
STUDYING SOCIETY

AQA GCSE SOCIOLOGY UNIT 1
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THE SOCIOLOGICAL APPROACH

Sociology explores the social factors that shape human behavior and the way that society influences our daily lives. Sociologists must select and use evidence in a balanced way or their research may be criticized by other sociologists. They focus on group (rather than individual) behavior and discuss the social influences on human life.

KEYWORDS

- **Sociology:** The study of human social life, groups and societies.
- **Society:** A group of people who share a culture.
- **Social structures:** The groups and institutions that make up society such as families, the education system and the social stratification system.
- **Social processes:** Processes such as socialization, social control and social change.
- **Social issues:** Issues and problems that affect individuals, groups and communities in their daily lives such as fear of crime, inequality and poverty.
- **Culture:** The way of life of a society or group including its values, norms, beliefs and language.
- **Socialization:** The process through which we learn the culture and values of the society we are born into.
- **Social stratification:** The way society is structured/divided into hierarchical strata with the most privileged at the top and the least privileged at the bottom.

COLLECTING PRIMARY DATA

CARRYING OUT SOCIOLOGICAL RESEARCH:

1. Develop research aims and hypotheses
2. Carry out a pilot study
3. Select a sample
4. Collect data
5. Analyse data
6. Evaluate study's aims, methods, findings and conclusion

KEYWORDS

- **Population:** The particular group being studied, for example students in Higher education or families.
- **Sample:** A subgroup of the population that is selected for study.
- **Sampling frame:** A list of members of the population
- **Representative sample:** A sample that has the same characteristics as the population but is a smaller version of it.
- **Generalizations:** General statements and conclusions that apply not only to the sample studied but also to the broader population.
- **Peer review:** Before papers are accepted for presentation at conferences or before articles are published in journals, they are assessed and reviewed by experienced sociologists. This operates as a form of quality control.
- **Representative:** Typical; a representative sample is one that reflects the characteristics of its population.

SAMPLING TECHNIQUES

Probability sampling (Random sampling):

If the sample is selected randomly, it is likely to be representative of the population.

- **Simple random sampling:** Each member of the population has an equal chance of being selected.
- **Systematic sampling:** Researchers take every 'nth' item from the sampling frame, for example every 20th name from a school register.
- **Stratified random sampling:** Researchers divide the population into strata according to characteristics such as age, gender and ethnicity. They then randomly draw a sample from each strata in proportion to the numbers in the population.

Non-probability sampling:

This technique is used when a sampling frame is not available. If the sample is not selected randomly, it is not likely to be representative of the population.

- **Snowball sampling:** Through contact with one member of a population, the research is introduced to, or identifies others in the same population.

CROSS SECTIONAL AND LONGITUDINAL STUDIES

Survey type	Definition	Example	Advantages	Disadvantages
Cross-sectional	A cross-sectional survey takes a cross section of the population and questions them on relevant issues only once .	A questionnaire asking students about their attitudes towards sex only once	Not as time consuming as a longitudinal survey. Can be a cheap way of gathering a lot of information.	This only gives us a snapshot view. It only tells us about people at one particular point in time .
Longitudinal	A study of the same group over time.	A questionnaire is given to a group of students concerning their attitudes towards sex. A questionnaire is given to them every year until they finish University.	Allows us to examine social change over time.	Can be time consuming and expensive.

QUANTITATIVE DATA

A social survey is an example of a primary research method used to obtain quantitative data. A survey produces statistical information that counts/measures something. The results are presented as graphs & tables of statistics with the sociologist's comments and analysis.

If follow-up surveys are carried out several times over a number of years, in a longitudinal study, it is possible to identify social changes over time.

SOCIAL SURVEYS

Social surveys are used to collect information from large numbers of people. They can be based on questionnaires or structured interviews. The questions are standardized so all respondents answer identical questions in the same order. Survey questions can be 'open-ended' or 'closed'.

- Self-completion postal questionnaires: sent to respondents via post/email. They complete a copy of the questionnaire and return it to the researcher.



