

GCSE Research Methods Overview - Teacher

METHOD	Participant observation	Unstructured interview	Questionnaires/Structured interview
Definition	Participant observation involves directly participating in the activities of the group he or she is studying. Participant observation offers the sociologist an opportunity of seeing life as it is actually lived. Can be overt or covert. Interpretivists.	An unstructured interview is more like an informal, open-ended chat or conversation. The interviewer may use a list of headings as guides or prompts for questioning, but many of the questions will follow on from what the subject has said. The unstructured interview aims to get the interviewees to lead the discussion. This means the research is subject-led rather than researcher-led. The interviewee is encouraged to talk at length about issues raised and every effort is made to create a rapport and a relaxed atmosphere. The intention is for the respondent to talk freely and honestly. This type of interview is also known as an in-depth or ethnographic interview as it delves deeply into the thoughts and experiences of the subject. Such a method collects qualitative data.	A questionnaire is a list of written questions which can be answered in the following ways: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The respondents can fill in the answers themselves (self-completion) • An interviewer can ask the questions and record the results (structured interview). Questionnaires are particularly associated with social surveys – the aim is to gather mostly statistical information about a (usually large) group of people from whom a sample has been selected. Favoured by positivists. Open/closed questions.
Main strengths	<p>Validity – Participant observation tends to be high on validity. The researcher is able to see the participants in their natural setting, acting normally. If covert, the participants will be unaware of the researcher's identity and will not change their behaviour, thus avoiding the Hawthorne effect. This is particularly important in the case of deviant groups who may wish to hide their activities.</p> <p>Objectivity – As the researcher is merely recording what is happening, his/her bias should not influence the findings.</p> <p>Reliability - Another researcher merely recording what he/she observes should obtain the same results.</p>	<p>Validity – One of the main strengths of the unstructured interview is its attempt to get at social reality. For this reason it produces data which is high in validity. Respondents can give detailed explanations and describe their feelings and experiences in depth. The method also allows the interviewee to build up a relationship and rapport with the interviewer which can encourage the interviewee to talk even about sensitive and personal issues. An example of this can be seen in Dobash and Dobash's study into domestic violence. They were able to extract data with regard to women's worst and severest experiences of violence, and they were encouraged to talk openly about such experiences.</p> <p>Ethical – Another strength of the unstructured interview is that it is easy to gain informed consent. This ensures the research is ethically acceptable and that the researcher is adhering to ethical codes of conduct.</p> <p>Objective – Another strength of the unstructured interview is that a trained interviewer should remain objective during the data collection process and not let their bias influence the findings. The interviewer should not dominate the discussion and it should, as far as possible, consist of the interviewee talking.</p>	<p>Representativeness – Questionnaires are relatively quick and cheap, certainly compared to the time and cost involved in lots of face-to-face interviews. The researcher can contact a large sample making results more representative.</p> <p>Reliable – The respondents are replying to the same question. If repeated, another sociologist should get similar results, so the data will be reliable.</p> <p>Representativeness and reliability mean that answers can be compared and accurate generalisations can be made.</p> <p>Ethical – Questionnaire responses are usually done anonymously which encourage respondents to answer honestly. Can gain consent.</p> <p>Validity – There is no interviewer present to affect the results and to influence the replies of the respondents. Interviewer's bias is therefore not present, enhancing validity.</p>

