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Getting the most from this book

Exam tips

Advice on key points in the text to help you learn and recall content, avoid pitfalls, and polish your exam technique in order to boost your grade.

Knowledge check

Rapid-fire questions throughout the Content Guidance section to check your understanding.

Knowledge check answers

- 1 Turn to the back of the book for the Knowledge check answers.

Summaries

- Each core topic is rounded off by a bullet-list summary for quick-check reference of what you need to know.

Exam-style questions

Commentary on the questions

Tips on what you need to do to gain full marks.

Sample student answers

Practise the questions, then look at the student answers that follow.

Commentary on sample student answers

Read the comments showing how many marks each answer would be awarded in the exam and exactly where marks are gained or lost.

Questions & Answers

Question 3
With reference to Source A, explain **one strength** and **one weakness** of the way the concept of 'deprived' was operationalised. 10 marks (AO2: 4 marks; AO3: 6 marks)

Make sure each strength and weakness is detailed and refers to Source A.

Question 4
Using Source B and your wider sociological knowledge, assess the usefulness of content analysis for investigating the representations of black young men and boys. 25 marks (AO1: 5 marks; AO2: 6 marks; AO3: 15 marks)

Describe the method and explain how it works in practice before describing and assessing its strengths and weaknesses. Use specific examples from Source B to illustrate your points, aiming for at least two strengths and two weaknesses.

Section B
Answer **all** the questions in Section B.

Question 5
Outline ways in which working-class people are disadvantaged in UK society. 20 marks (AO1: 12 marks; AO2: 8 marks)

Make sure you focus on 'disadvantage', so make comparisons with other classes. Also try to refer to a range of areas of social life where life chances are affected, rather than to just one.

Question 6
Evaluate the view that ethnic inequalities are caused by the structure of society rather than the culture of individuals. 40 marks (AO1: 16 marks; AO2: 8 marks; AO3: 16 marks)

Consider which theories tend to blame the structure of society for ethnic inequalities and which blame individuals' culture to ensure you get the right focus here.

Student answer

1 Source A shows which adults are more likely to be deprived based on their employment status.

The largest proportion of adults who are deprived are those who are working full-time, at 39%. This is three times higher than the next nearest category, which is those working part-time, and both the working categories are higher than the other categories. In terms of the adults who are not working, the most likely deprived adults are those who are unemployed, at 12% compared to the lowest group which is students at 6% — double the percentage.

Source A shows which adults are more likely to be deprived based on their employment status.

These data are quite simple, so there is a danger of just reproducing the figures. Always try to make some kind of comparison — which this answer does well, comparing proportions of different groups with specific data.

4/4 marks awarded

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About this book

This guide covers Component 2: Researching and understanding social inequalities in the OCR Sociology specification H580 (A-level).

How to use this book

The first main section of the book is **Content Guidance**. It follows the headings for Researching and understanding social inequalities in the OCR specification. Each part of the Content Guidance contains exam tips, knowledge checks and definitions of some key terms. Knowing and understanding the meaning of sociological concepts is an essential part of the whole course.

The second main section of the book is **Questions & Answers**. At the beginning of this section are the three assessment objectives (AOs) against which your exam answers will be judged, with some guidance regarding how to display the required skills, and a list of command words, which will help you to understand more clearly what each question is asking you to do. The questions provided are in the style of the OCR exam for Component 2, and are each followed by an A-grade answer. Remember the importance of noting the structure and mark allocations of questions. Throughout the student answers, you will find comments explaining why what has been written is good and is scoring well. More detailed guidance on how to use the Questions & Answers section is given on pages 69–71.

Content Guidance

■ Section A Research methods and researching social inequalities

What is the relationship between theory and methods?

Positivism

Positivists argue that social behaviour is the product of social forces beyond the control of the individual. The origin of these social forces or laws lies in the way societies are organised, that is, their social structure. Positivists argue that the social structure of society shapes or determines the behaviour of human beings. In this way, people are the puppets of society.

Positivists highlight the predictability of human actions by identifying social patterns and trends in behaviour. For example, they note that the mass of working-class people generally behave in similar ways with regard to family life, educational achievement, consumption of consumer goods, leisure and cultural pursuits and so on, to the extent that there are clear working-class patterns of behaviour that contrast greatly with middle- or upper-class behaviour.

In light of this, positivists believe that society and the social forces that underpin it should be studied using scientific research methods, on a large scale. There are a number of principles that underpin this scientific approach.

