Sociology Transition Tasks

Spec: https://www.aqa.org.uk/subjects/sociology/as-and-a-level/sociology-7191-7192/specification-at-a-glance

Research methods

Writing sociologically

Task 1: Read and make notes on the scanned pages of the textbook on choosing a research method and watch the video on PET factors here (https://www.tutor2u.net/sociology/reference/practical-ethical-and-theoretical-issues-in-sociological-research).

Also watch the following Loom, where Ms Tovey explains how to write a 20 mark response in sociology: https://www.loom.com/share/26586ff8cfee483284b909f8803ed25b.

You are then going to be attempting a 20 mark response to this question:

Item A
Before they begin research, sociologists have to make choices about which research method to use. This choice is often affected by factors such as time, money and skills/qualities the researcher possesses. However, others would argue ethical factors, such as informed consent, have a greater impact on a sociologist's choice of method, whilst some say it is theoretical factors that have the strongest influence; for example, whether the key aim is to collect rich, detailed, valid research or replicable, objective, reliable research that can be used to establish laws of human behaviour.

Applying material from Item A and your knowledge, evaluate the view that practical factors are the most important influence on a sociologist's choice of research method. [20]

Please don't worry if you are not completely confident about your response. We are looking here to see how much effort you have put in, so give it your best go. We will give you some feedback on this when you start the course officially in September, but it will not be a graded piece of work.

Current sociological issues

Keeping up with the news

Task 2: As sociology students, you will be expected to keep up to date with current affairs throughout your A-level course by watching the news and reading reputable newspapers.

We would like you to make a start on this over the summer by keeping up to date with the news and making a scrapbook/log book of any items you see that link to sociology in any way (e.g. links to education, families and households, crime, media, religion, inequality).

Each entry should include a headline and a summary of what the article says, which you should be prepared to share in September.

We would like to use these ideas to update our 'sociology in the news' display, so make them great!

Research Methods
Sociological research

Task 3: Please watch the documentary 'McIntyre Undercover: Chelsea Headhunters' (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=y0nadafM3fY&t=1137s).
Please answer the following questions:

1) What do you think Donal McIntyre wanted to find out by studying the Chelsea Headhunters?
2) Donal McIntyre used 'covert participant observation' to study the Chelsea Headhunters. What things did he have to do to be able to gain access to the group (list as many as you can)?

Extension – Based on your understanding from Task 1, what ethical issues were there in Donal McIntyre's study?

CHOOSING A RESEARCH METHOD

Sociologists use a wide variety of different methods and sources to obtain data (information or evidence) about society. To make sense of this variety, we can classify them into:

- Primary and secondary sources of data.
- Quantitative and qualitative data.

Primary and secondary sources of data

Primary data is information collected by sociologists themselves for their own purposes. These purposes may be to obtain a first-hand 'picture' of a group or society, or to test a hypothesis (an untested theory).

Methods for gathering primary data include:

- **Social surveys**: these involve asking people questions in a written questionnaire or an interview.
- **Participant observation**: the sociologist joins in with the activities of the group he or she is studying.
- **Experiments**: sociologists rarely use laboratory experiments, but they sometimes use field experiments and the comparative method.

A big advantage of using primary data is that sociologists may be able to gather precisely the information they need to test their hypotheses. However, doing so can often be costly and time consuming.

Secondary data is information that has been collected or created by someone else for their own purposes, but which the sociologist can then use.

Sources of secondary data include:

- **Official statistics** produced by government on a wide range of issues, such as education, crime, divorce and unemployment, as well as other statistics produced by charities, businesses, churches and other organisations.
- **Documents** such as letters, emails, diaries, photographs, official reports, novels, newspapers, the internet and television broadcasts.

Using secondary data can be a quick and cheap way of doing research, since someone else has already produced the information. However, those who produce it may not be interested in the same questions as sociologists, and so secondary sources may not provide exactly the information that sociologists need.

Quantitative and qualitative data

Sociologists make use of two different kinds of data in their research: quantitative data and qualitative data.

Quantitative data refers to information in a numerical form. Examples of quantitative data include official statistics on how many girls passed five or more GCSEs, the percentage of marriages ending in divorce or the number of people who are unemployed.

