

2 SOCIOLOGICAL RESEARCH METHODS

Example answers

AS LEVEL

1 Outline **two** problems of using experiments in sociological research.

[4 marks]

STUDENT RESPONSE

An experiment may have ethical concerns, as it may involve interfering with the subject's personal life.

Secondly, an experiment may produce data which is lacking in validity, as the social environment may be created, meaning people may interact differently than they do in real life.

TEACHER COMMENTS

It is important to remember to clearly explain both of your points. One of the above problems is explained well whereas the other is a bit vague. Can you identify which problem requires more focus and improve it?

2 Evaluate the problems of using official statistics in sociological research.

[16 marks]

STUDENT RESPONSE

'Official statistics' refers to quantitative data collected for the government. They are collected in two broad ways. Firstly, for things like birth or death rates and secondly, for official surveys such as the Census.

Official statistics are usually collected in a standardised and objective fashion, and are therefore regarded as highly reliable. Secondly, positivists compare statistics in order to uncover correlations, and therefore possible cause and effect relationships. Thirdly, they are useful for observing trends over a period of time.

However, some sociologists argue that there are problems with using official statistics as part of sociological research. Firstly, they may not present a complete or valid picture of whatever the sociologist is studying. For example, divorce statistics do not tell us how many marriages break down, because some people just separate. Furthermore, the official statistics may be based on operational definitions that sociologists would not agree with. They would need to make sure that the way that the government defined and measured social class was in agreement with sociological definitions and measurements.

TEACHER COMMENTS

A good way to approach a methods essay is to consider the practical factors along with ethical and theoretical considerations. Can you think of any ethical considerations of using this method? How would positivists and interpretivists view this method? Always remember to add detail to each of your strengths and limitations, some of the points raised in this essay would benefit from greater development.

3 Read **Item A** and answer the question that follows.

ITEM A

Educational sociologists have sometimes argued that differences in ethnicity and achievement can be related to the existence of racism in the education system. Racism could take many forms ranging from having a culturally biased curriculum to individual teachers who may treat members of some ethnic groups better than others and systematic, institutional racism in the procedures followed by schools.

Sociologists sometimes use unstructured interviews to study racism in the education system, in which they interview pupils, teachers or parents. However, unstructured interviews are not the only method that might be used in studies of racism and it might be possible to produce a more complete picture of racism by using a mixture of methods.

Applying material from **Item A** and elsewhere, evaluate the strengths and limitations of using unstructured interviews to study racism in education.

[20 marks]

STUDENT RESPONSE

The unstructured interview is like an informal conversation – the researcher usually has a list of topic areas, but no interview schedule is used. Instead, the interviewer asks open-ended questions. Many of the questions asked are often a flexible response to what the interviewees say.

Unstructured interviews are very useful for studying racism in education. This is because the interviewer can ask questions based on the response of the interviewee and, as Item A says, can probe for reasons as to why people think and behave in the way that they do. Unstructured interviews can often result in unexpected findings.

Interpretivist sociologists are very keen on unstructured interviews because they believe that valid data can only be obtained by getting close to people's experiences and the meanings behind them. By using unstructured interviews, the researcher can see the world through the eyes of the teachers, parents and pupils being studied and appreciate why they act the way they do. Verstehen is therefore achieved.

However, unstructured interviews do have limitations. They are very time consuming, and can therefore be expensive depending upon the size of the sample. A big problem is that some people may not be able to tell the truth in an unstructured interview, because they are not aware that they behave in certain ways. All interviews suffer from interviewer effect. This means that the interviewee may be negatively affected by the social status of the interviewer, or because they are unsure whether the information that they give will be used against them in some way. Racism is a very sensitive topic, and people are therefore reluctant to admit to it. For example, teachers may fear losing their jobs, and therefore end up giving socially desirable answers to put themselves in a good light. They may therefore lie and as a result the data is not valid.

Positivists do not like unstructured interviews because they do not regard them as scientific. If we are investigating racism, we should do what Item A recommends and use a mixture of methods.

TEACHER COMMENTS

To succeed in this situation, the student needs to apply their knowledge of the method specifically to the case study provided. Read through the response above and highlight the links to the study of racism in education. Can you think of ways to further link some of the points raised in this answer to the case study?

A-LEVEL

4 Read **Item B** and answer the question that follows.

ITEM B

Subcultures in education are groups of pupils or students whose attitudes and values are significantly different from those of other groups of students or pupils. Subcultures may have pro-school or anti-school attitudes, or something in-between. Subcultures may be influenced by gender, class and ethnic differences, although sometimes they can be formed simply on the basis of taste.

One way of studying subcultures in education is for the researcher to hang around with members of the subculture as far as possible, observing their behaviour and perhaps sometimes asking questions and keeping notes. This process can be difficult for some researchers because the characteristics of the researcher (for example his or her age) may differ from those of members of the subculture and some interaction may take place in private.

Applying material from **Item B** and your knowledge of research methods, evaluate the strengths and limitations of non-participant observation to investigate subcultures.

[20 marks]

STUDENT RESPONSE

Subcultures are groups of students whose attitudes and values are significantly different from those of other groups of students. Subcultures may have pro-school or anti-school attitudes. Subcultures may be organised around gender, class, and ethnic differences. For example, anti-school subcultures may be composed of working-class females or black boys.

One way of studying subcultures in education is for the researcher to use non-participant observation. This is where the researcher records and observes behaviour without participating in the everyday life of the group. This may involve the researcher observing parts of the school in which subcultures might gather, such as the playground. Some researchers have even used CCTV to observe group behaviour. One strength of non-participant observation, therefore, is that it allows the researcher to see how pupils actually behave rather than simply hearing how they claim to behave.

Non-participant observation avoids the problem of the Hawthorne effect, which means that if the subjects of sociological research are not aware that they are being observed, they are more likely to act naturally. Item B notes that a researcher could hang around with members of a subculture as much as possible. The research could observe their behaviour, ask them questions and keep notes on what they see. This should produce more valid data – data which reveals the true motives of how the subculture interacts with teachers and other pupils, as well as why the subculture behaves in the way that it does.

Direct observation is also an objective method because the lack of direct involvement with participants means that the sociologist is less likely to get over-friendly with the subculture and become biased. This type of method is often used by positivists who argue that if an observation schedule is being used, such observation should be reliable because it can easily be repeated and the results cross-checked by another sociologist. Also, this type of observation makes it easier to record data and keep track of all observations unlike in participant observations. This is because you are making notes as you observe the behaviour, rather than trying to recall the observations later. This means that a non-participant's observations could be seen as more reliable.

TEACHER COMMENTS

The question is looking for clear evaluation so although the answer outlines some developed strengths that are linked to subcultures, it neglects the limitations of using the method. Can you create some limitation paragraphs that link clearly to the case study to provide the evaluation that would enhance this answer?

- 5 Outline and explain **two** arguments **against** the view that sociology should be the study of 'social facts'.

[10 marks]

STUDENT RESPONSE

Some sociologists called positivists believe that sociology is scientific. They believe that human beings can be studied in the same way as chemicals, because people behave in very predictable and similar ways. They believe that sociologists should therefore adopt the logic and methods of the natural sciences to research people. This means that they should test hypotheses by collecting evidence in a scientific way.

TEACHER COMMENTS

The student has made a typical error in this response, can you identify it? Once you have understood the nature of the question can you provide two correct arguments that meet the demands of the question? Always remember to read the question very carefully.