

“A” Level Sociology

A Resource-Based Learning Approach

**Module One:
Theory and Methods**

Unit M13: Research Considerations

These Notes have been designed to provide you with a knowledge and understanding of the following syllabus areas:

- a. "Consider the practical considerations influencing choice of topic, choice of method(s) and the conduct of research"
- b. "Recognise the relationship between theories and methods".

The Aims of these Notes are to help you understand:

1. Theoretical and practical research considerations in sociological research.
2. The relationship between theoretical perspective and research methodology.

The Objectives of these Notes are to help you understand:

1. A range of practical research considerations governing sociological research.
2. A range of theoretical research considerations governing sociological research.
3. The "four-cornered relationship model" of sociological research.
4. The concepts of:

Ontology,
Epistemology,
Methodology and
Methods.
5. The theoretical relationship between the four concepts listed above.

Introduction

This set of Notes looks at various **practical and theoretical research considerations** involved in the collection of sociological data and we can begin by looking at a number of (mainly) **practical research considerations**, followed by a more in-depth discussion / analysis of various **theoretical research considerations**.

Practical Research Considerations.

This section briefly discusses a number of factors, loosely grouped under the sub-headings of "choice of research topic" and "choice of research method" that, potentially, affect the overall research process.

1. A researcher's choice of topic to research can be affected by the following:

- **The Interests of the Researcher.**

Given that sociologists specialise and develop interests in certain areas of the social world, it's hardly surprising that they choose to conduct research in these areas. For **example**: Peter **Townsend** and **poverty** (see: "Poverty in the UK.", 1979).

- **Current Debates and Intellectual Fashions.**

Research subjects go in and out of fashion (see below: **Funding of Research**). In the past few years, **Medical Sociology** has been **fashionable**, whereas in the **mid-1960's** one of the major intellectual debates concerned the question as to whether or not the **class structure in Britain was changing** in such a way that the majority of people could be labelled as "middle class".

For **example**: Goldthorpe, Lockwood et al and the **Embourgeoisement Thesis** (see: "The Affluent Worker in the Class Structure, 1965).

Goldthorpe et al attempted to test the then-current theory (as put forward in the late 1950's by writers such as **Zweig**) that **increasing affluence** meant that a **convergence** in the **class structure** was occurring in Britain (in effect, the idea that the working class was becoming middle class).

- **The Funding of Research.**

In this respect, there is a need to consider such things as:

1. Who is paying for research.

Their approval will be needed over choice of topic(s).

2. The political / academic background to research funding.

Historically in **Britain** it has been **easier** to get **funding** for research that is:

- a. **Designed to help policymakers make decisions.**
- b. **Statistically-based (quantitative)** rather than **qualitative**.

- **The Power of Subjects to Resist Your Research.**

In order to research a topic, you need such things as **access** to subjects and (usually) their **co-operation**. This be one reason for the fact that a great deal of sociological research has focused on the activities of the **powerless** (who **lack the ability to resist**) rather than the **powerful** in society (who most certainly can - and do - resist...).

- **Choice of method(s).**

Some topics (or aspects of them) may **not be appropriate** for the methods the researcher wants to use (see below: Theoretical Perspective). This may be the case if the topic under investigation consists of a number of smaller topics - **different methods** may be **appropriate** to **different aspects** of the larger topic.

- **The Theoretical Perspective of the Researcher.**

The researcher's choice of topic, aspects of behaviour to be studied and how it is appropriate to study them will be affected by the perspective within which the researcher is working.

An **ethnomethodologist** (Interactionist Perspective), for example, is **unlikely** to want to choose a topic of research that involves the detailed accumulation of **statistical data** because they are unlikely to see such **quantitative** data as having **validity**.

- **Time and Money.**

These factors will affect choice of topic in numerous ways, not the least being in relation to the **scope of research** undertaken (rather than attempting to study the prescribing behaviour of all doctors in England, for example, the researcher may be **restricted** by time and money to the study of a small number of doctors in a particular part of the country).