Similarly, information collected by opinion polls and market research surveys often comes in the form of quantitative data – for example, on the proportion of the electorate intending to vote for a particular party or how many people take holidays abroad.

Qualitative data, by contrast, gives a 'feel' for what something is like – for example, what it feels like to get good GCSE results, or for one's marriage to end in divorce.

Evidence gathered by using participant observation aims to give us a sense of what it feels like to be a member of a particular group.

Similarly, in-depth interviews that probe deeply into a person's views can give us an insight into what it is like to be in that person's 'shoes'. These methods can provide rich descriptions of people's feelings and experiences.

Box 11 **Some examples of types of data**

	Quantitative data	Qualitative data
Primary sources	Questionnaires Structured interviews	Participant observation Unstructured interviews
Secondary sources	Official statistics	Letters Newspaper articles

Application

Which of the four categories above does each of the following sources of data belong in?

a field experiments
b paintings
c exam league tables
d school reports
e divorce statistics.

Factors influencing choice of methods

Given the wide range of methods available, how do we select the right one for our research? Different methods and sources of data have different strengths and limitations and we need to be able to evaluate these when selecting which to use.

We can look at these strengths and limitations in terms of a number of practical, ethical (moral) and theoretical issues.

Practical issues

Different methods present different practical problems. These include:

time and money

Different methods require different amounts of time and money and this may influence the sociologist's choice.

For example, large-scale surveys may employ dozens of interviewers and data-inputting staff and cost a great deal of money. By contrast, a small-scale project involving a lone researcher using participant observation may be cheaper to carry out, but it can take several years to complete.

The researcher's access to resources can be a major factor in determining which methods they employ. A well-known professor will probably have access to more research funds than a young student, for example.

requirements of funding bodies

Research institutes, businesses and other organisations that provide the funding for research may require the results to be in a particular form. For example, a government department funding research into educational achievement may have targets for pass rates and so require quantitative data to see whether these targets are being achieved. This means the sociologist will have to use a method capable of producing such data, such as questionnaires or structured interviews.

personal skills and characteristics

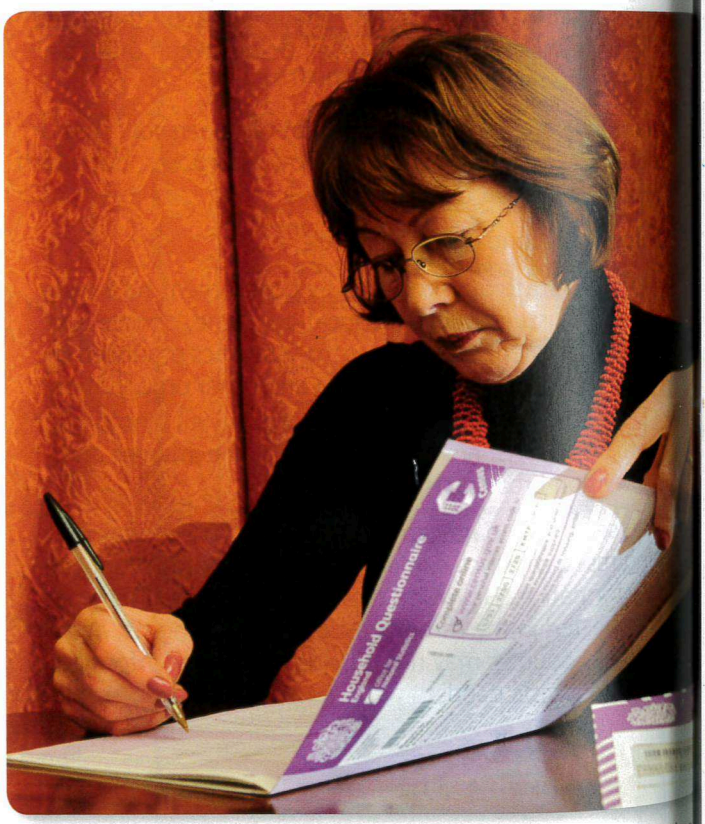
Each sociologist possesses different personal skills and this may affect their ability to use different methods. For example, participant observation usually requires the ability to mix easily with others as well as good powers of observation and recall, while depth interviews call for an ability to establish a rapport (relationship of empathy and trust) with the interviewee. Not all sociologists have these qualities and so some may have difficulty using these methods.

