

# Sociological Research Methods Knowledge Organiser Strip

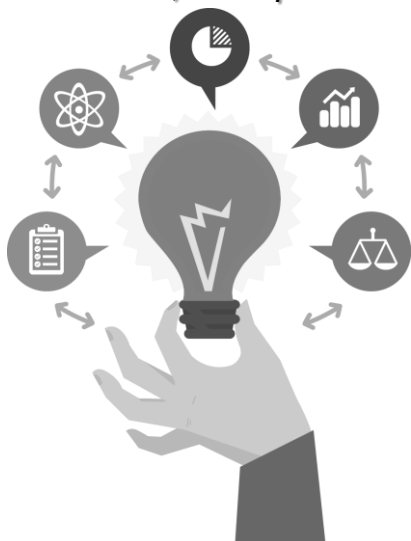
In this section of the course, we assess the methods Sociologists use to research and understand society. A key part of sociologist's work involves carrying out research in order to collect data (information) to provide them with evidence to help explain the social world & to contribute to our knowledge of modern society. Research findings also provide important information for policy makers, government & local authorities.

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**NOTE – Methods is embedded throughout**

**- Use this to supplement your revision, not replace it.**



## 1. The Research Process:

The **research process in sociology** involved **several steps or stages**. In broad terms, these are:

**Aim** - An aim is something that the researcher wants to investigate or find out. It can be a general or specific idea, but this is the purpose of the research.

**Hypothesis** - This is an idea which a researcher guesses might be true, but has not yet been tested against the evidence.

**Review Existing Literature** - Before you carry out research you need to look at what has been researched in the area before.

**Plan a Research Method** - Once you have established what you are trying to find out, you choose which research method you will use.

**Sampling** - A sample is made up of your research participant (people you are studying). It is a smaller representative group drawn from the population you want to study.

**Pilot Study**- This is a small-scale practice of your research This is carried out before the main body of research to check for initial patterns, issues with questions, practical problems etc.

**Carry out Research** - Here you need to look at your initial research plan and adjust it based on the findings of your pilot study. Then you carry out your research on your sample.

**Gather Results** - Depending on the research method chosen, the way you gather your results will vary.

**Analysis** - This is the part where you try to make sociological statements from your findings. Here you link what you have found with ideas in society.

**Evaluation** - Before you publish your work it is important you evaluate what you have done. You consider the strengths of your research and the method you use. However, you also consider the weaknesses.

**Publish** - The researcher now decides how to publish the results. This can be in many forms: book, magazine, T.V show etc

## 2. Primary-Secondary – 3. Quantitative-Qualitative

Another influence on a researcher's choice of method is the type of data they want to gather. Data is the information collected by sociologists when they research society and it can be divided into the following types:

**Primary data:** This is information that researchers have gathered themselves. E.g. questionnaires, interviews, observations.

**Secondary data:** This is information that has been collected by somebody else & then used by the researcher. E.g. official statistics, historical documents & diaries.

### Quantitative-Qualitative

When a researcher collects data it can also be divided into quantitative data and qualitative data.

**Quantitative data** is numerical, often presented as numbers shown in statistics, in graphs, bar charts, etc.

**Qualitative data** is in-depth material, usually descriptive and presented in a written form.

### Positivism-Interpretivism

Positivism is based on the idea that the only way to obtain knowledge about the world is through scientific methods. Positivist sociologists focus on behaviour that can be observed and measured rather than on people's feelings or emotions. They prefer quantitative research methods such as large-scale surveys & prefer to describe society in statistical terms.

Interpretivist - sociologists argue that the subject matter of sociology – people – is completely different from that of the natural sciences. People do not behave like objects or animals. Interpretivist sociologists prefer qualitative methods such as in-depth interviews and participant observation that collect rich, detailed accounts rather than statistics.



## 4. Evaluating Research

Whenever Sociologists conduct or look at research they evaluate it. They want to look at the advantages and disadvantages of the research and data.

Sociologists do this by assessing the:

- Reliability
- Validity
- Generalisability
- Representativeness
- Ethics



**Reliability** - means the research should be able to be repeated in a different time and place and similar results will be gained.

**Validity** - is concerned with whether the research has uncovered truth about social life.

**Generalisability** - If the research can be generalised (applied) to all people who are similar to the sample, it is considered generalisable.

