

# Practical issues are the most important – sociology essay sample

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Examine the extent to which practical issues are the most important influence when selecting research methods and a research topic (20 marks)

Practical issues are considered to be of most importance when choosing what research method to use. Different methods require different amounts of time and money which may influence the sociologist's choice as large-scale surveys have to employ dozens of interviewers and staff costing a lot of money whereas a small-scale project involving a lone researcher may be cheaper to carry out however, this then may take more time. The funding of research comes from institutes, businesses and other organisations requiring quantitative data to be produced, this means that the method used will have to be capable of producing such data such as questionnaires or structured interviews. Sociologists require different personal skills which may affect their ability to use different methods as participant observation usually requires the ability to mix easily with others, observation and recall skills whereas interviews require the sociologist to establish a rapport with the interviewee.

Not all sociologists may have these qualities or skills so may have difficulty using certain methods. Another practical issue is subject matter as it may be much harder to study a particular group or subject by one method than another. Research opportunity can be an issue as sometimes the opportunity to carry out research occurs unexpectedly meaning that it may not be possible to use structured methods such as questionnaires which would take longer to prepare whereas in other circumstances the researcher might have been able to set up the research opportunity carefully beforehand and have plenty of time to select their methods. Before sociologists decide which

method to use they need to decide what topic they wish to study, practical factors may affect this choice. A practical issue influencing choice of topic may be the inaccessibility of certain situations to the researcher as this can restrict what topics they are able to study. Ethical issues can be considered more important when choosing which method to use in research.

Informed consent can be an ethical issue as research participants should be offered the right to refuse and should be made fully aware of all the relevant aspects of research so they can make a fully informed privacy decision. Consent should be obtained beforehand and at intervals throughout the process. Confidentiality and is an ethical issue to be considered as the identity of research participants should be kept secret to prevent any negative effects, privacy of research participants should be respected and their personal information should be kept confidential such as in postal surveys as they are anonymous and protect the identity of research subjects. Researchers need to be aware of the possible effects of their work on those they study such as police intervention, social exclusion and psychological damage. The researcher should try anticipating and preventing these harmful effects. Special care should be taken where research participants are particularly vulnerable because of their age, disability, or physical or mental health. Covert research can create serious ethical problems such as lying or deceiving research participants in order to win their trust or obtain information as it is impossible to gain informed consent while keeping the research or its purpose a secret.

Theoretical issues can also be considered more important in influencing the choice of methods as we have to consider the validity of the method and which allows the researcher to get closer to the truth. Qualitative methods such as participant observation give a more valid or truthful account of what it is like to be a member of a group than quantitative methods such as questionnaires can. We also have to consider the reliability of the method this is one which when repeated by another researcher gives the same results Representativeness is also a theoretical issue than can influence the choice of method used as this refers to whether or not the people we study are a typical cross section of the group we are interested in.

We have to use a representative sample so our findings can be generalised. Large scale quantitative surveys are more likely to produce representative data. The choice of topic being studied can be influenced by the sociologist's theoretical perspective. To evaluate, Practical issues are the most important in influencing choice of methods because they constrain the choices researchers can make as they limit the factor rather than having a positive influence on choice. Ethical and theoretical issues may have some influence on choice of methods for consent and privacy issues and the validity, reliability and representativeness of the methods but practical issues are more important.