2. A researcher's choice of method(s) can be affected by the following:

- **The Theoretical Perspective of the Researcher.**

A **Structuralist** is **unlikely** to use **Participant Observation** as a method of data collection, whilst an **ethnomethodologist** is unlikely to run around with a **questionnaire...**

- **Time Available for the Research.**

Some methods are more **time-intensive** than others. **Participant Observation**, for example, may take many years of intensive research.

For example, **William Whyte** ("Street Corner Society") spent approximately **five years** (in total) doing his study of gangs in America. In this time, he gathered extensive information about the behaviour of one gang in a small area of the country...

- **Money Available.**

In a perfect world, money would always be available for social research into any topic and using any method - but it's not a perfect world...

The **amount of money** you have to spend will **directly influence** the **methods** you employ (**questionnaires** are **cheaper** than **in-depth interviews**, **interviews** are **cheaper** than **participant observation...**).

The money available will also influence the **size of any research team** - the more people available, the greater your size of sample and so forth.

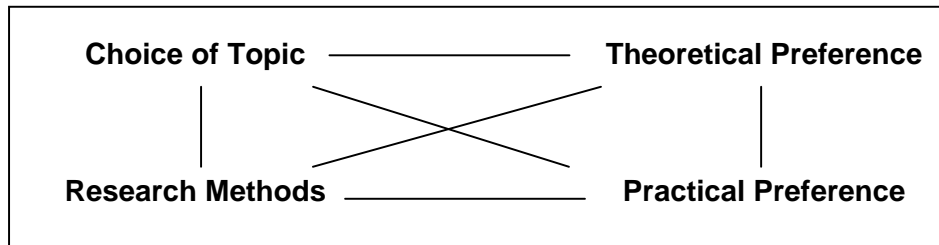
- **The Size and Composition of the Group Being Studied.**

Methods such as **social surveys** and **questionnaires**, for example, are **appropriate** for studying **large, widely-dispersed groups**.

Participant observation may be more-appropriate for the study of **small, geographically-localised, groups**.

“The Four-Cornered Relationship” Model

We can express the relationship between various practical and theoretical research considerations in the following, diagrammatic form.



The above model suggests that whenever we approach the study of social phenomena, the particular **method** (or methods) we **choose** to adopt will be **conditioned** by various **practical and theoretical considerations**:

For **example**, if our research involves investigating the prescribing patterns of **doctors in Britain**, it's **unlikely** that we will have the **time** and the **money** available to do much more than select a representative sample of doctors and send them a questionnaire to complete.

Additionally, since most sociological research is commissioned by interested groups such as Government agencies, the people who provide the **funds** for our research may demand a considerable say in how we spend those funds (a condition of doing the research, for example, might be that we must produce **statistical**, rather than qualitative, data).

Finally, our **choice of subject matter** to study may affect the **kinds of methods** we can adopt.

When Laud **Humphreys**, for example, chose to study the behaviour of male homosexuals in public lavatories (“Tea Room Trade”, 1970), he chose to use (**covert**) **Participant Observation** because he was,

“...convinced that there is only one way to watch highly discreditable behaviour and that is to pretend to be in the same boat with those engaging in it. To wear a [metaphorical] badge saying ‘I am a watchbird, watching you’ into a Tea Room would instantly eliminate all action except the flushing of toilets and the exiting of all present...”.

However, while practical considerations are clearly important in the “real world” of sociological research, it’s important that we recognise there is a **further dimension** to the question of why different sociologists choose to use different methods of data collection - one that comes under the general heading of “**Methodology**”.

In basic terms, questions of **methodology** are concerned with the **reliability** and **validity** of the data we collect:

For example, the question of whether or not **interviews** are a **valid** method of data collection, (given the argument of various Interactionists that they involve inherent problems of bias - the “**interview effect**”).

Theoretical Research Considerations (1)

In this respect, we can loosely characterize **methodological** considerations in relation to our choice of research method (as appropriate or inappropriate) to what we are trying to study, in terms of such things as:

- **How we see the social world.**

For example, in terms of the particular sociological perspective we hold, the nature of phenomena in the social world and so forth.

