



General Certificate of Education

Sociology 5191

SC3W Sociological Methods

Report on the Examination

2008 examination - January series

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Set and published by the Assessment and Qualifications Alliance.

SC3W – Sociological Methods

General

Overall, candidates demonstrated a reasonable understanding of the demands of this question paper. However, there were still a proportion of candidates who spent too long on parts (a) to (d), thus limiting the amount of time available to respond to the essay questions.

Essay writing under examination pressure continues to be a major demand on candidates, who often exhibited a strong tendency to rely on descriptive accounts of relevant points and studies. Candidates generally require further guidance on how to select, explain, evaluate and apply suitable material.

There is also a tendency among many candidates to use colloquial terminology rather than more precise academic language. Words such as 'true', 'accurate', 'good' and 'bad' in relation to the strengths and weaknesses of research methods, lack the precision of 'high in validity' or 'unrepresentative'. The latter approach should be encouraged.

Question 1

- (a) Most candidates were able to answer this question clearly and effectively through reference to 'first-hand data' or data collected by sociologists themselves. A few responses were poorly constructed, obscuring the meaning of the candidates' attempted explanation. A few also only offered an example such as interviews, and so gained one mark. It was pleasing to note that very few candidates had no clear idea about the meaning of 'primary' data.
- (b) This question was dealt with very effectively by many candidates who were able to display a clear understanding of what constitutes ethical issues. Some candidates, however, lost marks through repetition, confusion between practical and ethical concerns, or by relating concerns on choice of topic rather than method. Typical issues that were identified included harm to research subjects, being drawn into illegal acts, deception and anonymity.
- (c) Many candidates gained either four or six marks on this question. The most common responses that gained reward indicated advantages such as validity, depth, the only way to study past events and low cost.
- (d) Many candidates were able to identify two appropriate disadvantages of official statistics. Common disadvantages identified included social construction, lack of control of the data collection process, being out of date and being subject to political manipulation. However, as in previous examinations, the main demand on candidates was to then explain the disadvantages they had identified. In many cases the 'explanation' was no more than a repetition of the disadvantage itself or did not explain how this created difficulties for the sociologist. For example, 'political manipulation' was often followed by a statement about how this was done to benefit the government's image rather than explaining how this disadvantaged the researcher.

A few candidates misread the question and took it to be concerned with the advantages of official statistics.

- (e) This was a straightforward question on a research method which tends to be popular with candidates. Although many candidates were well prepared for questions relating to participant observation (PO), they then often failed to get into the top mark band for a variety of reasons, the most prevalent being misunderstanding the demands of the part (e) 'examine' question. This particular question asked candidates to examine the reasons why some sociologists use PO in their research. The focus of answers should therefore be on the positive attributes of different forms of PO. However, many candidates elected to present an 'advantages/disadvantages' response, which was only relevant in parts. More sophisticated answers used knowledge of the weaknesses of PO in an evaluative manner rather than simply putting them in list form at the end of the essay.

Some candidates went off on a tangent by discussing non-participant observation which, in some cases, was also confused with covert PO. A few made no distinction between covert and overt PO. Other less effective answers were distracted into sometimes quite lengthy accounts of particular studies that have employed PO which, although accurate, usually offered little or no analysis or evaluation.

Most candidates could identify the methodological location of PO but sometimes this was limited to a bald statement such as 'interpretivists prefer PO'. Stronger responses explained what it is about PO that meets the research criteria of interpretivists.

- (f) High quality responses had a clear focus on the postal dimension whereas less effective answers were drawn into often lengthy accounts of issues relating to questionnaires in general. These sometimes appeared to be rehearsed answers.

Stronger answers made good use of Item B, linking their own knowledge to explicit references to this Item. Better responses also applied examples of studies, presented a theoretical base to their discussion, or made appropriate use of key concepts as a way of analysing and evaluating the usefulness of postal questionnaires.

As in previous examinations, some candidates who had made reference to methodological issues in their answer to part (e) strangely did not always do so in their response to this question. Possibly this stemmed from a mistaken belief that the same or similar material cannot be used in answer to different questions. Candidates should be encouraged to make appropriate methodological references in answers to questions throughout the paper.

Less effective responses were shorter and went into less depth. They often included quite lengthy descriptive passages which, although containing potentially relevant material, made a limited range of points in a relatively large number of words. At this level of response AO2 skills were limited.

The least effective answers were those that were heavily reliant on Item B or that made a few vague points usually in relation to cost and time.

Mark Ranges and Award of Grades

Grade boundaries and cumulative percentage grades are available on the [Results statistics](#) page of the AQA Website.