

Specification Area(s):	Introduction to Social Research: Key Concepts
You will need:	Class Handouts

Examine the extract from the 2001 Census (a social survey based on a questionnaire method) and, using the materials provided, answer the following questions:

1. Does this material use a primary or secondary research method?

Primary

Secondary

Briefly explain your reasons for this assessment:

2. Does this material collect primary or secondary data?

Primary

Secondary

Briefly explain your reasons for this assessment:

3. Does this research collect quantitative or qualitative data?

Quantitative

Qualitative

Briefly explain your reasons for this assessment:

4. How reliable is the data from this piece of research?	Reliable	Unreliable
Briefly explain your reasons for this assessment:		
5. How valid is the data from this piece of research?	Valid	Invalid
Briefly explain your reasons for this assessment		
6. How representative is the data from this research?	Representative	Unrepresentative
Briefly explain your reasons for this assessment		

7. Can the findings from this piece of research be generalised?	Yes	No
Briefly explain your reasons for this assessment		
8. Is the data from this research objective or subjective?	Objective	Subjective
Briefly explain your reasons for this assessment:		
9. Is this an example of positivist or Interpretivist research?	Positivist	Interpretivist
Briefly explain your reasons for this assessment:		

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<http://www.colchsfc.ac.uk/sociology/>

Key terms

Primary

Secondary

Quantitative

Qualitative

Positivist

Interpretivist

Reliability

Validity

Representative

Generalise

Objectivity

Bias

Definitions

- 1) **Primary**: first hand original research (e.g. participant observation, focus group, social surveys)
- 2) **Secondary**: data already collected; used for different reasons such as reanalysis (e.g. official statistics)
- 3) **Quantitative**: data that is largely numerical in form (e.g. large scale social survey)
- 4) **Qualitative**: data consisting of words/meaning/interpretations (e.g. participant observation)
- 5) **Positivist**: objectivity, causes, reliability, sociology should be scientific
- 6) **Interpretivist or phenomenologists**: sociology and research should report on how people understand the world (meanings)
- 7) **Validity**: does the data provide a true picture of what is being studied or measured? Are the findings an accurate account of social reality?
- 8) **Reliability**: the extent to which repeated measurements, under the same conditions, produce the same results. If other researchers using the same methods, under the same conditions, produced the same results then the data is reliable. How constant are the findings?

Remember that data can be reliable without being valid. Those that support qualitative methods argue that quantitative methods lack validity but are often reliable. Qualitative methods are criticised for being unreliable and unsystematic as there is no way of replicating the study and checking the reliability of the findings.

9) **Representativeness**: is the group of people being studied typical of others? Consider the following example:

- If there are 1000 people on an island and we only interview 100 of them, we have to ask how typical is the group to the rest of the island?
- 250 people on the island have red hair; 250 pink hair; 250 yellow hair and 250 purple hair.
- For my research to be representative, of the 100 people I interview, 25 must have red hair; 25 pink hair; 25 yellow hair and 25 purple hair.
- If this is the case than my sample of 100 represents the population of 1000.

10) **Generalisability**: can the findings from one setting be applied to similar settings? Are the findings from a study of student drug users in London similar to findings if we studied drug users in Manchester? In this example, the people I study do not represent the whole population of drug users, but my findings may say something interesting about the behaviour of drug users in general.

11) **Bias**: distortion of results; difference from true value

12) **Objective**: to what extent is the research value free and a reflection of reality?

Following section © P.Rouncefield: <http://www.rouncefield.homestead.com>

A slightly-longer version of this material can be found at:

http://www.rouncefield.homestead.com/files/as_soc_basics4.htm

Research Methods...

are tools. A good craftsman knows what tool to use.

There is no escape from theory and method, but that is good news. This part of the syllabus is relatively straightforward and can provide the foundation for a good exam grade provided you are prepared to work at remembering a few basic ideas. All methods will have good and bad points use the terms below to investigate how effective different methods are. Do remember that there really are no bad methods, so usually you are not required to criticize the methods themselves, only their use in particular research programmes. Methods are simply tools. You would not use a fork when you really needed an axe, so don't use a questionnaire when you really should use observation. What you should look out for is what method is appropriate for the particular task. Don't blame the tools blame the people who use inappropriate tools to do things they were not designed to do.

