# CONTENTS

## Topic
- Consensus vs. conflict; structure vs. action  
  - 4
- Modernity and post-modernity  
  - 14
- Is sociology a science?  
  - 18
- Subjectivity, objectivity and value freedom  
  - 23
- Choice of topic and method and research design  
  - 26
- Questionnaires  
  - 30
- Interviews  
  - 36
- Participant and non-participant observations  
  - 41
- Experiments  
  - 46
- Documents  
  - 50
- Official statistics  
  - 54
- Sociology and social policy  
  - 57
- Methods in context  
  - 62
AQA A LEVEL SOCIOLOGY TOPIC COMPANION: THEORY & METHODS

This A Level Course Companion has been designed specifically to support teaching and learning, taking a systematic approach closely based on the AQA specification. The Theory and Methods Companion takes each point from the two Theory and Methods areas of the specification and breaks it down into sections. Each section makes a clear link to the specification, provides a checklist of what needs to be known and then explains key content, using both classic and some more contemporary studies and examples.

The sections are:

- **Theory**
  - Consensus vs Conflict; Structure vs Action
  - Modernity and Post-modernity
  - Is Sociology a Science?
  - Subjectivity, Objectivity and Value-freedom

- **Research Methods**
  - Questionnaires
  - Interviews
  - Participant and non-participant observation
  - Experiments
  - Documents
  - Official statistics
  - Choice of topic and method

- **Theory and Methods**
  - Sociology and Social Policy
  - Overview

- **Methods in Context**

Each section includes regular evaluation of theories, studies or perspectives. This is written in the explicit and developed way that students would need to try to emulate in the exam. Each section concludes with a list of possible exam questions along with expert examiner hints. While potential questions are endless (especially in relation to specific wording and the items) all the types of questions that could be asked are included, providing opportunity to write about all the core content. There is a skills-based section on the Methods in Context questions.

It is important to remember that in sociology you are encouraged to apply themes, knowledge and analysis across topic areas, including between different substantive topics. When attempting questions from one section, you should always be aware that you can and should use information from other sections. Two key features of this companion help to facilitate this synoptic approach. These are:

- "making the link": where a connection between content in this module and that of another (usually from the first year) is explicitly explored.
- "links to core themes": where AQA’s core themes of socialisation, culture and identity, social differentiation and power and stratification are applied to each area of the specification.

The language is designed to be reader-friendly, yet packed with key terminology and the sort of academic style that A Level students need to develop in order to excel in their exams.
CONSENSUS VS. CONFLICT; STRUCTURE VS. ACTION

Specification: consensus, conflict, structural and social action theories.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>WHAT YOU NEED TO KNOW</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Identify, outline and explain:</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Consensus theories</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Conflict theories</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• The differences between them</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Identify, outline and explain</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Structural theories</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Social action theories</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The differences between them</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Evaluate the usefulness of:</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Consensus theories</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Conflict theories</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Structural theories</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Social action theories</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>For understanding contemporary society</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Consensus Theories
Consensus theories are those that see people in society as having shared interests and society functioning on the basis of there being broad agreements on norms and values. The main consensus theory we consider is functionalism.

Functionalism
The sociological perspective, functionalism, developed from the writings of the French sociologist, Emile Durkheim (1858-1917).

Emile Durkheim argued society was like a human body (the organic analogy). Society was made up of various institutions that acted like the organs of the body: they all needed to be functioning properly for the body to function. Problems in one area of society (such as high levels of crime, for example) could be a symptom of dysfunctions somewhere else (just as a headache is not always caused by banging your head). In order for society to run smoothly there has to be the correct balance of social cohesion and social control. By social cohesion, Durkheim meant the extent to which people in society were bound together in common purposes. By social control, he meant the extent to which people were prevented from behaving in an anti-social manner. He believed the good society had neither too little nor too much of either of these qualities. Too little social cohesion and you have a selfish society where people do not look out for each other. Too much, and people do not seek personal advancement which stifles progress. Too little social control and you have lawlessness and chaos. Too much and you have oppression and tyranny. He argued that this balance was best maintained by consensus: i.e. agreement.