- **Our assessment of the relative reliability and validity of various methods.**
- **The level of access we have to our subject matter.**

For example, attempting to study a relatively **closed social group** (one that, for whatever reason, doesn't want to be studied by some busybody sociologist thank-you-very-much) using a **questionnaire** is **unlikely** to **produce** much **data**...

- **The purpose of our research.**

In basic terms, who's paying for it and how they expect us to present our findings. In crude terms, whilst you might tender for a **government contract** to do some research into doctor's prescribing patterns on the basis of doing a five-year, in-depth, participant observation study in a doctor's surgery in Chester (?), you're unlikely to get the contract...

- **The value-orientation of the researcher (see point one).**

The Sociological Toolbox?

In the above respect, the way we use various methods of data collection will be conditioned by a wide range of (**methodological**) factors.

Choosing one research method over another is **not** simply a question of looking into a sociological toolbox containing various methods and selecting the "**right tool for the job**" (since, in methodological terms, a tool that is considered right for a particular job - or piece of research - by one sociologist may not be considered right by another...).

Stephen **Ackroyd** and John **Hughes** ("Data Collection in Context", 1981) argue that this way of viewing research methods (as a set of theoretical tools that can be picked-up and discarded depending upon how appropriate they are for the task at hand) is **mistaken**. They argue this because, **unlike tools in a toolbox, sociological methods do not have a clear, unequivocal, purpose.**

For **example**, if we are faced with the practical problem of fixing a picture to a wall with a nail, we go to our toolbox and select the most appropriate tool for the job (in this instance, a hammer since you ask). A hammer is specifically designed for just such a purpose and it performs it's task well. If we had selected a spanner for the task, we would probably find that this tool was not well-adapted to the task...

However, **no such certainty** applies to a method such as a **questionnaire**. Not only do we have to consider such things as **practical problems** in adopting particular methods, but also we **may not believe** that questionnaires are a **valid** way of studying the social world (for various reasons to do with the nature of the

way we see the world in **theoretical** terms, the way we view the **nature of the phenomena** we are studying, the way we can **interpret relationships** within the data and so forth)

In this respect, at least **two major methodological considerations** are involved here, concerning such ideas as:

1. Our perception of the method itself as a valid or invalid way of studying social phenomena.

In effect, we are asking the question,

“Does a particular method of data collection allow us to discover something about human behaviour ‘as it really is’ (whatever this may mean) - or does the method we use simply reflect pre-conceived notions that we hold about both the nature of the social world and human behaviour within that world”?

2. When we collect data about the social world, we are guided by a number of theoretical considerations. We have to decide, for example:

- What counts as data?
- What is the relationship between various aspects of the data?
- How do we interpret the data we collect?

We can perhaps understand the above more easily by looking at **Ackroyd** and **Hughes**’ characterisation and implicit **criticism** of the “**toolbox**” approach to methods of data collection, about which they argue there are two basic variants:

1. The “Nature of the Problem” approach:

The idea here is that each “problem” we encounter in our research can be handled by an appropriate tool / method. For example:

If a screw has come loose, we select a screwdriver from our toolbox.
If we need to contact 1000’s of people, we select a questionnaire.

Looking at in this way, it’s perhaps difficult to see what all the fuss is about - but try **changing the perspective** and look at it from another angle.

“**Problems**” in the social world are a condition of the way we interpret the world (in simple terms, something you see as a “problem” may not be a problem to me - for example, is poverty a “problem” to someone who is not poor?).

Thus, **the way we define something** as a “**problem**” in the first place will **condition** the way we **theorise a solution** to that “problem”. The problem of “how to contact 1000’s of people” is only a “problem” insofar as we have chosen to carry-out our research in this way. If we **define the problem differently**, then perhaps we would see that other methods are more appropriate ways of collecting data...

2. The “Nature of the Method” approach:

The argument here is that **each method of data collection** available to us can only do **certain things well** and, therefore, we must recognise that certain methods can only discover certain things. For example:

- A screwdriver handle can be used to bang a nail into a wall, but not as effectively as a hammer.
- Participant observation can tell us a great deal about a relatively small group of people, but it's not as effective as a questionnaire if we need to contact large numbers of people.
- A structured interview can tell us something about a person, but not in as much depth as if we lived with them for a year...