subject matter

It may be much harder to study a particular group or subject by one method than by another. For example, it might prove difficult for a male sociologist to study an all-female group by means of participant observation, while written questionnaires may be useless for studying those who cannot read or write.

research opportunity

Sometimes the opportunity to carry out research occurs unexpectedly and this means that it may not be possible to use structured methods such as questionnaires, which take longer to prepare. For example, a Glasgow gang leader offered the sociologist James Patrick (1973) the chance 'out of the blue' to spend time with his gang. With little time to prepare, Patrick had no option but to use participant observation. In other circumstances, the researcher might have been able to set up the research opportunity carefully beforehand and have plenty of time to select their methods.



▲ Using secondary data from the Census saves sociologists time and money, but may not provide exactly the information they need

Ethical issues

Ethics refers to moral issues of right and wrong. Methods that sociologists use to study people may raise a range of ethical questions. The British Sociological Association sets out ethical guidelines for the conduct of research, including the following principles.

informed consent

Research participants (the people being studied) should be offered the right to refuse to be involved. The researcher should also tell them about all relevant aspects of the research so that they can make a fully informed decision. Consent should be obtained before research begins and, if the study is lengthy, again at intervals throughout the process.

confidentiality and privacy

Researchers should keep the identity of research participants secret in order to help to prevent possible negative effects on them. Researchers should also respect their privacy. Personal information concerning research participants should be kept confidential.

harm to research participants

Researchers need to be aware of the possible effects of their work on those they study. These could include police intervention, harm to employment prospects, social exclusion and psychological damage. Wherever possible, researchers should anticipate and prevent such harm.

vulnerable groups

Special care should be taken where research participants are particularly vulnerable because of their age, disability, or physical or mental health. For example, when studying children in schools, researchers should have regard for issues of child protection. They should obtain the consent of both the child and the parent, and they should provide information in language that the child can understand.

covert research

Covert research is when the researcher's identity and research purpose are hidden from the people being studied. This can create serious ethical problems, such as deceiving or lying to people in order to win their trust or obtain information. Clearly, it is impossible to gain informed consent while at the same time keeping the research or its purpose secret.

However, some sociologists argue that the use of covert methods may be justified in certain circumstances. These may include gaining access to secretive, dangerous or powerful groups.

Activity **Discussion**

Should research always be ethical?

...go to www.sociology.uk.net

Theoretical issues

This refers to questions about what we think society is like and whether we can obtain an accurate, truthful picture of it. Our views on these issues will affect the kinds of methods we favour using.

validity

A valid method is one that produces a true or genuine picture of what something is really like. It allows the researcher to get closer to the truth.

Many sociologists argue that qualitative methods such as participant observation give us a more valid or truthful account of what it is like to be a member of a group than quantitative methods such as questionnaires. This is because participant observation can give us a deeper insight through first hand experience.

reliability

Another word for reliability is replicability. A replica is an exact copy of something, so a reliable method is one which, when repeated by another researcher, gives the same results.

For example, in physics or chemistry, different researchers can repeat the same experiment and obtain the same results every time. In sociology, quantitative methods such as written questionnaires tend to produce more reliable results than qualitative methods such as unstructured interviews.

Application

Read the following statements and decide which one is an example of reliability and which of validity:

1. My mum had the flu. She told me how she was hot, tired and aching all over. When she had finished describing her symptoms in detail, I really knew what it must feel like to be so ill.
2. We took my mum's temperature and it was 102 degrees. She decided to go to the doctor, who took her temperature too and it came out as 102 degrees. She checked it again when she got home and it was still 102.

representativeness

Representativeness refers to whether or not the people we study are a typical cross-section of the group we are interested in. Imagine for example that we want to know about the effects of divorce on children. It would take a great deal of time and money to study every child of divorced parents, and we might only be able to afford to study a sample of, say, 100 such children.

However, if we ensure our sample is representative or typical of the wider population, we can use our findings to make generalisations about all children of divorced parents, without actually having to study them all.

Large-scale quantitative surveys that use sophisticated sampling techniques to select their sample are more likely to produce representative data.

methodological perspective

Sociologists' choice of method is also influenced by their methodological perspective – their view of what society is like and how we should study it. There are two contrasting perspectives on the choice of methods: positivism and interpretivism.