Critical to functionalism is the idea of socialisation. This is the process that creates a value consensus and therefore social solidarity. There are two stages of socialisation:
• Primary socialisation: learning the particularistic values of family and community through family (occurs at a young age).
• Secondary socialisation: learning the universalistic values of wider society through education, media and other institutions.
Functionalism is essentially a conservative idea, based on the view that social change is a gradual process that happens naturally when the consensus shifts.

Key functionalists you might have encountered in other modules or go on to encounter, include:
- Talcott Parsons
- Davis and Moore
- Young and Wilmott
- Robert Merton
- Walt Rostow

Key functionalist ideas include:
- Organic change (rather than radical change)
- Meritocracy (people achieve their position in society through effort and ability, rather than through inheritance)
- Social institutions have positive functions

Another theory that often gets considered alongside functionalism is the New Right.

**New Right**

Not everyone agrees that the New Right is a consensus theory (there is no consensus on it!). The ways in which it is a consensus theory are very similar to functionalism.

*Exam Hint: If you get a question about consensus theories, you can talk about the New Right, but to question the extent to which it is one would be considered good analysis.*

The New Right combines neo-liberal economics (free markets and minimal government intervention) with more traditional conservative views on social issues (such as a traditional view on family life, school discipline and law and order).

The New Right, in many ways, shares the views of functionalists with the main difference being that they argue that, in the late 20th century in countries like the UK and the USA, society became dysfunctional: the necessary consensus broke down. The New Right argument is that a range of government policies, most notably those associated with the welfare state, undermined the key institutions that create the value consensus and ensure social solidarity.

An example of this is the family. The New Right argues that liberal left politicians and welfare policies have undermined the traditional nuclear family, particularly by creating a large increase in lone-parent families. They argue that this has led to inadequate socialisation, particularly for boys with no father figure. Charles Murray argues that this has led to the creation of an underclass.

New Right ideas were instrumental in changing modern conservatism in the 1970s and were highly influential on both Margaret Thatcher and Ronald Reagan. It would be possible to argue that the New Right is a political movement rather than a sociological theory; its observations on those groups in society with very different and conflicting norms and values can lead some to question whether it is a consensus theory. However, the New Right support a society like that envisaged by functionalists and support government policies which to try and change society in that way (such as tax breaks to encourage traditional nuclear families).
### Make the Link

The **agents of socialisation** that create the value consensus are:
- Families
- Education
- Media
- Places of worship, etc.

As such, the ideas of consensus theory, and the key theme of socialisation, is present in all of the A Level sociology modules. When answering questions about consensus theories, you can support your points with examples from any other topic area. Make sure you link those examples very explicitly to the question though. Long, descriptive accounts from other modules will not be highly regarded.

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### Evaluating Consensus Theories

- The main criticism of consensus theories comes from conflict theories and therefore will be considered in detail in the next section. Marxists and feminists both argue that society is not built on consensus but instead on fundamental conflicts. They both argue that the illusion of consensus in society does not serve the interests of everyone, just those in the powerful groups (the ruling class and men, respectively).

- Therefore, some Marxists in particular (such as Antonio Gramsci) argue that functionalism is a deliberate ruling-class ideology designed to maintain the status quo.

- A specific criticism of functionalism is that it looks at society through rose-tinted spectacles: it is too optimistic. Institutions in society are positive and beneficial for some, but can be very damaging for others (whether or not you consider that as a fundamental conflict in society). Therefore, there is a key criticism of functionalism in that it is idealistic.

- Some accuse the New Right of lacking objectivity: there is a political position that supports low taxes and minimal public spending. It is convenient that they think welfare spending causes many social problems when this position also supports the preference for lower taxation on the wealthy.