Again, this looks like simple **commonsense** - we have something we want to study, certain methods do certain things well and other things badly, therefore, we need to select the method that does the job we require in the best possible way.

However, theoretical considerations are just as significant in this respect as they are in the other respect noted above. In this instance, the **assumption** is made that the choice of research method is simply and exclusively a practical problem, divorced from wider considerations such as:

- The reliability and validity of different methods.
- The beliefs that we, as researchers, hold about what constitutes "knowledge", "evidence" and so forth.
- The way the relationship between the researcher and the researched may affect the data we collect.

Theoretical Research Considerations (2)

Having looked at a number of examples of the way theoretical considerations intrude into the data collection process in relation to choice of methods, it would perhaps be useful to try and put this into an **overall context**.

Important Note.

While it could be reasonably argued that it is not particularly necessary to do this in the context of **A-Level studies**, it's probably best if you decide for yourself as to whether or not you want to delve into this rather **murky area of sociological theory**. If you don't, then all well and good and if you do, then read on...

In the above respect, all questions concerning the relationship between theory and methods of data collection come down to what **Bilton et al** (“Introductory Sociology”) calls **four related ideas**.

1. Ontology:

This idea is concerned with the “**theory of being**” that we adopt.

In short, **what do we believe exists?**

In relation to Sociology, for example, an ontological question is one that considers what the subject-matter of Sociology actually is. For example, is it:

- The attempt to find solutions to social problems?
- To answer questions such as “why are we here?”?
- To elaborate the fundamental laws of social development?
- To understand the nature of social interaction?
and so forth.

The significance of ontological questions, therefore, is that the **answers** we give to such **questions** will **condition** the way we view the **purpose of Sociology** as a subject, the way we address ourselves to research matters and, of course, the way we see it as **appropriate** to study the social world (especially in terms of our choice of research methods).

2. Epistemology :

This concept is concerned with “**how we know what we claim to know**” about the social world. In effect, this translates into the idea of what kind of **statement** or **proof** will we **accept** in order to **justify** to both our self and others **what we believe to exist?**

For example, we may argue that:

- “Seeing is believing”,
- “Experiencing something is enough to believe it”,

or, alternatively, we make accept something on **trust**, or because we have **faith**.

In relation to **Sociology**, for example, **epistemological questions** relate to the evidence that we are prepared to accept in order to justify something as “true”.

For example, if I suspect you of stealing my pen, an epistemological question might be what sort of proof will I accept from you in order to convince me that you didn’t take it?

- Your word?
- The word of someone you were with at the time of the alleged theft (an alibi)?
- A thorough search of your belongings?

This idea is important, in sociological terms, since the **kind of evidence** we are prepared to **accept** about the social world will, once again, **condition** our **choice of research method** - since if you are not, for example, prepared to accept that the picture of reality you get from interviewing someone is an accurate reflection of that reality, it follows that you are unlikely to use interviews in your research.

3. Methodology:

This idea is concerned with the **logic of social inquiry**. In short, how to both **discover** and, more importantly, **validate**, knowledge. We have come across this type of question in relation to two ideas:

- **The interview effect.**

If, for example, you believe that interviews are a manipulative process whereby the respondent attempts to present a picture of him / herself to you that accords with the picture they would like you to have, it follows that, methodologically, you would not see the collection of data in this way as being valid.

- **The observer effect**

If, for example, you believe that, no matter how unobtrusive the observer, the mere presence of an observer within the process of interaction he / she is studying affects the behaviour of the people being observed, it follows that, methodologically, you would not see the collection of such data in this way as being valid.

4. Methods:

This idea refers to **specific techniques of data collection**. In short, which techniques can we use in order to gather data / evidence that will support or refute the hypotheses we wish to test?

As should be evident, the above categories are significant in relation to the way we collect data and it might be useful to outline a couple of **examples** of the **relationship** between the four categories.

