2.8 Experiments in Sociological Research: Laboratory and Field Experiments: 30-minute Pack

AQA 8192 · about 30 minutes

Total Marks

Name: _____ Date: ____ / ____ / _____

Answer ALL questions. For short answer questions write in full sentences for AO2 and AO3 items. The final evaluation question must be written in full sentences. Spend about 30 minutes on the paper.

1 Explain one advantage of using the comparative method rather than trying to carry out an experiment on whole societies.

(Total for Question 1 is 2 marks)

2 Explain two ways demand characteristics may affect participants in a laboratory experiment about conformity among school pupils.

(Total for Question 2 is 4 marks)

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3 Write a balanced evaluation considering strengths and weaknesses of experiments for sociology, comparing laboratory and field approaches and considering the comparative method where experiments are not possible.

(Total for Question 3 is 12 marks)

4 Explain two ways a laboratory experiment gives sociologists high control over variables in a study of group behaviour in a classroom setting.

(Total for Question 4 is 4 marks)

5 Item A: A researcher tests two posters in similar parks to see if anti-litter messages reduce dropping of fast food wrappers. In Park X the researcher displays a poster saying 'Please keep this park clean' and records 8 incidents of littering in one afternoon. In Park Y there is no poster and there are 14 incidents of littering in one afternoon. Using Item A and your knowledge, explain one strength of this field experiment design.

(Total for Question 5 is 4 marks)

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Mark scheme · 2.8 Experiments in Sociological Research: Laboratory and Field Experiments: 30-minute Pack

Question 1

identifies an advantage, e.g. it avoids ethical and practical problems of manipulating national policies or social conditions	**B1**
development, e.g. researchers can still learn about possible causes by comparing existing differences without intervention	**B1**

Answer: An advantage is it avoids the ethical and practical problems of manipulating national policies or social conditions, while still allowing researchers to learn about possible causes by comparing existing differences.

Question 2

identifies that participants may guess the research aim and change behaviour to fit expectations	**B1**
development, e.g. pupils might pretend to conform more or less to please the researcher	**B1**
identifies that participants may try to behave in a socially desirable way	**B1**
development, e.g. pupils could avoid appearing to copy others if they think copying is frowned upon, distorting the results	**B1**

Answer: Demand characteristics can lead participants to guess the aim and change behaviour to fit expectations, for example pupils might pretend to conform more or less to please the researcher. They can also cause socially desirable responding, for example pupils avoiding copying others if they think copying is frowned upon, distorting results.

Question 3

Level 1 Basic statements about experiments with limited development. May identify one or two simple strengths or weaknesses with little or no sociological context or examples. **1-3**

Level 2 Clear explanation of strengths and weaknesses of experiments. Some comparison between laboratory and field experiments and at least one valid point about the comparative method. Limited evaluation and few supporting examples. **4-6**

Level 3 Good evaluation showing understanding of how experiments provide control, replication and causal evidence but face validity, ethical and practical limits. Compares lab and field studies with relevant examples and shows why the comparative method can be a necessary alternative. **7-9**

Level 4 Detailed, balanced and well-supported argument. Explains how laboratory experiments give control and precision, and how field experiments improve ecological validity, but also evaluates problems such as demand characteristics, Hawthorne effect, ethics and limits for studying whole societies. Uses specific examples and reaches a supported conclusion about when experiments are useful and when comparative or other methods are preferable. **10-12**

Indicative content:

- Laboratory experiments offer high control of variables, isolation of the independent variable and easier replication, supporting claims about cause and effect
- Laboratory settings risk low ecological validity and demand characteristics, participants may act unnaturally when aware of being studied
- Field experiments have higher ecological validity because they occur in natural settings, but they have weaker control and may suffer from Hawthorne effect and confounding variables
- Ethical issues: informed consent, deception and potential harm are harder to manage in field experiments affecting the public
- Practical limits: experiments are costly and usually unsuitable for studying whole societies or long term social changes
- Comparative method allows sociologists to study societies without manipulation, avoiding ethical and practical problems but making causal claims weaker due to uncontrolled variables
- Reliability and validity trade offs: how replication can improve reliability but may not solve validity problems if the setting is artificial
- Usefulness depends on research aim: experiments are useful for testing specific causal hypotheses in controlled conditions or applied policy tests, while comparative and other methods are better for large scale, historical or cultural questions
- Conclusion could weigh that experiments are a powerful tool when used appropriately, often alongside other methods, but they are not a universal solution for sociological research questions

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Question 4

identifies controlling the independent variable, e.g. researcher assigns seating or tasks	**B1**
development, e.g. this ensures differences in the dependent variable can be linked to the manipulation	**B1**
identifies controlling extraneous variables, e.g. keeping the same room, time and instructions for all participants	**B1**
development, e.g. reducing extraneous variation increases internal validity of the causal claim	**B1**

Answer: A laboratory experiment allows the researcher to control the independent variable, for example by assigning seating or tasks, so differences in participation can be linked to the manipulation; it also allows controlling extraneous variables, such as room, time and instructions, reducing other sources of variation.

Question 5

identifies a strength, e.g. higher ecological validity because the test is in a real park setting	**B1**
development, e.g. behaviour is observed in a natural context so findings are likely to reflect real-world littering	**B1**
further development, e.g. the difference 8 versus 14 incidents suggests the poster may have had an effect, giving useful practical evidence	**B1**
link to sociological use, e.g. such applied results can inform local council policy on anti-litter campaigns	**B1**

Answer: A strength is higher ecological validity because the research is carried out in real parks, so observed behaviour is likely to reflect actual littering. The difference of 8 incidents with a poster versus 14 without suggests the poster may have reduced littering, giving practical evidence that could inform council policy.

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