistics. Statistics are compiled from a variety of primary research methods, such as questionnaires and official records. They are compiled by the government. They are **secondary sources** of data.

Key Terms:
Social Construction: Statistics are a result of the interpretations of society towards acts. E.g. in Durkheim's study of suicide, it was individuals who decided whether a death was suicide or not.
Data Manipulation: Statistics can be interpreted and presented in a variety of different ways and to prove various points.
Hard Statistics: These are statistics that are recorded as there is a legal obligation to do so, e.g. births, deaths, marriages and divorces.
Soft Statistics: These are statistics that are based upon reporting, such as crime, or through government surveys, such as unemployment figures. These are open to manipulation and interpretation.
Changing Definitions: Data collected in official statistics is often subject to change, for example official measure of poverty and deprivation vary.

Strengths of Official statistics:
Practical Strengths:
- **Readily available and free to access** through government websites or through requesting access to statistics that exist.
- Can be useful as a **preliminary tool** to conduct further research or as part of a mixed methods approach.
- As they are produced by government agencies it can be argued that they have **credibility.**
- Can be used to formulate policy to improve the lives of individuals.

Ethical Strengths:
- **Consent** to use statistics is not required as consent will have been given in compilation of results.
- Will not disclose personal information about participants as all data is **anonymised.**

Theoretical Strengths:
- Preferred by **positivists** as they are comprised of **quantitative data**.
- Collected on a large scale so often representative of the general population.
- Have high reliability as they are repeated at frequent intervals.

Limitations of Official statistics:
Practical Limitations:
- Some statistics may take longer to compile and data may be outdated at time of use. E.g. Census data is compiled every 10 years.
- Data manipulation can occur through changing the definitions of social issues, e.g. poverty, to suit the needs of government.
- Lack of control over how the data is collected and it may not suit the specific purposes of a researcher.

Ethical Limitations:
- Objective approach ignores the needs of those being studied – e.g. feminist methodology looks to inform those being studied of help and assistance they can receive.

Theoretical Limitations:
- Data collected may be less valid, measuring what is happening rather than expanding on the reasons that it is happening.
- Data collected is based upon individual's definitions of events, rather than objective facts. E.g. Recorded crimes rely upon interpretation of CPS and police to state an act is a crime.

Use in Sociological Research:
Widely used by sociologists – an example is The Spirit Level by Wilson and Pickett. Also used to discover rates of crime, imprisonment, demographic change, inequality and diversity in the UK.

Use in Education – MiC Link
School performance tables (league tables) and exam results are both compiled by the Department for Education annually. Other statistics such as exclusions, teacher workforce, SEN and other measures of disadvantage are also collected and published annually.

Exam Gold:
Official statistics are preferred by structural approaches in sociology due to their scale and reliability. Whilst they provide trends that may be used to formulate policies, they often ignore the specific needs of marginalised groups and individuals which limits their use for understanding individual motivations.

PERSONAL, PUBLIC AND HISTORICAL DOCUMENTS

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These include: **public documents, personal documents, historical documents, photo diaries, journals, biographies, video diaries, blogs, vlogs.** They are usually a source of qualitative data, but some historical documents, such as parish records and old census records may also provide quantitative data. They are **secondary sources** of data.

Key Terms:
Authenticity: This is the extent to which a document or source can be traced to a specific author or from a specific time **period.**
Credibility: The extent to which a document represents a credible viewpoint of the events described.
Representativeness: Is the document representative of individuals of that time
Ambiguity: The clarity of the document, including how it may be interpreted by others.
Subjectivity: The extent to which the individual has presented a biased opinion of an event.

Use in Sociological Research:
Documents are favoured by interpretivists due to high validity and providing an insight into lives of others. **Tomas and Zanecki** used letters from Polish migrants to analyse impacts of migration. **Laslett** used parish records to analyse types of family dating back to 1600s.

Use in Education – MiC Link
Use of public documents by **Gerwitz, Ball and Bowe** when examining parental choice and marketisation of education who looked at marketing materials.

Public Documents:
Practical issues:
- These are available to the public but some may be **embargoed for future release** limiting access.
- Older records may not be available digitally and **travel may be required in order to access them**
- Information may be **redacted** from some public documents

Ethical issues:
- Care must be taken to ensure that individuals' names that are not in the public interest are excluded from research.

Theoretical issues:
- **May lack objectivity** and be based upon a specific political viewpoint or personal ideology.
- Public documents are **credible and authentic** coming from trusted sources.

Personal Documents:
Practical issues:
- **Gaining access** to personal documents may be difficult as they are not intended for public use
- **Cost of purchasing private documents** from families.
- May be held in **private collections** and require travel.

Ethical Issues:
- Discussion of issues of a personal nature would require anonymity for the persons involved including family members

Theoretical issues:
- Highly valid source of data reflecting individuals' meaning and motivations, but **may lack credibility or reflect a viewpoint that is not generalisable to the public.**
- Lacks **reliability**

Historical Documents:
Practical issues:
- Gaining access to documents that have not been digitalised may require travel. **May need to be interpreted** from older versions of languages and require **specialist training or staff to interpret**.
- May be part of private collections that are unavailable to public

Ethical Issues:
- Discussion of issues of a personal nature would require **anonymity** for the persons involved including family members

Theoretical issues:
- Lack **reliability**, but have high **validity**.
- **Authenticity** may be an issue if cannot be traced to original author. Do they represent a credible viewpoint? Are they **representative** of people of that time?

Exam Gold:
Documents are seen as secondary sources in sociology, which differs from other subjects such as History where they are perceived as primary sources. They may also be referred to as qualitative secondary sources in exams and so pay attention to the wording of questions to ensure you are answering the question.