- Postmodernists and interpretivists criticise both consensus and conflict theories for being structuralist theories: seeing human behaviour as determined by the great structures in society rather than individual humans having agency and being responsible for their own actions (see **structure vs action**).
Conflict Theories
Conflict theories are theories that see society as being made up of two or more groups with competing and incompatible interests. The two main conflict theories that we study in sociology are Marxism and feminism which see society divided by social class and gender respectively. Other theories, such as interactionism recognise conflict in society, but do not view society as being fundamentally based on one specific conflict.

Marxism

Karl Marx (1818-1883) was a German philosopher, economist, journalist, sociologist and communist who developed one of the most influential theoretical frameworks in the social sciences of all time. It centred on his critique of capitalism, the economic system of the western industrialised world.

While capitalism was creating unimaginable industrial development during the period of Marx's life, he observed that it was also creating unprecedented poverty and a society divided with a fundamental conflict based on social class. This conflict would ultimately destroy the very thing that created it, through communist revolution.

The key to understanding Marx’s view is the exploitative nature of work in a capitalist society. For Marx, the bourgeoisie (the ruling class, who owned the means of production, that is factories, mines, etc.) employed the proletariat (the working class) to produce the items that they then sold. Because the purpose of capitalist enterprise is to make a profit, the workers are never paid the real value of their work. Coal is worth nothing in the ground, it is the miner that makes it valuable by extracting it. However, the mine owner must receive much more for the sale of their coal than they pay to the miners in order to accumulate capital: to make profit. For Marx, this “surplus value” is essentially theft: it is an exploitative relationship. Thus Marx argues that capitalism makes most people poor.

Far from there being a consensus in society, then, the two main classes in a capitalist society have entirely opposing interests. It is in the bourgeoisie’s interests to pay their workers as little as they can get away with in order to make profit. At the same time, there is a contradiction at the heart of capitalism: the workers are also the customers and so, by making them poor, capitalism creates “crises” where the economy collapses (recessions or depressions); a particularly deep one of these will be the final crisis and trigger a communist revolution. There is debate about the extent to which Marx thought this inevitable.

Traditional Marxists note that the proletariat, despite being exploited by the bourgeoisie, mostly accept bourgeois rules without considering it normal, unavoidable or even desirable. They argue that this happens because the bourgeoisie transmit their ideology through what Louis Althusser termed ideological state apparatuses which lead to the workers not having class consciousness (being conscious of their social class and how it is treated in the class system). Instead, they take on the bourgeois ideology itself: i.e. have a misguided or false view of their own position in society - a false class consciousness. Should the proletariat become class conscious and revolt or strike against the ruling class, then the repressive state apparatus is able to control them (the police or the army).

A famous quotation from Marx is “philosophers have only interpreted the world in various ways; the point is to change it.” Marx did not just analyse and describe capitalist society, he was a political activist and wanted the proletariat to rise up against the bourgeoisie in a communist revolution.


**Feminism**

Feminism is a perspective and social movement that views contemporary society as being patriarchal (that is, dominated by men). However, while all feminists agree that society is patriarchal (to different degrees) and fight for women's rights, there are several distinct forms of feminism. For example:

**Liberal Feminism:** All feminists identify and are concerned about patriarchy in society, but liberal feminists are particularly interested in the issue of legal equality. They want men and women to have the same legal rights. In the UK at least, after women got the vote on equal terms to men, the Equal Pay and Sex Discrimination Acts were passed, and various other reforms in, for example, birth control and divorce, were achieved, many liberal feminists consider that their battle is well advanced and in these areas largely won. However, liberal feminists still note the reality that a gender pay gap remains and issues like the glass ceiling and the dual burden continue.

**Radical Feminism:** Radical feminists see patriarchy as the principal end and aim of current social structures and therefore argue for a root-and-branch restructuring of society. They are therefore not satisfied with the appeals for legal equality that characterises liberal feminism. They believe that men and women have a false consciousness which leads them to have values and aspirations they consider their own but are actually imposed on them by patriarchal control. At the more extreme end of the perspective this has led some radical feminists to question whether there can ever be true consent in heterosexual relationships and to propose complete separation between the sexes. In recent years, there has been controversy with some radical feminists, like Germaine Greer, appearing to challenge the rights of transgender women. This is because, while postmodern feminists see gender as an identity of choice, radical feminists see gender as a set of cultural norms and values constructed and imposed on women by patriarchy and therefore to be rejected.