Positivists prefer quantitative data, seek to discover patterns of behaviour and see sociology as a science.

Interpretivists prefer qualitative data, seek to understand social actors' meanings and reject the view that sociology can model itself on the natural sciences.

Box 12 explains why positivists and interpretivists prefer different types of methods and data.

Functionalists and Marxists often take a positivist approach. They see society as a large-scale (macro-level) structure that shapes our behaviour. By contrast, interactionists favour an interpretivist approach. They take a micro-level view of society, focusing on small-scale, face-to-face interactions.

conclusion

The sociologist's theoretical perspective is usually the most important factor when choosing which method to use. Whenever possible, they will want to obtain the type of data – quantitative or qualitative – that their perspective views as most appropriate.

However, practical and ethical factors usually limit the choice. Just because a sociologist *prefers* a particular kind of method, doesn't mean that they can simply go ahead and use it. Time, resources, access, consent, privacy and so on are all constraints on their choice.

Finally, even sheer chance may determine the method used. For example, David Tuckett (2001) describes how one postgraduate sociology student found himself taken ill with tuberculosis and confined to a hospital ward, so he used this as an opportunity to conduct a participant observation study.

Box 12 Why do positivists and interpretivists prefer different types of data?

Positivists and interpretivists collect and use different types of data: positivists prefer quantitative data, while interpretivists prefer qualitative. This is because they make different assumptions about the nature of society and how we should study it.

- Positivists assume that society has an objective factual reality – it exists 'out there', just like the physical world of nature.
- Society exerts an influence over its members, systematically shaping their behaviour patterns.
- Positivist research uses quantitative data to uncover and measure these patterns of behaviour.
- By analysing quantitative data, positivists seek to discover the objective scientific laws of cause and effect that determine behaviour.
- Positivists thus prefer questionnaires, structured interviews, experiments and official statistics. These produce data that is both reliable and representative.

- Interpretivists reject the idea of an objective social reality – we construct reality through the meanings we create in our interactions with others.
- Our actions are based on the meanings we give to situations; they are not the product of external forces.
- Interpretivist research uses qualitative data to uncover and describe the social actor's 'universe of meaning'.
- By interpreting qualitative data, interpretivists seek to gain a subjective understanding of actors' meanings and 'life worlds'.
- Interpretivists thus prefer participant observation, unstructured interviews and personal documents. These produce data that is valid.

Factors influencing choice of topic

Before choosing which method to use, sociologists need to decide what topic they wish to study. Several factors influence their choice.

the sociologist's perspective

The sociologist's theoretical perspective is a major influence on their choice of research topic. For example, a New Right researcher may study the effects of welfare benefits on the growth of lone-parent families, since the idea of welfare dependency is central to their standpoint. By contrast, a feminist researcher is more likely to choose to study domestic violence, as opposition to gender oppression lies at the heart of the feminist perspective.

society's values

Sociologists themselves are part of the society they study and thus are influenced by its values. As these values change, so does the focus of research. The rise of feminism in the 1960s led to a focus on gender inequality and today's environmentalist concerns have generated interest in 'green crimes' such as toxic waste dumping.

practical factors

Practical factors, such as the inaccessibility of certain situations to the researcher, may also restrict what topic they are able to study. For example, although sociologists may wish to study the ways in which global corporations make their decisions, this may not be possible because these are made in secret.

funding bodies

Most research requires funding from an external body. These bodies include government agencies, the Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC), charities and businesses. As the funding body is paying for the research, it will determine the topic to be investigated.

Activity **Research**

Perspective and choice of method

...go to www.sociology.uk.net

Box 13 **Triangulation**

In practice, sociologists often use a combination of methods. For example, they may begin with a limited number of in-depth, unstructured interviews to gain insights; these can then be used to develop questions for a questionnaire given to a larger sample.

This process is called 'triangulation'. It involves using two or more sources or methods to obtain a more rounded picture by studying the same thing from more than one viewpoint.

The idea is that different methods can complement each other – the strengths of one counter the weaknesses of the other. Combining them gives us the best of both worlds: reliable and representative quantitative data covering large numbers of cases, as favoured by positivists, and valid qualitative data looking at a smaller number in depth, as preferred by interpretivists.