Quantitative data

Positivists value the collection and use of quantitative, or numerical, data that can be converted into graphs, tables and charts, which allow them to identify correlations between patterns and trends. Positivists prefer to use large-scale survey methods that employ questionnaires and/or structured interviews as their primary research method because these are supposedly scientific in character. Additionally, they would value the use of official statistics because these are normally the result of standardised, reliable and objective data collection.

Patterns and trends

When quantitative data have been gathered, they will be analysed for any patterns and/or trends they might show by positivist researchers.

Patterns in the data are links between variables — for example, patterns in relation to ethnic groups, gender or age groups. The researcher may look to see whether the data show that males have different outcomes to females, or whether members of certain

Knowledge check 1

What is the difference between patterns and trends?

ethnic groups are more likely to do certain things than those of other ethnic groups. It may be that the data just show random connections and no patterns can be identified.

Trends relate to changes over time, so if data are longitudinal in nature (see below for an explanation of longitudinal studies) or if statistics are gathered annually and can be compared, then trends might be identified. There may be an increase or decrease in poverty, unemployment levels or certain crimes, for example.

Objectivity and value freedom

It is important for positivists that the research is carried out **objectively** to ensure that bias does not undermine the research findings. Value freedom is the idea that all sources of bias have been eliminated from the research process. For example, the research design needs to ensure that if the researcher is using a questionnaire or interview, the questions are neutral — they should not reflect any personal, political or sociological position that might lead research subjects into giving certain responses. The researcher also needs to ensure that their interpretation of data is objective — they should avoid being selective when analysing and evaluating their data. Thus, the values of a researcher will have no impact on the research or its findings.

However, the notion of value freedom is a contentious one because critics argue that sociology is social knowledge that is underpinned by sociological perspectives, moral codes, prejudices and, therefore, bias. For example, most sociology reflects Western, capitalist and **patriarchal values**. Interpretivists (see below) would argue that sociology is composed of values because sociologists are members of society and thus cannot escape the influence of its culture and its institutions. They would argue that this should be accepted and recognised.

Reliability

The key research concept of reliability relates to the way the research or measurement process is designed. If the research design is reliable, it generally means that if it is used by other researchers on a similar group of people, the same or similar results should be produced. This would be possible if the design included standardised procedures, which could easily be replicated. Therefore research methods such as structured interviews or questionnaires, which have a set list of questions in a particular order, would be seen as reliable. Reliability is particularly important to positivists, who want to carry out scientific research and who wish to generate data that can be quantified and compared in order to uncover patterns and trends.

However, reliability may be undermined by the fact that some types of research method, notably unstructured interviews and participant observation, often depend on the quality of the personal relationship established between the researcher and the research subjects. It may be impossible for other sociologists to replicate these unique relationships. Additionally, such methods will lack a structured set of questions or standardised procedures, making replication impossible.

Interpretivism

Interpretivists do not believe that human behaviour is predictable or that it is shaped by social laws or social forces over which people have no control. They argue that people have free will and can therefore exercise choice and make decisions to pursue their own courses of action. Individuals are therefore active rather than passive.

Exam tip

The notion that value freedom is virtually impossible to achieve is important when discussing the relationship between sociology and social policy. Do link this to the theoretical debate between positivists and interpretivists and what they are trying to achieve when conducting research.

Objective Refers to lack of bias or influence. Studying something objectively means recording results without influencing the research process or making personal judgements.

Patriarchal values

These are ideas that support and maintain male dominance.

Exam tip

Reliability is a key concept to use when evaluating research methods, as is validity (see below). Make sure you have a clear understanding of its meaning and link to positivism and quantitative data.

Knowledge check 2

Explain why reliability is important to a positivist.

They create their own destinies rather than having them shaped by social structures. Interpretivists' aim in conducting research is to understand the meanings of experiences to individuals, rather than to generalise more widely or make predictions.

Qualitative data

Interpretivists prefer qualitative to quantitative data. Qualitative data are made up of personal accounts taken directly from the subjects of sociological research in the form of interview transcriptions, descriptions of events experienced through participant observations, and so on. This type of data tends to focus on how the research subjects see or interpret the world around them and consequently it often provides insight into the feelings, opinions, motivations and thoughts of those being researched.

Meanings and experiences

Interpretivists consider the social world to be socially constructed — it is the product of shared interaction and the meanings or interpretations that humans use to make sense of that interaction. The role of sociologists is to uncover these shared interpretations or 'meanings', to document social experience and identify the motives and reasons for social actions.