Terms you really have to know

The following terms are central to an understanding of how to evaluate any particular method. They can be used to question the worth of any piece of research. You can expect to have to use them in the preparation of your research proposal for AS(AQA), or as a question for Module 3, but also in A2 be it as part of your coursework or as an examination question.

Validity

When sociologists ask whether a piece of research is valid they are asking whether the research is really measuring what it claims to measure. Research can sometimes make claims that are not valid, because the claims made by the research are not justified by the methods used to gather information.

It is not easy to make sure you are actually measuring what you hope to measure. For example, how would you measure how religious people are? Some researchers have suggested that a good way to measure the extent of religion in a society is to count how many people go to church. But what does that really measure? Really it is measuring how many people go to church.. It could be that some people go to church but don't believe in God(belonging without believing). Some people might not go to church but still believe in God(believing without belonging). Some might go for a good sing song(Christmas eve mass?).

Another example of questionable validity would be crime statistics. Do crime statistics really measure how many crimes there are? Or, domestic violence, do statistics really give an accurate picture of the extent of domestic violence?

These questions are really very important indeed because if research is inaccurate but believed to be accurate it is obviously misleading. At the heart of the problem of validity is the question of operationalisation.

The question of validity is also raised by quantitative research in which respondents are asked to choose from a researcher selected range of answers. For example, in research into dental services within a given geographic area two respondents might tick the box labeled 'very satisfied', but do they mean the same thing by very satisfied? They both ticked the same box but do they both mean the same thing?

Operationalisation

The term operationalisation refers to something that researchers have to do to a concept if they wish to measure it. What they have to do is express the concept in a way that can be measured. Clearly operationalisation is crucial in quantitative studies. If you are going to count something you need to be able to explain exactly what it is that is being counted.

For example; it is pointless to talk about social class if no indicator of what social class means is provided. Operationalisation has often proved a bit of a problem for sociologists who insist that only empirical evidence is valid in that concepts such as social solidarity or social integration depend upon understanding rather than evidence. Nevertheless, the basic point is sound; if you cannot define something then you cannot measure it.

Reliability

This does not mean reliability in the common sense understanding of 'you can rely on'... The meaning is in fact quite precise.

To ask if a piece of research is reliable is to ask about the ability of the method to reveal information that is actually there rather than a set of findings created by a particular researcher. The test is to find out if research done by one researcher produces the same result as that obtained by any other researcher who carried out the same piece of research using the same method.

To argue that a piece of research is reliable is to argue that the findings are not tainted by the person doing the research. So reliability is established when different researchers replicate the methods of a particular piece of research and come up with similar results.

Generalization

In sociology generalization means making general statements that cover large numbers of people on the basis of information gathered from only a limited number of those people. In research terms to claim that you can generalize from a piece of research is to make claims about the representational quality of the research. To be able to generalize you must be confident that the people who were actually studied reflect and contain all the significant variables that are pertinent to the research, for example, class, sex, age, ethnicity.

Generalization is a practice that emerges from surveys where a sample of the population under scrutiny is selected as representative of the entire population. Good examples of such samples come from political sociology. At times of general, or by-elections, researchers don't ask all those who could vote how they will vote but only a sample of the electors. On the basis of this sample predictions are then made about the probable outcome of the election.

Imposition

The concept of 'imposition' is a useful way of understanding how values get into any piece of research. In this usage imposition equals selection. Wherever in a piece of research a researcher makes a decision about that research then there is imposition.

In quantitative research, such as the structured questionnaire, imposition occurs where the researchers select the questions to be asked and the range of answers that can be given. In qualitative research it is the researcher who decides what to record and thus what to ignore, what to include in the final research and what to exclude.

The decisions made by the researchers reflect their judgments, and their judgments reflect their values and concerns. No piece of research can therefore ever be objective.