The process of research

Once we have chosen a topic for research and a method for investigating it, there are a number of further steps we need to go through. The first of these is to formulate an aim or hypothesis for the research.

Formulating an aim or hypothesis

Most studies either have a general aim or a specific hypothesis. A hypothesis is a possible explanation that can be tested by collecting evidence to prove it true or false.

For example, we may suspect that family size affects educational achievement. If so, we can formulate a specific hypothesis as a cause-and-effect statement, such as: 'differences in family size cause differences in achievement'. We can then collect evidence to test whether or not this is true. If the hypothesis turns out to be false, we must discard it.

Discarding a hypothesis might seem like a bad thing, but in fact it means we have made some progress. For example, if our research reveals no link with family size, we have learned something new and so we can now turn our attention to another possible cause instead – perhaps parental attitudes, or income? We simply formulate a new hypothesis and set out to test it.

The advantage of a hypothesis is that it gives direction to our research. It will give a focus to our questions, since their purpose is to gather information that will either confirm or refute (disprove) our hypothesis.

Positivists favour a hypothesis as the starting point for research. This is because they seek to discover cause-and-effect relationships – e.g. that large family size causes underachievement. Using quantitative methods such as questionnaires, they formulate questions designed to discover whether and why these factors are linked.

While a hypothesis is a statement about a specific relationship ('A causes B'), an aim is more general. It identifies what we intend to study and hope to achieve through the research. Often it will simply be to collect data on a particular topic, such as the way of life of a subculture.

The advantage of an aim is that it is more open-ended. We are not tied to trying to prove a particular hypothesis; instead we can gather data on anything that appears interesting about a situation. This can be very useful at the start of our research, when we know very little about the topic – since by definition, in this situation we would have no real idea about what hypothesis we wanted to test.

Interpretivists often favour a broad aim rather than a hypothesis, since they are interested in understanding actors' meanings, so the task is to find out what the actors themselves think is important, rather than to impose the researcher's own possible explanations in the form of a hypothesis.

Operationalising concepts

Suppose our hypothesis is that working-class pupils achieve lower qualifications because of lower parental income. Before we can test it, we need a working or 'operational' definition of our key ideas – in this case, social class. The reason is simple: without a working definition, we won't be able to count the numbers of working-class pupils who have or don't have qualifications.

Now, 'social class' is a fairly abstract concept, so we need a way of *measuring* what class each pupil belongs to. Most sociologists would probably use parental occupation as an indicator of a pupil's social class. This process of converting a sociological concept (such as class) into something we can measure is called 'operationalisation'.

Once we have operationalised our concept, we can start devising questions that measure it. For example, we might ask parents, 'what is your job?' This will allow us to see what social class each pupil belongs to. We can then correlate this with information we collect about their qualifications to find out whether our hypothesis is true or false.

Operationalising a concept may seem straightforward, but a problem can arise when different sociologists operationalise the same concept differently. For example, we might disagree about whether a routine office worker is working-class or middle-class. This can make it hard to compare the findings of different pieces of research.

Application

Write an operational definition of the following concepts that would allow you to measure them in a survey: (a) material deprivation; (b) anti-school subculture; (c) educational underachievement.

Positivists are concerned to operationalise concepts because of the importance they place on creating and testing hypotheses. By contrast, interpretivists put less emphasis on operationalising concepts. This is because they are more interested in actors' own definitions and understandings of ideas such as 'class', 'achievement' etc, than in imposing their own definitions of these concepts.

The pilot study

Sociologists who use social surveys (questionnaires and structured interviews) often carry out a pilot study before conducting their main survey. This involves trying out a draft version of the questionnaire or interview schedule (the list of interview questions) on a small sample.

The basic aim of the pilot study is to iron out any problems, refine or clarify questions and their wording and give interviewers practice, so that the actual survey goes as smoothly as possible.

For example, Young and Willmott (1962) carried out just over 100 pilot interviews to help them decide on the design of their study, the questions to ask and how to word them.

A pilot study may reveal that some questions are badly worded and hard to understand, or that the answers are difficult to analyse. After carrying out the pilot study, it should be possible to finalise the questionnaire or interview schedule.