Verstehen, empathy and rapport

Interpretivists argue that the aim of sociological research should be to get inside people's heads and to experience the world from their point of view. This is called empathetic understanding or **verstehen**. Interpretivists therefore emphasise the use of ethnographic methods such as unstructured interviews and participant observation, which aim to conduct research in the research subject's natural environment. Interpretivists also emphasise the importance of establishing a rapport with the respondent. A rapport means a relationship which is based on trust and respect, and if a rapport is established, the responses in an interview situation are likely to be much more valid.

Validity

The key research concept of validity relates to whether research and its findings give a 'true picture' of what is being studied, that is, whether research reflects the reality of the activities or attitudes of the person/group being studied. Validity is especially important to interpretivists, who want to understand the motives and meanings that people attach to their actions. Research which generates detailed, qualitative data is often seen as being more valid, since it gives a more meaningful insight into how the respondents really feel or act.

However, validity can be undermined by a number of factors, including issues of social desirability — where the respondent gives a more socially acceptable answer rather than telling the truth about how they really feel. The personal characteristics of the researcher, and the rapport they have built with the respondent, may also impact on validity, as may issues of **researcher imposition** in, for example, the way the researcher designs their questions or by the way they react to things said, their facial expressions or in the way they interpret the information gained.

Subjectivity, researcher imposition and reflexivity

Interpretivists argue that researcher imposition is an important source of bias in positivist sociological research. That is, when developing research tools, researchers

Verstehen Literally 'to understand'. It refers to the ability of the social researcher to understand the social world and action from the respondent's perspective, and 'see through their eyes', using methods such as unstructured interviews, participant observation.

Researcher imposition The tendency of a researcher to impose their ideas, values and expectations on the research process as a whole and on the respondent.

often make decisions or have assumptions about what is and is not important based on their own experience rather than that of the research subjects. Consequently, they may miss something important. Positivists would tend to argue that by maintaining objectivity and value freedom, researcher imposition will be avoided.

Interpretivists argue that their approach of putting the research subjects at the centre of the research is a better way of avoiding this problem. However, critics point out that there is always the danger, in research involving the establishment of rapport and close relationships with subjects, that the sociologist may 'go native' and allow their subjective relationships to overcome their detachment and objectivity. There is also the danger that **subjectivity** might intrude into the research process in the form of selective interpretation of the data because the researcher sympathises with the lifestyle of the group being studied.

Interpretivists tend to be aware of this possibility of bias and have stressed the importance of reflexivity. This refers to researchers being aware of how their decisions and actions may impact on the social behaviour of their subjects during the research process. In order to improve the validity of their findings, many researchers keep a journal of the research process in which they critically self-reflect on their research design and everyday experience of contact with their subjects. A reflexive researcher will also often ask their respondents what impact they feel taking part in the research has had on them, in order to fully acknowledge the two-way nature of social research.

Representativeness and generalisability

Although mentioned in the specification as part of this section, these concepts, which relate more to sampling, will be discussed later in this Guide, under 'The sampling process'.

Summary

- There are two important theoretical approaches to sociological research: positivism and interpretivism.
- Positivists believe that social behaviour is largely the product of social forces that originate in the social structure or organisation of society.
- Positivists believe that sociologists should use scientific methods that are standardised, reliable, objective and value free in order to identify patterns and trends in behaviour.
- They use methods such as questionnaire surveys and structured interviews which use representative samples and produce quantitative data.
- In contrast, interpretivists believe that social behaviour is the result of people actively choosing to interact in social groups and the interpretations or social meanings that people apply to those encounters.
- Interpretivists stress the importance of validity, arguing that research methods should produce qualitative data that reflect authentic and natural behaviour as well as achieving *verstehen* and building a rapport.
- Interpretivists therefore prefer methods such as unstructured or semi-structured interviews and participant observation.

Knowledge check 3

How is the problem of researcher imposition linked to value freedom?

Subjectivity

The opposite of objectivity. In research terms it refers to a researcher interpreting something from their own viewpoint, and becoming personally involved. Although it is not desirable, interpretivists would argue that subjectivity is inevitable.

Exam tip

Much of the debate about the strengths and weaknesses of research methods reflects the debate about whether to take a positivist or interpretivist approach to the investigation of social life. Work this positivist–interpretivist distinction into your answers whenever you can.

