



GSOC.RM12 Practical and Theoretical Factors Influencing Choice of Research Method

AQA 8192 · Calculators not allowed · about 50 minutes

Total Marks

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Name: _____ Date: ____ / ____ / ____

Answer ALL questions. Use clear sentences for questions worth 4 marks or more. Where asked, apply the named factor to the scenario given. Total time suggested: about 50 minutes.

- 1** Which one of the following is a practical factor that may limit a sociologist's choice of research method for a study of youth gangs in an urban area?
- ☐ A) theoretical preference for qualitative data
 - ☐ B) the researcher's access to the group
 - ☐ C) the interpretivist idea of verstehen
 - ☐ D) the claim that quantitative results are more objective

(Total for Question 1 is 1 mark)

- 2** Define what sociologists mean by 'researcher access' in the context of choosing a method to study a closed social group, such as a religious sect.

(Total for Question 2 is 2 marks)

- 3** Identify and explain one way limited funding could affect the choice of method for a national survey of teenage attitudes to education in the UK.

(Total for Question 3 is 4 marks)

- 4 Identify and explain two practical problems a lone researcher might face when using participant observation to study a small, secretive drug-using peer group in one city.

(Total for Question 4 is 4 marks)

- 5 Item A: A small research team has six months and a modest budget to study why a coastal town has rising youth unemployment. The team can access local schools and the job centre but not informal groups meeting outside institutions.
Using Item A and your own knowledge, explain one practical reason why the team might choose to use structured questionnaires with school pupils rather than covert observation of street networks.

(Total for Question 5 is 4 marks)

- 6 Describe one way the size of a research team can influence the choice between conducting many standardised interviews and a few in depth qualitative interviews in a study of care home staff attitudes.

(Total for Question 6 is 3 marks)

- 7 Explain one theoretical reason a positivist sociologist might prefer using a large questionnaire survey to study patterns of class and educational attainment across several schools in a city.

(Total for Question 7 is 2 marks)

- 8** Identify and explain one practical advantage of using existing secondary quantitative data, such as Government education statistics, when researching national differences in school exam outcomes.

(Total for Question 8 is 4 marks)

- 9** Describe two ways an interpretivist researcher might try to maximise validity when choosing a method to study the daily routines of care workers in a dementia ward.

(Total for Question 9 is 4 marks)

- 10** Explain two practical reasons why a researcher studying elderly social networks in rural villages might decide against a face to face, large scale survey.

(Total for Question 10 is 4 marks)

- 11** Define the positivist preference for 'objectivity' as it applies when choosing a research method to study rates of truancy across schools.

(Total for Question 11 is 2 marks)

- 12** Item B: A single researcher with specialist skills in life history interviewing has been given access to a small group of retired miners in one town and has limited funding for travel. Using Item B and your own knowledge, explain one theoretical reason why the researcher might choose in depth life history interviews instead of a large numerical questionnaire.

(Total for Question 12 is 4 marks)

- 13** State one limitation of relying on large scale quantitative surveys when researching the reasons why pupils from a particular ethnic group underachieve at school.

(Total for Question 13 is 2 marks)

- 14** Identify one practical advantage of using a team of trained interviewers to collect structured questionnaire data across several neighbourhoods when researching household poverty.

(Total for Question 14 is 2 marks)

- 15** Explain two ways that a positivist and an interpretivist might differ when choosing how important representativeness is for a study of national patterns in youth political participation.

(Total for Question 15 is 4 marks)

- 16** Discuss which factors should matter most when a sociologist chooses a research method to study the impact of sudden factory closure on the daily lives of workers in one town. In your answer, consider both practical and theoretical factors and reach a reasoned conclusion about which should be prioritised for this study.

Discuss which factors should matter most when choosing a method to study the impact of a sudden factory closure on workers' daily lives in one town.

