Research Methods

Types of data
Quantitative: Statistical data that is in numbers and can be presented in tables and graphs.
Qualitative: Data that is in words and has lots of detail, helping to give context.
Primary: Research information that sociologists have collected themselves – the researcher has more control over the data collected and can tailor it to exactly what they want, but can be expensive and time-consuming
Secondary: Information that has been collected by someone else for another purpose – cheaper/easier as it's already available but might not be exactly what is wanted and is often out-of-date.

Pilot studies
A **pre-test** for the research so you can practise the methods, to secure funding for research and to work out practical issues (e.g. time/cost). Less common with qualitative research, but essential to quantitative research to check questions.

Questionnaires
Series of questions used to find out about an issue – most widely used research method.
Closed questions: One word answers or categories to tick.
Open questions: So respondents to develop their ideas.

Advantages: •Generate large amounts of data •Quick and cheap way of collecting data (especially online) •Respondents usually complete them independently – no need for team of interviewers

Disadvantages: •Questions can be interpreted differently or lack detail – compromises validity •Can have a low **response rate** (particularly postage surveys)

Content analysis
Quantitative method used to analyse mass media, e.g. tally chart to measure the number and type of gender roles on TV adverts. Useful for measuring key themes show in the media, e.g. media bias of reporting global events.

Interviews
Structured interviews: Prepared list of question, which are standardised so all interviews are the same – even if different interviewers are being used.
Unstructured interviews: No pre-planned questions so can gain detail (high validity) – but more difficult to repeat so less reliable.
Semi-structured interviews: Some pre-planned questions but also flexibility to adapt questions to probe further if needed.
Rapport: Build-up of trust between researcher and respondent – important when talking to vulnerable people.
BUT, time-consuming and costly, interviewers need training.

Observation
Where researcher observes the behaviour of a group.
Overt: Participants are aware they are being observed – but can lead to **Hawthorne Effect** (change of behaviour).
Covert: Participants unaware they are being observed – most sociologists prefer this as observations are likely to me more truthful.
Participant: Researcher interacts with group being observed – but can become too involved/influence group.
Non-participant: Researcher observes from a distance.
BUT, studies are difficult to repeat, and sample size is usually too small to be representative.

Sampling
Target population: Group of people researcher wants to study.
Sample: Small section of the population selected for research purposes.
Sampling frame: List of potential participants, e.g. electoral role.
Random sample: Where everyone in the has the same chance of being selected.
Systematic sample: Follows a specific rule to get an unbiased sample, e.g. every 10th person on a register.
Stratified sample: Divides sample frame into smaller groups, e.g. age, social class, and then draws at random from these groups to increase representativeness.
Opportunistic sample: Using the people who are available at the time.
Quota sample: Including a certain number of people from certain groups to increase representativeness, e.g. 25% of sample must be under the age of 30.
Snowballing sample: Used for smaller groups who are difficult to access – the research uses one contact to introduce them to a second.
Unrepresentative sample: Only uses a specific group of people so can not be generalised to others outside of the study.

Reliability: Can the research be repeated with different participants and gain a similar result? *Questionnaires tend to have highest reliability.
Validity: How accurate is the data that has been collected – how deep an insight does it provide? *Participant observation and unstructured interviews tend to have the highest validity.
Representativeness: Does the sample include a wide range of characteristics that are been in the general population? If not the results will be too generalised, and therefore won't answer hypothesis properly.
Ethics: The rules to follow so that a piece of research or the way it is conducted is morally right, e.g. anonymity, confidentiality, informed content, protection from harm.