Questions & Answers

■ How to use this section

In this section you will find examples of three A-level papers. Each question part is followed by a brief analysis of what to watch out for when answering it. At the end of the question and analysis section, an A/A*-grade student answer is given for each question, with commentary throughout indicating where credit is due.

Read each question carefully and try to answer it in full, or at least make notes on how you would answer it, before reading the student answer and comments. Remember that there is no single way of answering an exam question — high marks can be gained taking different approaches. However, the example answers and comments should help to show you the kinds of approach that would do well and some of the pitfalls to avoid.

As a general point, you should always read the whole question before starting to write. When you come to a question that is based on a source, study the source carefully before you start writing, as it will contain material that is essential to answering the question.

The student answers are accompanied by comments. The comments tell you what it is that enables the student to score so highly and where or why they miss out on any marks.

Examinable skills

OCR Sociology examination papers are designed to test certain defined skills. These skills are expressed as assessment objectives (AOs). There are three AOs and it is important that you know what these are and what you have to be able to do in an exam to show your ability in each.

Assessment objective 1

Demonstrate knowledge and understanding of:

- **sociological theories, studies, theorists, concepts and empirical data**
- **sociological research methods**

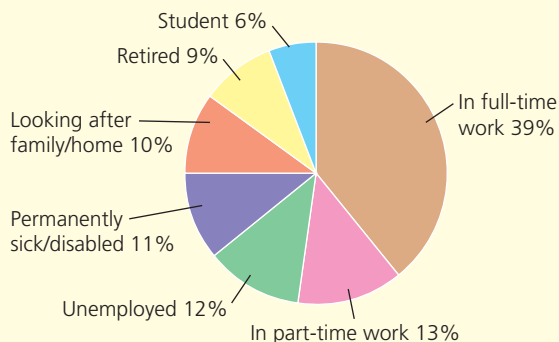
Your answers must demonstrate clearly to the examiners that your knowledge is accurate and appropriate to the topic being discussed and that you have a clear understanding of it. It is not enough simply to reproduce knowledge learned by rote — you must be able to use your knowledge of concepts, sociological studies, empirical evidence and sociological theories in a meaningful and logical way to address the specific question set.

Example 1 questions

Section A

Read the source material and answer **all** the questions in Section A.

Source A



Deprived adults by employment status

Source: PSE UK 2012

To operationalise the concept of 'deprived' the researchers first created a list of 'necessities' based on a separate attitudes survey. An item or activity was defined as a 'necessity' when over 50% of respondents agreed that it was.

Then, in a living standards questionnaire, a different sample of adults was asked which of these necessities they had. An adult lacking three or more necessities because they could not afford them was defined as 'deprived'.

The sample size for the living standards questionnaire was 5,193 households (4,205 in Britain and 988 in Northern Ireland) in which 12,097 people were living (9,786 in Britain and 2,311 in Northern Ireland).

Source B

Media representations of young, black males

Kerry Moore, John Jewell and Stephen Cushion carried out a study which sought to explore whether the news media present negative images or stereotypes of black young men and boys, and how such images are constructed. They employed a mixed methods approach, including both quantitative and qualitative content analyses and semi-structured interviews.

The content analysis was based on a sample of all UK daily and weekend national newspapers, a selection of regional newspapers and a range of television and radio news bulletins. They monitored the media for sixteen weeks in total, evenly spaced over eighteen months in 2008–9.

The analyses included a number of different categories for examining the patterns of coverage. These included within each media type: the volume

of coverage; the prominence of news; when stories occurred; sources quoted and the story subject.

The researchers then conducted a more qualitative analysis of a range of mainstream print and broadcast news media, with the aim of assessing how and why certain ideas were constructed in the coverage and the social meaning and significance of these constructions.

Finally, they conducted a series of semi-structured interviews with journalists and editors working within or across a range of news media organisations in Britain.

Moore et al. identified that black young men and boys are regularly associated with negative news values. While young men and boys in general were regularly reported in relation to negative news values (just over 4 in 10 stories being crime-related), close to 7 in 10 stories of black young men and boys related in some form to crime. In the mainstream news media little context or explanation was provided in news reports regarding why crime may have been committed. Crimes such as knife attacks and murders were often represented as irrational, senseless acts of violence, or motivated by trivial petty rows or gang rivalries. Very little commentary concerning possible systemic or structural factors surrounding the crime was evident.