ADVANTAGES & DISADVANTAGES OF POSTAL QUESTIONNAIRES...

Advantages:

- Postal questionnaires are one of **the cheapest and quickest** ways of getting **information from lots of people**.
- **Researcher is not present** and therefore, respondents may be **more willing to answer personal or sensitive questions**.
- **Questions are standardized** so sociologists can compare respondents' answers
- Postal questionnaires **can be replicated to check reliability** of findings (consistency = reliability)

Disadvantages:

- Questions **cannot be explained** face-to-face so some may be **misunderstood or skipped**
- Questionnaire may **not have been completed by person it was sent to**
- Postal questionnaires are **not appropriate for some populations** (e.g. homeless)
- **Response rate is usually low**. Those who respond may not be representative or typical of the population being studied. If so, researcher **cannot generalize from the sample to the population**.

FURTHER EXAMPLES OF SOCIAL SURVEYS

- **Hand-delivered questionnaires:** research hands the self-completion questionnaire to the respondent and returns to collect the completed questionnaire.

- **Structured interview:** trained interviewer asks set questions and records respondents' answers. Conducted either face-to-face or via telephone



ADVANTAGES & DISADVANTAGES OF A STRUCTURED INTERVIEW...

Advantages:

- Trained interviewer **can explain questions** if respondent requires clarification
- **Questions are standardized** so sociologists can compare respondents' answers
- Sociologists can **identify connections between different factors**
- Structured interviews **can be replicated to check reliability** of findings (consistency = reliability)
- Sociologists **can generalize from reliable results** taken from representative sample

Disadvantages:

- **Use of pre-set questions** assumes that sociologist has skills to decide what questions need to be asked, how and in what order before the interview even takes place
- Interviewees (respondents) have **few opportunities to raise new issues**
- **Interview effect:** in a formal interview setting, interviewees may only give answers that are socially acceptable to show them in the most positive light. The results may not be valid
- **Interviewer effect:** Interviewer's personal or social characteristics may influence the interviewees' responses making the results invalid

KEYWORDS

- **Longitudinal studies:** Studies of the same group of people conducted over a period of time. After the initial survey or interview has taken place, follow-up surveys or interviews are carried out at intervals over a number of years.
- **Reliability:** Consistency. Research findings are reliable if the same or consistent results are obtained a second time using the same methods.
- **Validity:** Truth or authenticity. Research findings are valid if they provide a true or authentic picture of what is being studied.
- **Replication:** Standardized methods such as questionnaires can be replicated by other researchers to check reliability of research findings. Consistency confirms reliability.
- **Interviewer effect:** Interviewer's personal or social characteristics may influence the interviewees' responses making the results invalid
- **Interview effect:** In a formal interview setting, interviewees may only give answers that are socially acceptable to show them in the most positive light. The results may not be valid

QUALITATIVE DATA

Unstructured interviews and participant observation are examples of primary research methods used to obtain qualitative data. They produce information in the form of words, quotations from interviewees and detailed descriptions.

UNSTRUCTURED INTERVIEWS

An unstructured interview is a guided conversation where the interviewer is guided by a short list of prompts they have prepared in advance. Group interviews are usually unstructured and are like small group discussions.

ADVANTAGES & DISADVANTAGES OF AN UNSTRUCTURED INTERVIEW...

Advantages:

- Trained interviewer **can rephrase questions and clear up any misunderstandings**
- Interviewer is not constrained to pre-set questions and so **can ask follow-up questions to explore complex issues**
- **Interviewees can develop answers** and explain views in detail
- Give an **in-depth and rich** account of the topic being studied
- Provide a **more valid** or authentic picture of the topic

Disadvantages:

- **More time consuming and expensive** for the amount of data that is collected
- **Interviewer must have necessary skills** needed to keep conversation going and encourage interviewees to 'open up'
- **Interviewer effect:** Interviewer's personal or social characteristics may influence the interviewees' responses making the results invalid
- **Interview effect:** In a formal interview setting, interviewees may only give answers that are socially acceptable to show them in the most positive light. The results may not be valid
- **Not standardized so difficult to replicate** in order to check reliability
- **Sample size is smaller** so it is **difficult to generalize** from sample to wider population

ADVANTAGES & DISADVANTAGES OF A GROUP INTERVIEW...

