

A LEVEL SOCIOLOGY (AQA)

**SOCIOLOGICAL RESEARCH METHODS:
ESSAY QUESTIONS**

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CONTENTS

Contents and Introduction – Using this ebook	pages 1 - 2
Section 1 Sociological Methods: Skills	pages 3 - 5
Section 2 Research Methods Essays – General Guidance	page 6
Section 3 Sociological Research Methods	
3.1 Observation	pages 7 - 12
3.2 Interviews	pages 13 - 18
3.3 Questionnaires	pages 19 - 24
3.4 Experiments	pages 25 - 29
3.5 Primary and Secondary Sources of Data	pages 30 - 34
3.6 Quantitative and Qualitative data	pages 35 - 39
Section 4 Choice of Research Method and Topic	pages 40 - 43
Section 5 Methodological Location Paragraphs	pages 44 - 47
Section 6 Terminology	pages 48 - 51

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EXAMINER INSIGHT SERIES

ESSAY QUESTIONS ON SOCIOLOGICAL RESEARCH METHODS

Introduction – using this ebook

The purpose of this ebook is to help candidates to improve the quality of their answers to questions on AQA Paper 3. Many candidates fail to maximize their marks on this type of question because they do not fully understand what examiners are looking for in answers. There are several '**Examiner Insight**' boxes in the ebook which give clear indications of what an examiner will be thinking as they read answers to this question.

Section 1 outlines the three skills of Application, Analysis and Evaluation. With 12/20 marks for these skills, it is very important for candidates to demonstrate them as often as possible in their answers. Examiners will not just be looking for appropriate knowledge (8/20 marks) but for these other skills as well. The sort of annotations examiners might use are presented in this section and then used in the specimen essay answers.

Section 2 offers some general guidance for essays on research methods. Of particular importance is the part that explains how the advantages of a method should be used when a question is about its disadvantages (and the other way around). Not using them appropriately is one of the main reasons why even very knowledgeable candidates lose a lot of marks on this question.

Section 3 takes each method in turn. For each method there is a breakdown of the likely kinds of essay questions that could be asked about the method or which do so in part. There is then a substantial **Examiner Insight** box which identifies and explains many of the key issues with questions on the method. There follows an example question which is briefly deconstructed and an example essay with a commentary in the left-hand side bar. This commentary applies the kind of annotations that an examiner would use. The essay is a top mark band answer to show how the skills of Application, Analysis and Evaluation can be presented. It is very useful to pay special attention not just to what is written in the essay but also to what an examiner might put by way of annotation. For some methods there are also one or two 'quick de-codes' of alternative questions.

Section 4 does the same as in Section 3 for the possible question on factors affecting choice of research method and topic

Section 5 presents some examples of 'methodological location' paragraphs which are the most effective way to begin an essay. These are quite detailed and in the actual exam, there may not be time for this level of detail.

Section 6 presents some of the terminology that is useful to know when answering questions on research methods.

There is a short podcast supporting this ebook. Email lindpress@aol.com to receive a copy.

3 RESEARCH METHODS

3.1 OBSERVATION

Types of observation in sociological research:

Non-participant observation (NPO) is when behaviour is simply observed without researcher involvement, often using a structured format.

Participant observation (PO) involves the researcher participating to some extent in the behaviour of the group.

Structured observation (SO) is when behaviour is recorded on an observation schedule. It is usually non-participant.

Overt participant observation (OPO) is when the researcher's identity or aim is known to those being observed.

Covert participant observation (CPO) is when those being observed are not told of the research purpose.

Questions are built using these forms of observation.

They can ask about the advantages **or** the disadvantages of observation in general or of a particular kind of observation.

Example questions:

- Applying material from Item C and your own knowledge, evaluate the advantages of participant observation.
- Applying material from Item C and your own knowledge, evaluate the disadvantages of participant observation.
- Applying material from Item C and your own knowledge, evaluate the disadvantages of covert participant observation.
- Applying material from Item C and your own knowledge, evaluate the limitations of structured observation.

Other types of question which relate to observation:

A question could be asked about the advantages or disadvantages of covert research in general.

- Applying material from Item C and your own knowledge, evaluate the limitations of carrying out covert research.
- Applying material from Item C and your own knowledge, evaluate the advantages of covert research.

