

Outline and explain two reasons why personal and historical documents are better for studying society than official statistics (10)

One reason that personal and historical documents are better for studying society than official statistics is the level of in-depth and valid insight into the lives of individuals that they provide. Personal documents, such as diaries and letters, would be preferred by Interpretivists, as they give the researcher the chance to achieve 'verstehen' or insight into the lives of the individuals that they are studying. Researchers will be able to analyse the meanings and motivations of the subject and draw conclusions from their writing about how social issues have impacted on them. An example would be Thomas and Zanecki's analysis of letter sent by Polish immigrants to the USA back home, which would provide a valuable insight into their experience, rather than the objective, yet detached immigration figures that were provided at the time. Official statistics are limited in that they do not have high validity and merely represent the scale of a social issue, rather than investigate the reasons why issues have occurred.

A second reason why personal and historical documents may be better for studying society is due to the nature of official statistics. Whilst positivists would prefer the large scale and objective data official statistics provide, Interpretivists would argue that the definitions of issues often lead statistics to be little more than a social construction. An example of this is Durkheim's study of suicide which compared suicide statistics across nations and found similarities in the data of catholic countries having lower suicide rates. Interpretivists, such as Atkinson and Douglas criticised these finding and suggested that it would be better to examine each case of suicide to ensure that coroners were recording the verdicts correctly. Atkinson found through examining historical documents that often the decision was made based upon key facts, such as history of mental ill health or financial problems. Interpretivists would argue that Durkheim's methods lacked validity in finding out motivations for suicide, or indeed the accurate recording of suicide and that it would be preferable to use alternative methods, such as personal documents and historical documents to understand whether or not the death was a suicide or not.