(Total for Question 16 is 8 marks)

Mark scheme · GSOC.RM12 Practical and Theoretical Factors Influencing Choice of Research Method

Question 1

- **B1** B (the researcher's access to the group)
- **Answer: B**

Question 2

- **B1** identifies researcher access as the ability of the researcher to reach and gain the cooperation of participants (oe)
- **B1** development, e.g. this includes practical permission, trust, gatekeepers and the time needed to gain entry
- **Answer: Researcher access is the ability of the researcher to reach and gain the cooperation of participants; it includes practical permission, trust, gatekeepers and the time needed to gain entry.**

Question 3

- **B1** identifies a relevant effect, e.g. limited funding may prevent a large, nationally representative sample
- **B1** explains the effect, e.g. small samples reduce representativeness and may force the researcher to use cheaper methods such as online convenience sampling
- **B1** identifies a further effect, e.g. limited funding may restrict travel and interviewer numbers
- **B1** explains the further effect, e.g. fewer interviewers means fewer face to face interviews and more reliance on self-completed questionnaires which may lower response rates
- **Answer: Limited funding may prevent a large, nationally representative sample and force use of cheaper methods such as online convenience sampling, which reduces representativeness. It can also restrict travel and interviewer numbers, meaning fewer face to face interviews and greater reliance on self-completed questionnaires with lower response rates.**

Question 4

- **B1** identifies a practical problem, e.g. safety concerns when entering a risky setting
- **B1** explains this problem, e.g. lone researcher may be at physical risk and cannot ask for backup while observing
- **B1** identifies a second practical problem, e.g. limits on time and ability to record detailed data while building rapport
- **B1** explains the second problem, e.g. as a single observer the researcher may miss events or find it hard to take notes discreetly without damaging trust
- **Answer: A lone researcher may face safety concerns when entering a risky setting, being at physical risk and lacking backup, and may be limited in time and ability to record detailed data while building rapport, because taking notes can damage trust and the observer may miss events.**

Question 5

- **B1** identifies a practical reason from the item, e.g. access to schools makes questionnaires feasible
- **B1** develops the point, e.g. formal access is easier to arrange and less risky than trying to gain covert access to informal street networks
- **B1** adds a methodological consequence, e.g. questionnaires can collect data from many pupils quickly within time and budget limits
- **B1** further development, e.g. covert observation risks legal and safety problems and is time consuming to gain meaningful data, so is impractical given six months and a modest budget
- **Answer: Because the team can access schools, structured questionnaires are feasible and easier to arrange than covert access to informal street networks. Questionnaires allow many pupils to be surveyed quickly within time and budget limits, whereas covert observation is risky, may raise legal and safety issues, and is time consuming to produce reliable data within six months.**

Question 6

- **B1** identifies an influence, e.g. a larger team can conduct many standardised interviews
- **B1** development, e.g. many interviews allow a larger sample and more quantitative coverage
- **B1** further development, e.g. a small team may prefer a few in depth interviews because they take longer to conduct and analyse
- **Answer: A larger team can conduct many standardised interviews, allowing a larger sample and more quantitative**

Question 7

- **B1** identifies a positivist preference, e.g. for quantitative, standardised data
- **B1** develops the reason, e.g. because surveys can produce reliable, comparable data and allow generalisations about patterns across schools
- **Answer: A positivist prefers quantitative, standardised data; large questionnaire surveys produce reliable, comparable measures that allow generalisations about patterns of class and attainment across schools.**

Question 8

- **B1** identifies an advantage, e.g. it is cost effective
- **B1** explains the advantage, e.g. using existing data saves time and money because the data are already collected
- **B1** identifies a second advantage, e.g. large scale representativeness
- **B1** explains the second advantage, e.g. government statistics often cover whole populations or large samples, improving representativeness and allowing comparisons over time
- **Answer: Using existing government statistics is cost effective because the data are already collected, saving time and money, and often provides large scale representativeness since such statistics cover whole populations or large samples, allowing comparisons over time.**

Question 9

- **B1** identifies one way, e.g. use of participant observation
- **B1** development, e.g. observing naturally occurring behaviour helps understand meanings and context
- **B1** identifies a second way, e.g. in depth interviews with staff
- **B1** development, e.g. interviews allow exploration of workers' own explanations and feelings, increasing empathetic understanding
- **Answer: An interpretivist might use participant observation to watch naturally occurring behaviour and understand meaning in context, and conduct in depth interviews to explore workers' own explanations and feelings, increasing empathetic understanding and validity.**

Question 10

- **B1** identifies a first practical reason, e.g. high travel costs and time for reaching dispersed rural locations
- **B1** explains this reason, e.g. travel increases research costs and reduces time available for data collection
- **B1** identifies a second practical reason, e.g. lower response rates among elderly who may be less likely to complete postal or online surveys
- **B1** explains the second reason, e.g. low response rates reduce representativeness and increase the need for follow up, which costs more time and money
- **Answer: High travel costs and time to reach dispersed rural locations increase research expense and reduce time for data collection, and lower response rates among some elderly people make surveys less representative and require costly follow up, so a large face to face survey may be impractical.**