A specifically **Sociological example**, concerned with possible ways of studying the social world (“society”), might look something like the following...

[Note: Example “a” refers to a positivist methodology while example “b” refers to an interpretivist methodology.]

1. Ontological Dimension.

- Society exists...
 - a. In an objective form (Positivism)
 - b. In a subjective form (Interpretivism)

2. Epistemological Dimension

- I know it exists because...
 - a. People’s behaviour is patterned, relatively stable and orderly. Therefore, something about “society” must cause this to occur.
 - b. People behave in their day to day lives “as if” it exists (that is, because it is a convenient fiction).

3. Methodological Dimension

- I can validate what I know by...
 - a. Using objective methods to collect data about people’s behaviour.
 - b. Using subjective methods in order to understand the subjective meanings and interpretations involved in people’s behaviour.

4. Method(s) Dimension

- The technique I use will be...
 - a. The collection and analysis of quantitative data.
 - b. The collection and interpretation of qualitative data.

The main point of the above is to show that:

- a. The way you see the social world (**ontology**) and
- b. The form of proof you require to justify a claim to knowledge about the social world (**epistemology**), will have a significant impact upon,
- c. The kind of data you can collect in order to validate your arguments concerning the social world / people's behaviour (**methodology**) and
- d. The method(s) you consider to collect valid data (**methods**).

If we think about these ideas for a moment, it is clear that they will have a significant impact on the specific questions of:

- How you go about choosing methods of research for your research project part of the course.
- How to carry-out an evaluation of your data collection in the Methodology and Evaluation sections of your project and the general question of:
- Whether or not Sociology (or indeed, any other form of social science) can be considered to be scientific.

This latter question will be considered in more detail in the next part of the course, but for the moment it is important to remember that:

a. Your choice of research methods will be conditioned by both:

- Theoretical considerations (the way in which you see the social world).
- Practical considerations.

b. **Different sociologists** have **different “ways of seeing”** (Positivist sociologists have different ways of seeing the social world to Interpretivist or Realist sociologists).

c. The choice of research method is not simply a case of selecting the “most appropriate tool for the job”, since the job itself will be defined by methodological considerations and assumptions. For example:

A loose screw is a loose screw whichever way you look at it, but:

The concept of “**crime**” can - and frequently does - mean different things to different people. It can be:

- A **social problem** (for government, the police, etc.).
- A **way of life** (for a criminal).
- **Necessary** and / or inevitable (to a sociologist such as Durkheim).
- A **social construction / problem of labelling** (to a sociologist such as Becker).

Theories and Theoretical Approaches

Thus far we have looked, in varying amounts of detail, both explicitly and implicitly, at theoretical approaches to the study of the social world. These theoretical approaches (or perspectives) have involved looking at::

- The difference between Structuralist and Interactionist perspectives.
- The differences of theoretical approach within these two, very broad, categories. For example:
 - Structural Functionalism.
 - Conflict Structuralism
 - Symbolic Interaction
 - Phenomenology
- Differences of theoretical approach within each of these, more specific, categories. For example,
 - Marxist Conflict Theory
 - Weberian Conflict Theory
 - Feminist Conflict Theory.

However, it is also useful to say something about both the **general nature of sociological theorising** and the **specific relationship between theories and methods** of data collection. To this end, I've already outlined, in general terms, the way **theoretical issues** potentially **affect** the way we choose to study the social world. What I want to briefly do now, therefore, is to look at the nature of the **concept** of "**theory**" itself.

As we have seen at various points throughout the course (especially in relation to the use of the concept of ideological framework, for example), "theory" is implicit in our ability to understand both the natural and the social world. We can see this idea most clearly when we think about the world around us.

Thus, in order to **understand** what something is, it is necessary that we have a **theory** about that thing (part and parcel of this conceptualisation is, of course, naming - or **labelling** - the thing). For **example**, if someone says to you,

"Lend me your pen for a moment",

in order to comply with this request you need to have a **theory** about what a "**pen**" looks like. If you didn't have this theory (something that describes the relationship between the different elements that you recognize as the form taken by a "pen"), then you wouldn't understand the request.