The journalists and editors were aware of press guidelines concerning the reporting of 'race' or ethnic identity, and they asserted that they did not consider the black identity of perpetrators to be relevant to the news value of a story. However, in reflecting upon their practice in reporting stories featuring black young men and boys, journalists and editors acknowledged that coverage tends to be predominantly negative. Several voiced concern about what they saw as a problematic image associating young black males with gangs and violent crime. Interview respondents also highlighted that there are still comparatively few people working in mainstream journalism from a black or minority ethnic background.

Adapted from Kerry Moore, John Jewell and Stephen Cushion (2011) 'Media representations of black young men and boys', the REACH media monitoring project; used with permission

Question 1

Summarise the data shown in the pie chart in Source A.

4 marks (AO2)

Make sure you support patterns you identify with data, and make comparisons between different categories. Make two clear points.

Question 2

With reference to Source B, explain two reasons why some sociologists use mixed methods when conducting research.

6 marks (AO1: 2 marks; AO2: 4 marks)

Don't forget to illustrate with reference to Source B.

Question 3

With reference to Source A, explain **one** strength and **one** weakness of the way the concept of 'deprived' was operationalised.

10 marks (AO2: 4 marks; AO3: 6 marks)

Make sure each strength and weakness is detailed and refers to Source A.

Question 4

Using Source B and your wider sociological knowledge, assess the usefulness of content analysis for investigating the representations of black young men and boys.

25 marks (AO1: 5 marks; AO2: 5 marks; AO3: 15 marks)

Describe the method and explain how it works in practice before describing and assessing its strengths and weaknesses. Use specific examples from Source B to illustrate your points, aiming for at least two strengths and two weaknesses.

Section B

Answer **all** the questions in Section B.

Question 5

Outline ways in which working-class people are disadvantaged in UK society.

20 marks (AO1: 12 marks; AO2: 8 marks)

Make sure you focus on 'disadvantage', so make comparisons with other classes. Also try to refer to a range of areas of social life where life chances are affected, rather than to just one.

Question 6

Evaluate the view that ethnic inequalities are caused by the structure of society rather than the culture of individuals.

40 marks (AO1: 16 marks; AO2: 8 marks; AO3: 16 marks)

Consider which theories tend to blame the structure of society for ethnic inequalities and which blame individuals' culture to ensure you get the right focus here.

Student answer

- 1 Source A shows which adults are more likely to be deprived based on their employment status.

The largest proportion of adults who are deprived are those who are working full-time, at 39%. This is three times higher than the next nearest category, which is those working part-time, and both the working categories are higher than the other categories.

In terms of the adults who are not working, the most likely deprived adults are those who are unemployed, at 12% compared to the lowest group which is students at 6% — double the percentage.

These data are quite simple, so there is a danger of just reproducing the figures. Always try to make some kind of comparison — which this answer does well, comparing proportions of different groups with specific data.

4/4 marks awarded

Student answer

- 2 Mixed methods means using more than one research method in a study. Sometimes this is a combination of qualitative and quantitative methods and may be used to achieve triangulation. Qualitative methods may give the researcher validity, due to their depth, but they may not be seen as reliable, because they cannot be repeated. On the other hand, quantitative methods are more standardised and reliable, but may not be so valid, since they do not give a true picture. Using both will give the researcher the best of both worlds.

Another reason for using mixed methods is to get a complete picture. Methodological pluralism allows a researcher to get a fuller picture which is relevant in Source B because the content analysis shows what is happening in the media, and the interviews with the journalists show why it is happening, which is a good reason to use mixed methods in this case.

These two points are good, with use of concepts, and well explained — 2 marks for A01. The first point has no reference to Source B unfortunately, losing 2 of the possible 4 marks for A02.

4/6 marks awarded

Student answer

- 3 One strength was that by operationalising 'deprived' with the indicators of necessities they lacked, this means every participant would understand it in the same way, so it is clearly measurable. If they just asked 'are you deprived?' everyone may interpret this in different ways, so the data would not be reliable, since they could not be replicated and compared. Positivists would value this method of operationalising concepts, since it makes the research more scientific and objective.

One weakness is that it relies on what the people in the first survey defined as necessities, which might vary between different people and over time. Interpretivists would argue that each person would have a different definition, so the concepts should be explored through unstructured interviews rather than operationalised in this quantitative way, since it would be more valid then.

This is a good answer which demonstrates clear understanding of the question and uses the information in the source well to help explain it. Students often struggle to understand and explain the process of operationalising concepts so this example should be helpful.

10/10 marks awarded