**Representativeness** - How much does a study or a sample represent the wider population.

**Ethics** – What is right or wrong in Sociological Research:

**Confidentiality** is the need for researchers not to publish the personal details of respondents without their consent

**Anonymity** is the right of individuals participating in research to not be required to provide their name or personal details or, if they do give this information, it will not appear in any reports arising from the research

Participants should always give their **informed consent** to the research being conducted so that no deception occurs.

**Protection from harm** is the belief that nobody should be put in a position where they could come to any emotional or physical harm. People should never be made to feel uncomfortable, embarrassed or threatened & they should have the right to withdraw from the research at any point.

## 5. Sampling Methods

When you do research, it would be difficult or impossible to ask questions to everybody in the group you are studying as it would take too long and be too expensive. For example, if you are studying whether 'girls do more work around the house than boys', you cannot ask every boy and girl so you only ask a sample of the group.

**Sampling Frame:** this is the list of people from which you take your sample, e.g. school registers

Sampling Methods include:

Probability Sampling – Anyone in the population can be selected using a sampling frame

**Simple-Random Sampling** - To be truly random, everyone in the Population being studied must stand an equal chance of being selected.

**Systematic Random Sampling** - This is when you have a system for choosing your sample, such as picking every 5<sup>th</sup> name on the school registers. It can be quick to organise, but it is not representative as you may end up with more of one type of person than another.

**Stratified Random Sampling** - This sample is divided up into groups to accurately represent the people being studied, e.g. you might have 50% boys and 50% girls, 20% ethnic minority. You could also divide the group by age and by where they live.

Non-Probability Sampling – Samples that are selected on purpose by the researcher. This is used when a sampling frame is unavailable

**Snowball Sampling** – This is where a member of your sampling group introduces you to another participant and helps you recruit further participants.

**Quota Sampling** - Often used in market research, this is when respondents are selected because they represent certain groups in the total population (e.g. due to their age, gender, marital status, etc.).

**Purposive Sampling** - This is selecting a sample according to a known characteristic (being a headteacher or being homeless)



## 6. Questionnaires

A questionnaire is a list of written questions which are completed by a large number of people called respondents. They are normally handed out or posted out for people to self complete, but occasionally the questions are read out to respondents instead. There are two main types of questions that can be used in a questionnaire and most questionnaires will include examples of both.

1. Closed questions are often fixed choice and involve tick box answers. The respondent might be presented
2. Open questions gather more in-depth answers from respondents using words such as 'why'.

There are three main types of questionnaires:

1. Online
2. Surveys
3. Postal

The advantages and disadvantages of questionnaires are:

Advantages	Disadvantages
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Questionnaires can be more accessible for respondents ; its easier to find time for an online interview than face to face interview</li> <li>• Responses to questionnaires can generally be relatively easy to quantify</li> <li>• Questionnaires are generally most cost-effective to administer</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Low response rates can distort the data</li> <li>• Pre-coded questions can be biased</li> <li>• Questionnaires provide little opportunity for the researcher to gauge the truthfulness</li> <li>• Questionnaires generally limit the possible responses that a respondent can give</li> </ul>



## 7. Interviews

These interviews are unstructured and therefore each one is unique. The researcher has an idea of the topic they want to discuss but they do not have set questions to follow. They allow the interview to flow. This produces qualitative data.

A semi-structured interview is a mix of the two. The researcher has a guide of questions but allows the participant to speak freely.

### Advantages of Structured Interviews

- Questions are standardised so they can be compared.
- They can be easily replicated to check for reliability.
- Interviewers are trained and familiar with the interview schedule so they can help the respondents with any misunderstandings.

### Disadvantages of Structured Interviews

- The interviewer might make some people feel uncomfortable about telling the truth.
- The interviewer can also influence answers by their body language.
- The age, gender and ethnicity of the interviewer can also influence the respondent's answer. This is called the interviewer bias.

### Advantages of Unstructured Interviews

- They are much more flexible so any misunderstandings can be discussed.
- Researchers can explore how interviewees understand their own experiences and behaviour so they can collect detailed data

### Disadvantages of Unstructured Interviews

- In depth interviews are time consuming and expensive.
- It requires the researcher to have skills in order to encourage the participant to open up.
- The interviewer could ask leading questions and influence the responses of the participants.



## 8. Observations

This can be done overtly or covertly. Overt means that the researcher explains his aims and intentions to the group they are observing. Covert means that the researcher is working under cover.



In a participant observation the researcher joins in with the group.

### Advantages of Participant Observation

- It allows the observer to study the group in their everyday setting.
- Studies tend to take place over a period of time so the researcher can build a bond with the participants.
- By participating in activities the researcher can see things from the group's perspective and develop a deeper understanding.