Question 11

- **B1** identifies objectivity as aiming to remove researcher bias and produce neutral, replicable results
- **B1** development, e.g. positivists therefore favour standardised, quantitative methods that can be measured and tested
- **Answer: Objectivity is the aim to remove researcher bias and produce neutral, replicable results; positivists therefore favour standardised quantitative methods that can be measured and tested.**

Question 12

- **B1** identifies a theoretical reason, e.g. the interpretivist preference for qualitative methods to gain verstehen
- **B1** develops the reason using the item, e.g. specialist skills and access to a small group make in depth interviews appropriate to explore meanings and personal experiences
- **B1** links to theoretical outcome, e.g. life history interviews increase validity by allowing empathetic understanding of miners' lives
- **B1** further development, e.g. limited funding and small sample make large questionnaires impractical and unlikely to produce meaningful quantitative generalisations
- **Answer: An interpretivist approach favours qualitative methods like life history interviews to achieve verstehen; the researcher has specialist interviewing skills and access to a small group, so in depth interviews suit gaining empathetic**

Question 13

- **B1** identifies a limitation, e.g. they may fail to capture pupils' own meanings and experiences behind statistics
- **B1** brief development, e.g. reducing validity and making it harder to explain why underachievement happens
- **Answer: Quantitative surveys may fail to capture pupils' own meanings and experiences behind the statistics, reducing validity and making it harder to explain why underachievement happens.**

Question 14

- **B1** identifies an advantage, e.g. greater coverage and faster data collection
- **B1** brief development, e.g. multiple interviewers can reach more households in the same time, improving sample size and representativeness
- **Answer: Using a team of interviewers gives greater coverage and faster data collection because multiple interviewers can reach more households in the same time, improving sample size and representativeness.**

Question 15

- **B1** identifies positivist view, e.g. positivists prioritise representativeness
- **B1** explains positivist reason, e.g. representative samples allow measurement and generalisation about national patterns
- **B1** identifies interpretivist view, e.g. interpretivists may place less importance on representativeness
- **B1** explains interpretivist reason, e.g. they prefer depth and understanding of meanings which often come from small, purposive samples rather than large representative samples
- **Answer: Positivists prioritise representativeness because representative samples allow measurement and generalisation about national patterns; interpretivists place less importance on representativeness and prefer depth and understanding of meanings from small, purposive samples.**

Question 16

- **Level 1** (1-3): Basic points showing limited understanding. May list a few practical or theoretical factors with little explanation or application to the factory-closure context.
- **Level 2** (4-6): Clear explanation of several relevant practical and theoretical factors with some application to the case. Shows understanding of trade offs, for example time and access versus the need for validity or representativeness.
- **Level 3** (7-8): Detailed discussion weighing practical and theoretical factors, with clear, applied reasoning. Considers examples such as access to workers, funding, team size, and whether interpretivist depth or positivist generalisability is more appropriate. Reaches a supported conclusion that balances realism and research aims.
- **Indicative content:**
 - Practical factors to consider: time available after closure to collect data before memories fade or circumstances change, funding for travel and interview transcription, size and skills of the research team, and access to workplace, ex-employees and relevant gatekeepers.
 - Theoretical factors to consider: positivist goals of measuring changes across many workers for generalisable patterns, versus interpretivist goals of understanding individual meanings and experiences in depth, and how these shape method choice.
 - Application to the town factory closure: interpretivist methods such as life history or in depth interviews and participant observation could provide high validity about daily lived experience and emotional impact, especially where access is available and the sample is small.
 - Counterpoint: if the aim is to estimate the scale of economic impact across many households, a quantitative survey with a larger sample would be more representative and suited to positivist aims.
 - Trade offs: limited funding and a small team may favour in depth qualitative work; a large funded project might combine methods, using a survey for breadth and interviews for depth.
 - Conclusion guidance: for this study of daily lives in one town, prioritising theoretical validity and depth is often appropriate, given the local, contextual nature of the impact, but practical limits such as access and time must shape an achievable method, and a mixed approach may be ideal if resources allow.