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<p>Main weaknesses</p>	<p>Validity – If overt, the group may change their behaviour (Hawthorne effect). The bias of the researcher may influence what they see as significant, how they interpret events and what they choose to include.</p> <p>Objectivity – The researcher may become very close to the group and see events from their point of view.</p> <p>Reliability – Another researcher may build up a different relationship with the group and affect their behaviour differently. Another researcher with a different bias may interpret events differently.</p> <p>Practical – Getting accepted/access can be difficult. Time-consuming and demanding on researcher.</p> <p>The researcher may abandon research and join the group indefinitely (going native).</p> <p>Representative/generalisable – Samples are too small.</p> <p>Difficult to make notes.</p> <p>Cannot be replicated.</p> <p>Researcher may confront moral dilemmas if observing a deviant group, e.g. risk of danger and illegal activities.</p> <p>Ethical objections.</p>	<p>Validity – Can be affected by social desirability bias. Respondents may want to show themselves in a positive light and not express their true feelings. In this case women may feel ashamed and embarrassed by their experiences of domestic violence.</p> <p>Ethical – Due to the often sensitive nature of unstructured interviews, caution should be taken in regards to the intrusive nature of some questions. Dobash and Dobash's research on women who have been abused is something that would almost definitely be difficult for women to talk about.</p> <p>Objectivity – Sometimes the researcher's bias can creep into the research process. For example Ann Oakley was open about the fact that her research lacked scientific objectivity. She began her research into the experiences of new mothers as an academic, a feminist, and as a mother herself who felt depressed and oppressed in her new role.</p> <p>Reliability – There are features which make them unreliable. Firstly this can come from the bias of the interviewer who may unintentionally influence the direction of the interview. In addition, its conversational nature makes it difficult for it to be repeated by another sociologist and thus gain similar results. Different researchers may also build up different relationships with the subject and so they may get different results. This is because respondents may feel more comfortable with a certain interviewer and open up more.</p> <p>Representativeness – Unstructured interviews are also very time-consuming. Each of Ann Oakley's 66 interviews took approximately 2 hours and 30 minutes to complete. Therefore the sample size is restricted as it is expensive and impractical to target a large audience.</p>	<p>Validity – Questionnaires don't give a true picture of what is being studied, no carefully thought out answers can be provided. Because questionnaires are filled in quite quickly, often without much thought to their answers, are they a successful way of exploring difficult and complex issues. Closed questions force people into categories that may not reflect their actual views, behaviour or experiences. They only have a limited number of choices to select from which may not reflect the complexity of their real feelings.</p> <p>Objectivity – Researchers' biases may reflect how questions are answered, any may be reflected in the question.</p> <p>Respondents may interpret the questions differently and they may also apply different meanings to concepts, for example, if two people ticked a box saying their teacher was excellent; one could mean the teacher really makes them learn, the other could mean the teacher allows them to get away without doing work.</p> <p>Representativeness – depends on sampling – the group questioned must be typical of the target population.</p> <p>Non-response – if the rate is high, this will affect the questionnaire.</p>
<p>Links to research</p>	<p>Patrick; Humphreys; Hargreaves; Willis.</p>	<p>Dobash and Dobash; Oakley</p>	<p>Census; Hite survey; The Crime Survey for England and Wales</p>