### Disadvantages of Participant Observation

- It may be difficult for the researcher to gain entry to the group and for the group to trust them.
- Taking notes and recording activities as they happen can be challenging especially if the research is covert.
- The research is time consuming and therefore expensive.
- The observer effect – the presence of the observer can cause the group to act differently.

In non-participant observation the researcher sits back from the group and observes without joining in.

### Advantages of Non-participant Observation

- Researchers are less likely to get drawn into the group's activities.
- They can remain objective as they are less likely to let their opinions be influenced by the group.

### Disadvantages of Non-participant Observation

- It is more difficult to see the world through the eyes of group members if they do not participate in their activities.
- The observer effect may change the behaviour of the participants as they are aware of being watched.

## 9. Longitudinal Studies

Longitudinal studies follow a group of people over time. Changes in people's social attitudes and experiences can be examined. However, they are expensive to conduct and there are practical problems in retaining the original sample.

### Advantages of Longitudinal Studies

- Longitudinal studies allow researchers to examine social changes over time. Changes in individuals' daily lives, experiences, behaviour, values and opinions can be identified

### Disadvantages of Longitudinal

- The time scale involved means that longitudinal studies are relatively expensive and time-consuming
- Involvement in a longitudinal study may affect the behaviour of the participants – they might behave differently from the way they would have behaved if they had not been involved in the study.
- There are problems in maintaining contact with the original sample over time: people leave home, move house, move abroad or otherwise disappear for periods of time
- People may change their minds and decide to withdraw from the study.

## 10. Ethnography

Ethnography is the observation & description of group of people & their way of life

### Advantages of Ethnographies

- Based on the direct observation of social behaviour which provides a valid, well-rounded picture of the social behaviour under study
- Type of qualitative research providing detailed in-depth data

### Disadvantages of Ethnographies

- There are ethical problems, particularly with regard to the privacy of informants who can reveal their intimate details.
- The observer effect – when people are aware they are under study, they may change their behaviour
- Ethnographic research tends to be expensive & time consuming

## 11. Official Statistics

Statistics are a form of secondary data. This means that they are pre-existing as they have been collected by somebody else. Statistics are presented in the form of quantitative data such as birth rates or crime rates. Official statistics are compiled by government departments and agencies.

Sources include The Office for National Statistics and The Department of Education.

### Advantages of Official Statistics

- They save time and money because they have already been collected.
- They are based on large samples.
- They may only provide limited information.
- They allow for comparisons between data and information on trends.
- They can be used as part of a mixed methods study

### Disadvantages of Official Statistics

- They can tell us numbers but not meanings. For example we can know how many divorces are occurring each year but we do not know why.
- Sociologists cannot check the validity of official statistics.

## 12. Content Analysis

A content analysis studies the content of the media. It can measure and analyse the messages produced by the media.

### Advantages of Content Analysis

- Cheap method: You only need access to the media to be able to carry out a content analysis e.g. access to TV or newspapers
- It's a reliable research method: If you use a content analysis grid to measure the output of the media, then it is easy for other researchers to repeat your content analysis and test your results.

### Disadvantages of Content Analysis

- It lacks validity: If the content analysis is just quantitative data it will lack detail and depth of information. E.g. It can show that the media is violent and sexist, but it cannot explain why the media is violent or sexist.
- It is too subjective: This means the results are based on the opinions of the person doing the content analysis; they decide if something they see is violent and sexist.



## 13. PET

Practical issues are also something Sociologists need to consider. Sociologists need to assess how practical it is for them to complete research.

Key practical issues include:

- Time – is the research project too time-consuming?
- Access – can the researcher gain access? For example, researching a gang – can the researcher gain access to a gang?
- Cost – How much will the research cost? Extended participant observation would cost a significant amount.

Key ethical issues in Sociological research are:

- Protecting participants from harm (emotional, psychological etc)
- Informed consent – the participant should know they are being studied and the purpose of the research
- Anonymity, privacy and confidentiality – the participants identity must be protected, and all personal information should be kept confidential.

Key Theoretical issues in Sociological research are:

- Validity
- Reliability
- Representativeness



## 14. Social Policy

**Social policies** are plans and actions that governments and local authorities put into place to address a specific social problem.

Many Sociologists carry out research into the effectiveness of social policies. For example, welfare policies. Do they help relieve poverty, stop crime and help the elderly?

Sociologists, thus have a key role in social policy design and evaluation. In key areas of crime, education and welfare