Advantages:

- Through group interviews, the researcher can gather **a wide range of views and experiences and build up a lot of rich information** about the topic
- Participants in group interviews **can be recruited to take part in individual interviews at a later point in the research**
- Some **interviewees may feel more comfortable** when discussing their experiences in a group setting because they are **supported by others** in the group

Disadvantages:

- Group interviews **require a skilled interviewer** who can keep the discussion going and **encourage interviewees to 'open up'** whilst remaining **aware that the topics may be sensitive for some people**
- **Some interviewees may dominate the discussion** so that not every voice is heard. **Others will feel intimidated** in a group setting and prefer a one-to-one setting
- In a group setting, **the researcher cannot guarantee confidentiality or anonymity** to the interviewees

NON-PARTICIPANT OBSERVATION

In Non P.O. the sociologist simply observes the activities, but doesn't take part in them.

ADVANTAGES & DISADVANTAGES OF NON-PO...

Advantages:

- By reducing the level of interaction between the researcher and the participants you can **reduce the risk of the Observer effect**. However, this **only happens if the observation is covert**
- It is also **easier to record information and observations** if you are not participating, so you can record data more easily

Disadvantages:

- If the observation is overt you are more at risk from the **Observer Effect** as people know they are being watched
- You **do not gain as much information** as participant observations as you are not so submerged in the group you are observing

PARTICIPANT OBSERVATION

In research based on participant observation, the researcher joins a group and takes part in its daily activities in order to study it. Researcher watches and listens to the group and records what is observed over a period of time. It may be carried out either overtly or covertly.

With participant observation (PO), the research studies a group by becoming a full member of the group and participating in its daily life. In an overt PO study, the group's members are aware that the participant observer is doing research on them. However this may lead to the observer effect, whereby group members change their behavior because they know they are being studied.

In a covert PO study, the researcher does not tell the group that they are carrying out research. This avoids the observer effect but means that the researcher may avoid asking too many questions in case they 'blow their cover'.

Some supporters of covert PO argue that it may be the only way to study illegal activities and that it is acceptable so long as participants are not harmed as a result of taking part in the research. Others argue that covert PO is justified because it removes the observer effect.

However, critics argue that covert PO is unethical or morally unacceptable. This is because participants are not informed that they are being studied so do not get the chance to give, withhold or withdraw their consent.

COVERT PARTICIPANT OBSERVATION

Covert PO includes contact with a 'gatekeeper', a member of the group under study who will introduce the researcher into the group. The social researcher participating fully without informing members of the social group of the reasons for her presence, thus the research is carried out secretly or covertly.

ADVANTAGES & DISADVANTAGES OF COVERT PO...

Advantages:

- **Removes the observer effect**, so findings are more valid
- **Often suitable for 'difficult to reach' groups** or those groups or institutions which don't welcome the presence of observers for whatever reason

Disadvantages:

- **It can be hard to get into a group** - it takes a **lot of time and effort**, pretending to be something that you are not, getting contacts, and so on
- **The researcher may have to become involved in criminal or dangerous activities**, particularly where the research is studying a 'deviant' social group
- **The researcher has to employ a level of deceit**, since the researcher is essentially lies about the nature of her presence within the group
- **Close friendships are often resulting** from connections with members of the group under study and the covert nature of the research can **put a tremendous strain on the researcher**, both in and out of the fieldwork setting
- **The problem of 'going native'**, which refers to the fact that a researcher will cease to be a researcher and will become a full-time group participant
- It can be **both expensive and time consuming** for the amount of data gathered
- It would be **difficult to repeat a PO study in order to check reliability** of the findings

OVERT PARTICIPANT OBSERVATION

This includes the researcher being open about the reason for her presence in the field of study since the researcher is given permission by the group to conduct her research. There is also the use of a 'sponsor', who is an individual likely to occupy a high status within the group, therefore lessening any potential hostility towards the researcher.