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METHOD	Sampling	Secondary data	Triangulation
Definition	Cannot conduct research on everyone. When looking at rare characteristics may only have a few people. Opposite end – Census – very expensive and impractical for most researchers. Researchers take samples of the relevant population. Usually a sampling frame is needed. The aim of the sample is to reflect the characteristics of the target population so that results can be generalised. General rule – the bigger the sample, the more representative.	The analysis of data collected by other researchers. Examples, official statistics, archival sources, government documents; church records, letters and diaries. Sources of secondary data can be qualitative and quantitative ; therefore both positivists and interpretivists will use them. Most studies begin with a review of existing research carried out previously which can provide the springboard for subsequent research. With a modern trend towards triangulation, it is increasingly likely that primary and secondary data will be incorporated into research.	Each type of data has its uses and its limitations and it is frequently the case that a researcher will collect both. Triangulation refers to the methodological approach of using more than one method. Quantitative researchers may collect some qualitative data to increase the study's validity and qualitative researchers may collect some quantitative data to make their research more scientific. By using multiple methods researchers can hope to overcome the weaknesses and the problems that come from a single method. The purpose of triangulation in research is to increase the credibility and validity of the results.
Main strengths/ GROVER	<p>Volunteer – easy to gain consent. (Ethical) Access a variety of people (who read a newspaper) should be representative.</p> <p>Snowball – Useful when researching deviant groups. Don't require a sampling frame.</p> <p>Random – Everyone has an equal chance of being selected. Representative of target population and generalisations can be made.</p> <p>Stratified – Increases precision of the sample by making sure certain characteristics occur in the right numbers.</p> <p>Opportunity – Can use the first participants you find, which means it takes less time to locate your sample.</p>	<p>Historical documents – Compare trends over time (Pearson – football hooliganism).</p> <p>Personal and life documents – Diaries, memoirs, letters – useful where PO is not possible. Tend to be high in validity (Willmott and Young).</p> <p>Oral histories – Memories from the past should be valid.</p> <p>Media – Shape our understanding of the world. Quantitative and qualitative.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Statistics can often be used to look at patterns, for example, trends over time, comparisons between countries or comparisons between different groups of people. • Can provide sources of in-depth materials as well as data on large samples. 	<p>Qualitative research facilitates quantitative research</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 'Providing hypotheses' – Its unstructured nature of data collection can provide hunches which can be developed into hypotheses that can be tested quantitatively. • 'Aiding measurement' – An in-depth knowledge of social contexts through qualitative research can be used to design survey questions for questionnaires. Pope and Mays point out that semi-structured interviews took place before a British national survey on sexual attitudes and lifestyles so that the most appropriate sexual terms would be used in the survey. <p>Quantitative research facilitates qualitative research</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Quantitative research can be used to select a sample for further qualitative research. • Jamieson investigated young and offending men. They were given a questionnaire in which they reported their criminal offences. Equal numbers were then chosen to take part in a qualitative interview, those who did not offend, those who had offended but not recently and persistent offenders. • It is possible to gain both quantitative and qualitative data, and hence a fuller picture of the subject matter. • It is possible to use quantitative and qualitative data to check the reliability and conclusions reached of each approach. • As with Barker's study, qualitative research can be used to produce hypotheses which can then be checked using quantitative methods. • Qualitative research can explore the meanings behind connections unidentified through statistical analysis. • Neither quantitative nor qualitative approaches can produce totally valid and complete research on their own. • One method can be used to check the accuracy of your own interpretation.

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<p>Main weaknesses/GROVER</p>	<p>Volunteer – Majority of target population are unlikely to respond. Those who do may hold similar characteristics. Unlikely to be representative. Snowball – Not random so cannot be generalised. May run out of contacts. Could be biased – friends. Random – Requires an up-to-date and complete sampling frame. Could still be biased (more girls than boys). People can refuse to take part – self-selection – must accept on ethical grounds. Stratified – Finding a sample frame that provides characteristics of the stratified characteristics. Opportunity – Non-random so could be biased and unrepresentative. Choose people who are approachable. Depends on time and place they were located.</p>	<p>Historical documents – May be unreliable and open to a number of interpretations. Personal and life documents – How many people keep regular diaries anyway? The fact that they are being used for research make them less valid as this may influence what people include in their diaries. May contain biases if written with an audience in mind (e.g. a politician's diary). Personal documents are often very subjective, making generalisations difficult. Oral histories – Need to avoid imposition (researchers imposing their own biases on respondent). People's memories may be unreliable or affected by subsequent experiences. Media – Media reports are essentially biased. Newspapers tend to have a clear political viewpoint.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Some documents are not produced by those who claim to have produced them. • Some sources which exist may be vague. • Quantitative data such as statistics are subject to social construction. In addition, they give no indication of people's meanings. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Given the links between theory and methods, some sociologists would argue that there are some methods that are simply inappropriate to them. • Using more than one method makes research more expensive. • It is time consuming to use a variety of methods.
<p>Links to research</p>	<p>Milgram; Patrick; Jackson and Gray; Hite Survey</p>	<p>Ashworth; Pearson; Willmott and Young</p>	<p>Humphreys; Barker; Pope and Mays; Jamieson</p>