There could be a broader question asking about the strengths or limitations of qualitative data in general.

- Applying material from Item C and your own knowledge, evaluate the advantages of qualitative data in sociological research.
- Applying material from Item C and your own knowledge, evaluate the limitations of qualitative data in sociological research.

By examining the example questions above, it is easy to see a pattern in how they are constructed.

EXAMINER INSIGHT!

Questions on Observation

1 When a question asks about the advantages of a type of observation, how should its disadvantages be used? (and vice versa)

Simply presenting two disconnected lists of advantages and disadvantages will get a **maximum of 12/20**. Instead, what is needed is to use a relevant disadvantage to evaluate an advantage (or the other way around, depending on whether the question specifies advantages or disadvantages). For example, an answer might state that *'Participant observation has the advantage of involving the researcher in the life of the group they are studying which enables them to get closer to the group and begin to see the world from their point of view. This improves the validity of the data collected. However, this level of involvement with a group may lead the observer to over-identify with them, thus undermining the validity they seek'*.

If an essay does this four or five times with developed knowledge, and if the key concepts of validity, representativeness and reliability are applied accurately, the response will go into the top mark band.

2 Is it useful to compare the type of observation with other types of observation or with other methods?

This can be an effective approach but it does not benefit candidates very often. Either an answer then goes into a description of the other method (and off the point of the question) or it is not applied effectively enough to make a good evaluative point. An essay can get full marks without any attempt at comparison.

3 How important is it to give the theoretical location of types of observation?

It is very important to include this and it is also the best way to start an answer. Most observation is preferred by interpretivists because it generates qualitative data. The one form of observation that is used by positivists is structured observation as this uses a list of observational categories that the observer applies to record what they see. This produces quantitative data and is seen as reliable as the same categories can be used again by other researchers. PO and some forms of NPO are flexible, going with the flow of the research group's activities and allowing for empathetic understanding to develop.

4 How do validity, reliability and representativeness relate to observation?

By immersing themselves in the life of a group, the participant observer directly experiences the same things as the group thus gaining an authentic picture of the world-view of those being studied. However, this means that the research is not considered to be reliable as it cannot be replicated. The small size of the groups studied using this method also means it is unlikely to be representative.

5 What if the question asks about covert research in general?

Although the main focus in an answer is likely to be on PO, there are other forms of covert research that should be considered. These include the use of personal documents in some contexts, some field experiments and some aspects of laboratory experiments.

EXAMPLE QUESTION AND ANSWER WITH COMMENTARY

Question:

Applying material from Item C and your own knowledge, evaluate the limitations of participant observation. (20 marks)

Deconstructing the question:

The focus of the question is on participant observation (PO). It is important to identify the two ways PO can be carried out; covertly and overtly (CPO and OPO). This distinction needs to be drawn throughout the answer.

As the focus is on the limitations of PO, these need to be identified and developed as the core of the essay. The strengths of PO should not be placed as a block of knowledge at the end (or anywhere else, for that matter) of an essay. This will be seen by an examiner as 'simple juxtaposition'. A strength should be linked to each identified limitation in turn. Doing so gains marks for both Evaluation and Application skills.

An answer should also explain why PO is located within interpretivist methodology and why positivists do not use PO.

Answer

Types

'Participant observation (PO) comes in two forms: overt when the research purpose is known to the research group and covert when it is not. The limitations of PO vary according to whether it is overt or covert. PO is favoured by interpretivists for the qualitative data it creates but is not used by positivists who see it as failing the tests of reliability and representativeness.

Theory location

Concept

One practical problem with covert PO is that in order to protect their disguised role, the researcher is unlikely to be able to make notes and record events as they happen. This undermines the validity of their data as field notes will have to be written up from memory after the event. However, it may be possible for the researcher to go somewhere private during the research to make some notes. Then again, they may miss something important during their absence from the group.

Eval via solution to limitation Eval

Practical limitation with explanation

An

Both forms of PO can be time-consuming as it takes a long time to get access and settle into a group, gain their trust and develop relationships. The problem with this is not only cost but also the strain on the researcher, especially if the research is covert, as they have to maintain a 'front' for a long period which increases the chances of their cover being exposed. However, there is a benefit in that establishing a close relationship creates the opportunity to gain a deeper understanding of the world-view of the group, thus increasing the validity of the research data.

Eval