Samples and sampling

Sociologists often aim to produce generalisations that apply to all cases of the topic they are interested in. For example, if we were interested in educational achievement, we would ideally want our theory to explain the achievement levels of *all* pupils, not just the ones who were in our study.

Obviously, however, we do not have the time or money to include every pupil in the UK in our study, so we have to choose a *sample* of pupils to include. A sample is a smaller sub-group drawn from the wider group that we are interested in. The process of creating or selecting a sample is called *sampling*.

The basic purpose of sampling is usually to ensure that those people we have chosen to include in the study (such as pupils) are representative or typical of the research population, including all the people we have *not* been able to include in the study. (The research population refers to the whole group that we are interested in – all pupils, in this case.)

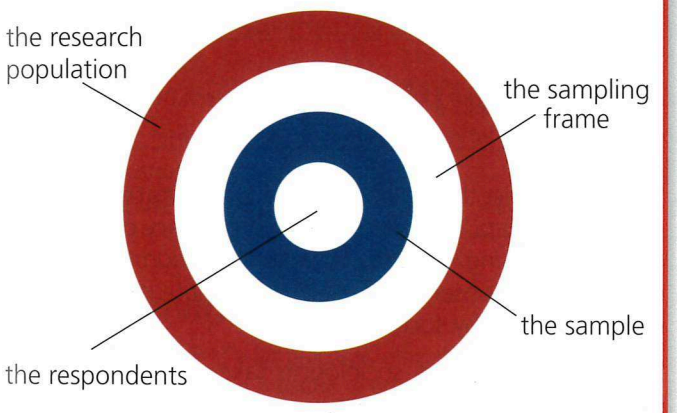
So long as our sample is representative, we should be able to generalise our findings to the whole research population. This is particularly attractive to positivist sociologists, who wish to make general, law-like statements about the wider social structure.

The sampling frame

To choose a sample, we first need a sampling frame. This is a list of all the members of the population we are interested in studying. For example, Young and Willmott used the electoral register (the list of people entitled to vote) as their sampling frame. It is important that the list we use as a sampling frame is as complete and accurate as possible. It should also be up to date and without duplications – otherwise the sample chosen from it may not be truly representative of the population.

Once we have obtained our sampling frame, we can choose our sample from it. In selecting the sample, we need to ensure it is representative of the wider population we are interested in (see Figure 3.1).

Figure 3.1: The essentials of sampling



Sampling techniques

Sociologists use various sampling techniques to obtain a representative sample:

- **Random sampling** is the simplest technique, where the sample is selected purely by chance. For example, names may be drawn out of a hat. Everyone has an equal chance of being selected. A large enough random sample should reflect the characteristics (e.g. gender, class etc.) of the whole research population. However, not all random samples are large enough to ensure this happens.
- **Quasi-random or systematic sampling** is where every nth person in the sampling frame is selected. Young and Willmott used every thirty-sixth name on the electoral register for their sample.
- **Stratified random sampling** The researcher first stratifies (breaks down) the population in the sampling frame by age, class, gender etc. The sample is then created in the same proportions, e.g. if 20% of the population are under 18, then 20% of the sample also have to be under 18.
- **Quota sampling** The population is stratified as above, and then each interviewer is given a quota of say, twenty females and twenty males, which they have to fill with respondents who fit these characteristics. The interviewer keeps at this task until their quota is filled.

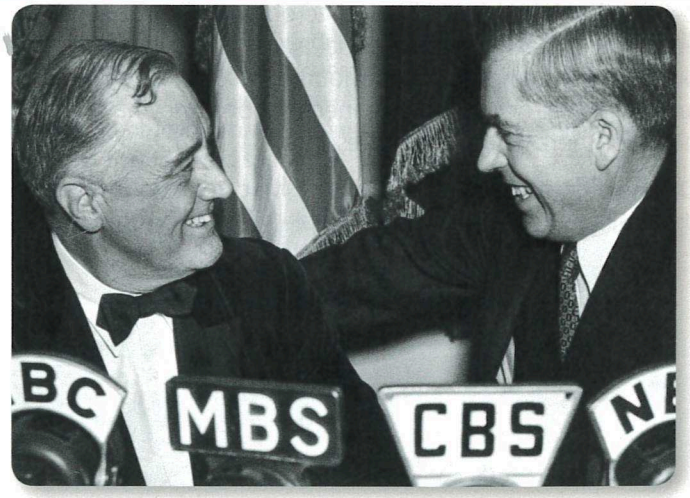
Non-representative sampling

As we have seen, the purpose of sampling is usually to ensure that the people we include in our study are representative of the research population. However, for both practical and theoretical reasons, not all studies use representative sampling techniques.