Thus, if someone says to you,

"Lend me your jambeziki for a moment",

you are **unlikely to be able to comply** because you would **not** have a **theory** that **describes** a "jambeziki" (I know this to be true because it's a word I've just invented).

Thus, as I've just noted, in order to hold a theory about something like a pen, we necessarily have to hold a theory that **describes** what a pen looks like (what makes

it different from a pencil, a three-piece suite or a jumbo jet - wouldn't it be funny if you asked to borrow someone's pen and they gave you a jumbo jet instead?...No, perhaps you're right, it wouldn't be very funny at all).

What holds **true** for **physical objects** also holds **true** for **social objects**. In order to **understand** that someone is a "**criminal**", we have to hold a **theory** about what constitutes a **crime**...

In this respect, as **Auguste Comte** ("The Positive Philosophy", 1853) has noted,

"If it is true that every theory must be based upon observed facts, it is equally true that facts cannot be observed without the guidance of some theory. Without such guidance, our facts would be desultory and fruitless; we could not retain them: for the most part we could not even perceive them."

Comte is simply arguing that it is **not possible** to observe something without our **observation** being **directed** by some **theory** (correct or incorrect) **about what it is we are observing**.

Similarly, in order to make sense of the relationship between the things we observe, it's also necessary that we hold a theory that allows us to satisfactorily interpret this perceived relationship.

Having established in your mind, I hope, the basic **principle** that **everything** we **observe** is based upon some form of **theory** that **explains** (to our satisfaction at least) **what we are seeing**, it follows that the theoretical approach we adopt when attempting to study the world has implications for:

- a. The theories we produce to explain the observation.
- b. The methods we adopt in pursuit of proof (or refutation) of those theories.

As an **example**, consider the following, different, theoretical approaches in relation to the concept of IQ:

Theoretical Approach 1:

a. If I believe that "**intelligence**" is a **measurable quality** related to the **genetic inheritance** we receive from our parents then the kind of theory I will develop to explain this relationship is one that will focus upon the need to demonstrate such things as:

- The existence of genes,
- The nature of genetic transmission,
- The relationship between genetic structures and behaviour.

b. In turn, the **methods** of data collection that I use will derive from both my theoretical approach and the theory I am attempting to establish. In this respect, such methods will involve trying to:

c. **Quantify levels of intelligence** for related individuals; **Quantify the relationship between genetic inheritance and intelligence levels.**

Theoretical Approach 2:

a. If I believe that "intelligence" is a socially-constructed category that is highly dependent upon such things as:

- The way we attempt to theorise this concept (what, exactly, do we mean by the concept?).
- The way in which we attempt to measure the concept (are such methods both reliable and valid?),
- The socialization process in any society,
- The nature of power relationships in any society, then,

b. It follows that the theory I adopt in order to explain these relationships is one that will focus upon such things as:

- The need to demonstrate that “intelligence” is a socially- constructed category,
- The need to demonstrate that there is no discernible relationship whatsoever between a person’s genetic structure and their behaviour.
- The way in which different social groups or classes use their powerful social positions as a means of applying “deviant” labels to the behaviour of the relatively powerless (labels such as “thick”, “stupid” and so forth).

The **methods** of data collection that I adopt will, therefore, reflect both my theoretical approach and theory of the relationship between intelligence and behaviour in such ways as:

- Attempting to collect data that demonstrates the way various social categories are constructed.
- Examining the concept of “intelligence” carefully.

Perspectives and Methods: A Public Health Warning...

While it’s clear there exists a relationship between various sociological perspectives and methods of data collection, it’s important to understand that this relationship is **not necessarily very strong** in the “**real world**” of **applied sociological research**. While the general theoretical perspective within which a sociologist works is clearly going to have some impact upon the way in which:

- They view the nature of the social world.
- They see various methods as appropriate or inappropriate to the study of the social world,

two main considerations have to be taken into account:

Firstly, the idea that **theoretical perspectives** within sociology are **not “hard and fast” categories** into which various sociologists can be neatly fitted. Indeed, one of the problems that we have when adopting a **“perspective approach”** to the study of different sociologists is that, in order to ensure that writers fit into a particular perspective, the **boundaries** of each perspective have to be **very widely drawn**.

