2.2 Sampling Methods in Sociological Research: 30-minute Pack

AQA 8192 · about 30 minutes

Total Marks

Name: _____ Date: ____ / ____ / _____

Answer ALL questions. Where a question refers to Item A, use both the Item and your own knowledge of research methods in your answer.

Item A: Studying first-generation university students

A hypothetical research scenario written for this exercise, for students to apply their knowledge of sampling to.

A sociologist wants to find out about the experiences of students who are the first in their family to go to university. She has been given permission to use the university's full list of registered first-generation students as a sampling frame. She is deciding between two possible approaches: (1) sending a short questionnaire to a large random sample drawn from this list, or (2) carrying out in-depth unstructured interviews with a small group of students who volunteer to take part after seeing a poster.

1 Look again at Item A. The sociologist is considering sending a short questionnaire to a large random sample drawn from the sampling frame.

(a) Using Item A and your own knowledge, explain one strength of this approach. **(3)**

(b) Using Item A and your own knowledge, explain one weakness of this approach. **(3)**

(Total for Question 1 is 6 marks)

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2 Look again at Item A. The sociologist is also considering carrying out in-depth unstructured interviews with a small group of student volunteers.

(a) Using Item A and your own knowledge, explain one strength of this approach. **(3)**

(b) Using Item A and your own knowledge, explain one weakness of this approach. **(3)**

(Total for Question 2 is 6 marks)

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3 Discuss the strengths and limitations of using official statistics in sociological research. In your answer you should refer to sociologists' views.

(Total for Question 3 is 9 marks)

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4 Random sampling is one method of selecting a sample from a sampling frame.

(a) Explain what is meant by random sampling. **(2)**

(b) Give one strength of using random sampling. **(1)**

(c) Give one weakness of using random sampling. **(1)**

(Total for Question 4 is 4 marks)

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Mark scheme · 2.2 Sampling Methods in Sociological Research: 30-minute Pack

Question 1

(a) identifies a genuine strength, e.g. a large random sample is likely to be representative of first-generation students at the university **B1**

(a) links the strength to Item A specifically, e.g. because she has the full sampling frame (the university's register), she can draw a properly random sample rather than relying on volunteers **B1**

(a) further development, e.g. a questionnaire is quick to send to large numbers and produces standardised, easily comparable (reliable) data **B1**

(a) Answer: Because she has a full sampling frame, a large random questionnaire sample is likely to be representative and produces reliable, comparable data quickly.

(b) identifies a genuine weakness, e.g. a short questionnaire cannot capture the depth of first-generation students' personal experiences **B1**

(b) links the weakness to Item A specifically, e.g. the topic (personal experience of being first in the family at university) may need detailed, open answers a short questionnaire cannot get **B1**

(b) further development, e.g. low validity results because respondents are limited to fixed questions/answers, and some may not respond at all (non-response), harming representativeness in practice **B1**

(b) Answer: A short questionnaire cannot capture the depth of personal experience the topic needs, giving lower validity; non-response can also undermine the representativeness the random sample was meant to secure.

Question 2

(a) identifies a genuine strength, e.g. unstructured interviews let students explain their experiences in their own words and in depth **B1**

(a) links the strength to Item A specifically, e.g. this suits a sensitive, personal topic like being the first in your family at university better than a fixed questionnaire **B1**

(a) further development, e.g. this produces high validity data and lets the researcher probe/follow up on unexpected answers **B1**

(a) Answer: Unstructured interviews let students describe their experiences in their own words, suiting this sensitive personal topic and producing high-validity, in-depth data.

(b) identifies a genuine weakness, e.g. volunteers are a self-selected group, not a random sample **B1**

(b) links the weakness to Item A specifically, e.g. students who respond to a poster and volunteer may differ systematically from first-generation students who do not (e.g. more confident, more willing to discuss the topic) **B1**

(b) further development, e.g. this makes the findings hard to generalise to all first-generation students, and a small sample is also time-consuming to interview and analyse **B1**

(b) Answer: Volunteers are self-selected, so may differ from first-generation students who did not come forward, harming representativeness; the small sample is also time-consuming to collect and analyse.

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Question 3

Level 3 A detailed, balanced discussion that develops strengths AND limitations, supported by accurate reference to sociologists' views, and reaches a supported conclusion. Sociological terminology is used accurately throughout. **7-9**

Level 2 A clear discussion of strengths and/or limitations with some development, showing some accurate awareness of sociologists' views. Limited attempt at a balanced conclusion. **4-6**

Level 1 One or more isolated, undeveloped points about official statistics, with little or no reference to sociologists' views. **1-3**

Level 0 No relevant content. **0**

Indicative content:

- Strength: official statistics are usually free, quick to access and cover very large numbers of people, e.g. the whole population in a census.
- Strength: because they are collected in a standardised way, they are reliable and allow comparisons over time and between groups.
- Positivist view: Emile Durkheim's study 'Suicide' (1897) used official suicide statistics from several countries and religious groups to argue that differences in suicide rates reflect differences in social integration and regulation, treating the statistics as reliable social facts.
- Interactionist/interpretivist critique: J. Maxwell Atkinson's 'Discovering Suicide' (1978) argued that official suicide statistics are not objective facts but social constructions, produced by coroners' interpretive judgements about ambiguous deaths, so they may say more about how coroners classify deaths than about the 'real' rate of suicide.
- Limitation: official statistics are collected for administrative or political purposes, not for sociological research, so they may not measure exactly what a sociologist wants to study (low validity).
- Limitation: definitions used by the government can change over time (e.g. how crime or unemployment is defined), making comparisons over time misleading.
- Limitation: some behaviour is not recorded at all, for example the 'dark figure' of unreported and unrecorded crime, so official statistics can understate the true scale of a problem.
- A balanced conclusion should weigh the practical strengths (scale, cost, reliability, comparability) against the validity concerns raised by interactionist critiques such as Atkinson's, rather than dismissing official statistics outright.

Question 4

(a) every member of the sampling frame has an equal chance of being selected (oe) **B1**

(a) development, e.g. selection is made using a method such as a random number generator or names drawn 'out of a hat', not by the researcher's judgement **B1**

(a) Answer: A method where every person on the sampling frame has an equal chance of being chosen, usually using a random number generator.

(b) any one of: avoids researcher bias in selection; more likely to be representative of the sampling frame; results can more confidently be generalised **B1**

(b) Answer: It avoids researcher bias in who is chosen, so the sample is more likely to be representative.

(c) any one of: by chance the sample could still be unrepresentative (e.g. all one gender); requires a complete, up-to-date sampling frame, which may not exist; selected individuals may refuse to take part **B1**

(c) Answer: By chance, a random sample can still turn out unrepresentative, e.g. mostly one gender or age group.

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