Box 14 **The biggest blunder in survey history?**

The biggest blunder in survey history was probably the 1936 poll on voting intentions carried out by an American magazine, the Literary Digest. The poll asked respondents how they would vote in the forthcoming election: for Landon, the Republican Party candidate, or for Roosevelt, the Democratic Party candidate. Two million people responded to the poll. The great majority surveyed said they would vote for Landon and the magazine predicted a Republican victory. Yet when the election came, Roosevelt won by a landslide. How could the magazine have got it so wrong?

The answer lies in the sampling frame used for the questionnaire. The magazine had used the telephone directory, wrongly assuming it would be a reasonably good list of all those who were entitled to vote. However, in 1936, telephones were still something of a luxury; many poorer voters were not telephone subscribers and did not appear in the directory. Since in America, poorer voters have tended to be Democrats and richer voters Republicans, using the directory to draw the sample was bound to over-represent the intentions of rich Republican voters and under-represent those of poor Democrats.



▲ Roosevelt (left) celebrating his election victory

practical reasons

There are several practical reasons why it may not be possible to create a representative sample.

- The social characteristics of the research population, such as age, gender and class, may not be known. It would thus be impossible to create a sample that was an exact cross-section of the research population.
- It may be impossible to find or create a sampling frame for that particular research population. For example, not all criminals are convicted, so there is no complete list available from which to select a sample.
- Potential respondents may refuse to participate. For example, some criminals may refuse for fear that their responses may be passed to the police.

Where it is not possible to obtain a representative sample, sociologists sometimes use snowball or opportunity samples.

- Snowball sampling involves collecting a sample by contacting a number of key individuals, who are asked to suggest others who might be interviewed, and so on, adding to the sample 'snowball' fashion, until enough data has been collected. Although not representative, this can be a useful way to contact a sample of people who might otherwise be difficult to find or persuade to take part, such as criminals.
- Opportunity sampling, sometimes called convenience sampling, involves choosing from those individuals who are easiest to access. Examples include selecting from passers-by in the street or from a captive audience such as a class of pupils. In neither case is the sample likely to be representative of the target research population.

theoretical reasons

Even where it is possible to create a representative sample, some researchers may not choose to do so, because of their methodological perspective (see Box 12). Interpretivists believe that it is more important to obtain valid data and an authentic understanding of social actors' meanings than to discover general laws of behaviour. Because interpretivists are less concerned to make generalisations, they have less need for representative samples.

Once we have selected the sample, we can begin to collect data about the topic using a suitable research method.

Box 15 Case studies

A case study involves the detailed examination of a single case (or a few cases at most), such as a school, family, workplace or even just one individual. As such, they are not representative and we cannot generalise from them. Nevertheless, they have several uses:

- To suggest hypotheses at the start of research: looking closely at one case may give us ideas we can test on a larger group.
- To provide a detailed insight into a particular group. Participant observation studies are usually case studies.
- To study exceptional cases. An example is Weber's (1905) study of the role of the Calvinist religion in the rise of capitalism, which he saw as unique.
- In a large-scale quantitative study, they can illustrate general points in more detail and give the study a qualitative dimension.

Topic summary

Sociologists test their theories using **quantitative** or **qualitative** data. Sociologists obtain **primary** data themselves, using methods including questionnaires, interviews and observation. **Secondary** data is produced by others but used by sociologists.

In choosing a method, sociologists take several issues into account. **Practical** issues include time and funding. **Ethical** issues include the researcher deceiving the subjects. **Theoretical** issues include validity, reliability and representativeness.

Perspective also affects choice of method. **Positivists** prefer **quantitative** data; **interpretivists** favour **qualitative** data. **Choice of topic** is also affected by society's values and funding bodies.

Before conducting research, the researcher needs a **hypothesis** (a testable statement) or aim, and concepts need to be **operationalised**. A **pilot study** may be used to iron out problems. A **representative sample** is essential if findings are to be generalised.