Two subsidiary points should be noted here:

- a. Writers we may consign to particular perspectives (for the sake of academic convenience) may not necessarily have much in common.
- b. A great deal of confusion exists (even amongst sociologists) about where one “perspective” ends and another begins. For example, even a cursory glance over the contents of two or three sociology textbooks demonstrates that there is no easy consensus concerning where “phenomenology” ends and “ethnomethodology” begins (or even over whether we should term a perspective “Interactionism”, “phenomenology” or whatever).

Secondly, with regard to various methods available to the sociologist, two points need to be noted:

- a. Firstly, that sociological research is not driven by the supposed “advantages” and “disadvantages” of various research methods. Methods of data collection within sociology tend to be infinitely adaptable to the theoretical requirements of the researcher.
- b. Secondly, there is no necessary relationship between theoretical perspective and methods of data collection, such that a Functionalist sociologist would never consider using some form of participant observation and, similarly, an Interactionist would never be caught using some form of questionnaire:

David Hargreaves, for example, working within a generally Functionalist perspective on the social world used a form of participant observation in his study of “Social Relationships In A Secondary Modern School”, whilst an avowed Interactionist such as Howard Becker has used various forms of interview techniques in his research.

Finally, therefore, it is important - if you are to study and understand sociology - to remember that many of the categories we create in order to understand the nature of sociological thought and practice are somewhat artificial, in the sense that they are created for our theoretical convenience as students of the subject. In this sense, it is necessary to retain an understanding of this various categories, without attempting to apply them too rigidly to the “real world” of sociological thought and practice.

Summary.

1. The sociologist's choice of research method(s) and topic is always influenced, to some extent, by practical and theoretical research considerations. These considerations come under the heading of "methodology" (the logic of sociological research).
2. Practical research considerations includes such things as:
 - The interests of the researcher,
 - Current debates and intellectual fashions,
 - The source of funding for the research,
 - The power of research subjects to resist investigation,
 - The time and money available for research,
 - The size and composition of the group being studied.
3. Theoretical research considerations includes such things as:
 - The theoretical perspective of the researcher,
 - The reliability and validity of data collection methods,
 - The values of the researcher.
4. In any sociological research, choice of methods will be conditioned by methodological considerations concerning the way in which the researcher sees the reliability and validity of particular research methods.
5. Sociological research is, according to Ackroyd and Hughes, more than simply "selecting the right method(s) for the problem".
6. The relationship between sociological theory and sociological methods can be summarized as the relationship between the concepts of:
 - a. Ontology (What we believe exists).
 - b. Epistemology (The proof we will accept to justify this belief).
 - c. Methodology (How we go about collecting what we consider to be valid proof).
 - d. Methods (The techniques we use to actually collect valid proof).
7. A "theoretical approach" or "sociological perspective" is a "way of seeing" the social world; in short, it represents a set of related values and beliefs about the nature of the social world and how it is possible and / or desirable to research it.
8. Different theoretical approaches involve different beliefs about the nature of the social world and hence the reliability and validity of different methods of research.
9. "Sociological perspectives", although theoretically useful as a means of categorizing sociological thought, are not "hard and fast", unchanging, categories. It is probably better to view these perspectives as very loose-knit collectivities of writers who share some, but not all, basic views about the nature of the social world.

Examination Questions.

1. Identify two practical research considerations that might influence the researcher's choice of topic (2 marks).
2. "Sociologists use whatever method suits their purpose best, irrespective of their particular theoretical approach".
With reference to this statement, evaluate the importance of various factors which may affect choice of method (8 marks).
3. Identify and explain two situations where a sociologist might choose to use a questionnaire rather than any other research method (4 marks).
4. Identify and explain two situations where a sociologist might choose to use participant observation rather than any other research method (4 marks).
5. Outline and explain Interactionist's preference for the use of qualitative data in explanations of social life (25 marks).