

1. Outline and explain two practical limitations of using observations in sociological research [10]

One practical limitation of using observations in sociological research is gaining access to a sample. As observations are an intrusive method of research, requiring the researchers to observe participants over long periods of time, participants may be reluctant to volunteer to be observed. Furthermore, if the researcher chooses to use covert participant observations, they will need to gain access through developing a cover, which can be time-consuming and difficult to achieve and may require modifications to the researchers appearance, attitude and personality. For example, when researching Chelsea football hooligans, McIntyre had to get tattooed to demonstrate his commitment to the firm. Furthermore, Griffin used sun lamps and took tanning pills in order to modify his appearance when conducting observations in the impacts of racism. However, one way to overcome this is through using a snowball sample, gaining access to one individual who could introduce the researcher to others.

A second practical limitation of using observations in sociological research is maintaining a cover. This is the case when using covert observations. As those being researched are unaware that they are being observed, the researcher must maintain their cover at all times. This means they are unable to overtly record conversations or take notes and means they must rely upon their memory when documenting their observation. Furthermore, if the researcher were to be discovered, it could negatively impact on their research, and in some instances cause them harm. For example, Patrick, when researching gangs in Glasgow, was almost uncovered when he tried to pay for a suit with cash, rather than through credit. This could have exposed him as being more affluent than those he was observing and had potential to end his research.

2. Outline and explain two reasons why sociological research cannot be value-free. [10]

One reason why sociological research cannot be value free is due to researcher's theoretical perspectives. Sociologists will be influenced by their view of society, for example Marxists will focus on class inequalities, feminists will focus on gender inequalities. This has the potential to impose the researcher's values onto any interpretation of data and means that the research could be value laden. This is particularly the case when considering the researcher's view of the responsibility of sociology as a force for changing society, rather than as empirical study. For example, Becker argued that the purpose of sociology was to be on the side of the underdog in society and represent the views of those less likely to be heard. As a result, his values could interfere with the conduct of his research, displaying empathy for his research subjects and looking for external reasons for behaviours that were observed, rather than looking at 'social facts'.

A second explanation for why sociology cannot be value-free is down to the demands of funding bodies. Sociologists fund their research based upon applications to funding bodies, such as charities, trusts, universities and the government. As a result, funding bodies have a large say in both the choice of topic the researcher investigates and the methods they use in order to conduct that research. For example, charities such as the Joseph Rowntree Foundation examined the impacts of poverty in the UK and so these values will be present in research that is conducted on their behalf. Furthermore, funding from governments tends to be based upon the use of large-scale quantitative data, in part due to the need for policies that result from the research to appeal to large sections of the electorate. As a result, conclusions may be drawn by researchers that support the creation of policies that would be ideologically favourable to the government. Gouldner argues that funding bodies are one of the largest influences in the conduct of sociological research and as such their values would be represented in all stages of the conduct of research.