ADVANTAGES & DISADVANTAGES OF OVERT PO...

Advantages:

- The **avoidance of ethical problems** in that the group are aware of the researcher's role
- The group is being **observed in its 'natural setting'**
- **Data may also be openly recorded**
- **Problems of 'going native' are avoided**

Disadvantages:

- There is possibility of the **observer effect**, where the behaviour of those under study may alter due to the presence of the researcher
- It would be **difficult to repeat a PO study in order to check reliability** of the findings
- Researcher is **less likely to see the world through the eyes of the group**

SECONDARY SOURCES OF DATA

Secondary data, such as official statistics or mass media reports, are collected and put together by other people, or organizations such as government agencies.

Quantitative secondary data: presented as statistical information that counts or measures something. Examples include results of opinion polls and official statistics such as numbers and rates of marriage and divorce.

Having secondary quantitative (statistical) information can help to put your study into context so that you can relate your study to what is happening in society. From this information, you can work out trends in order to devise questions about social attitudes to these changes so that your questions would be informed ones rather than random.

Qualitative secondary data: presented in visual or verbal form, for instance as words. Examples include newspaper and magazine articles, TV documentaries, diaries, letters, notes, memos, emails, photographs, school inspection reports, college prospectuses, internet websites, novels and autobiographies.

OPINION POLLS

Opinion polls can be a useful source of secondary data. They are a type of survey that uses fixed-choice questions to find out people's voting intentions or their opinions on topical issues. Organizations such as Gallup and GfK NOP are often commissioned to carry out surveys of voting intentions and political attitudes. These opinion poll findings on political issues are regularly published in newspapers in the coming months before a general election.

OFFICIAL STATISTICS

ADVANTAGES & DISADVANTAGES OF OFFICIAL STATISTICS...

Advantages:

- Official statistics are **relatively cheap, easy to access and cover many aspects of social life**
- In some cases, they are **one of the few sources of data available** on a topic
- They **allow sociologists to examine trends** (that is, increases or decreases over time) related to issues such as divorce, teen pregnancy, crime and poverty
- They **can be used with primary sources of data to get a fuller picture** of a topic. For example, in research on ethnicity and educational attainment, official statistics on GCSE exam results could be used alongside classroom observation and unstructured interviews with teachers

Disadvantages:

- They are **put together by officials** so sociologists have little say on the definitions used
- **Sociologists cannot check the validity** of official statistics. For example, official stats may not give a true measurement of classroom violence
- **They are 'socially constructed'** – they are the outcome of decisions and choices made by the people involved in their construction. For example, stats on domestic violence are published as statements of fact. However, they are the outcome of decisions made by people such as victims or police officers. The victims, for instance, must decide whether or not to report violent incidents to the police. As a result, domestic violence is likely to be under-reported to the police.

ETHICAL ISSUES

Ethical issues relate to morals and in the context of sociological research, raise questions about how to conduct morally acceptable research which protects the rights of research participants and safeguards their well-being

One ethical issue is ensuring that the welfare and wellbeing of research participants is taken into account when carrying out research. For example, divorce is a sensitive topic for some people and so in a research project regarding divorce, it would be important to not ask insensitive questions or questions that are too personal. Insensitive questions run the risk of upsetting or annoying the participants.

KEYWORDS

- **Social construction:** This term is often used in relation to age, gender and race and reflects the idea that, rather than being rooted in biology or nature, these are created by society or culture.
- **Ethical issues:** These relate to morals and in the context of sociological research, raise questions about how to conduct morally acceptable research which protects the rights of research participants and safeguards their well-being

EXAM QUESTION EXAMPLES

- 1) Outline one advantage and one disadvantage of using closed questions. (2 marks)
- 2) Identify and explain one reason why sociologists use a pilot study in questionnaire-based research. (4 marks)
- 3) Identify and explain one disadvantage of using unstructured interviews to study truancy among secondary school pupils. (4 marks)
- 4) Explain one way in which the findings from sociological research studies could help educational authorities in Britain to develop policies that tackle discrimination in schools, colleges or universities. (4 marks)