**Marxist Feminism:** Marxist feminists argue that working-class women are exploited by both patriarchy and capitalism. Most feminists think that gender is the most important division/conflict in society, but Marxist feminists see social class as being of equal importance.

**Difference Feminism:** Difference feminism, also known as black feminism, is a perspective that perceives how women are oppressed by the patriarchy but also by both capitalism and racism. They argue that minority-ethnic, working-class women are the most discriminated against people in society.

**Postmodern Feminism:** Some feminists agree with postmodernists that we are now in a new era of human history from that of modernity, an era which, feminists believe, was characterised by patriarchy. Postmodern feminists agree with other feminists that gender is a very important identity and that women are often subject to discrimination. However, they are interested in how people can pick and mix their identities, including gender and are also interested in the nature of masculinity. Rather than rejecting stereotypical aspects of the female gender identity, they often embrace their femininity as a positive identity (wonder-bras instead of burning bras).

This is also sometimes discussed in terms of four or five different feminist "waves". While all these types of feminist still exist, some are associated with a particular period and
development: e.g. radical feminism is associated with the “second wave” of the 1960s and 1970s and difference feminism with the third wave of the 1980s and 90s.

MAKE THE LINK

Again, as with functionalism, the ideas raised by Marxist and feminists can be found throughout sociology and across all the topics you might study. As such, if you are asked a question about conflict theories, you can use Marxist and feminist arguments from any of these topics to illustrate your points. You might find Families and Households or Culture and Identity provide particularly good examples for feminism, while Education and Work, Poverty and Welfare or Stratification provide good examples for Marxism.

Remember, you will not cover all the optional modules, but this will not put you at any disadvantage in terms of being synoptic. There is plenty of relevant material to draw from in the optional modules and so, while your answers might be different from those who studied other options, there is no reason why they should be any the less rich and detailed.

Evaluating Conflict Theories

- In the 20th and 21st centuries, a number of sociologists have approached society with a mode of analysis very much influenced by the writings of Karl Marx, however, they have gone on to adapt traditional Marxism in various ways. For example, some share Marx’s analysis of capitalism but do not share his belief in a communist revolution. Others (such as Antonio Gramsci, or, in more recent times, Stuart Hall) emphasise the cultural aspects of class conflict rather than the economic focus of Marx’s original writings. Those who have adapted Marx’s ideas in these ways are known as neo-Marxists.

- Just as functionalism can be criticised for its rose-tinted view of the world, conflict theories can be accused of the opposite. There are undoubtedly many problems in society, but not all aspects of society are based on conflict and exploitation.

- Contemporary society is arguably too complex to be defined by one central conflict. Marxist and difference feminists recognise this, to some extent, when they discuss intersectionality: gender, class and ethnicity are all interlinked. There is not just one primary conflict or identity.

- The experience of communism in countries like the Soviet Union has also contributed to criticisms of Marxist theory. Many of the problems that Marxists suggest are caused by capitalism were also present in those countries, along with new problems that Marx did not foresee. However, many Marxists counter-argue that Russian and Chinese communism was not organised in the way Marx envisaged.

- Some postmodernists argue that feminism ignores (and to some extent contributed towards creating) a crisis of masculinity. While concepts such as the dual burden present women’s dual domestic and working roles in a negative light, some question what the role of men is in contemporary society if women are increasingly instrumental and expressive leaders.

Structural Theories

The theories we have considered so far are (except for postmodern feminism) structural theories. Structuralism (also known as macro sociology) is the school of thought that human behaviour must be understood in the context of the social system – or structure – in which humans exist. People are not just independent actors making independent decisions, they are the product of the social conditions in which they live. Marxists, for example, think that institutions, culture, ideas (what they term the superstructure) cannot be understood separately from the basic social class interests of capitalist society (what they term the base).
If you are asked a question about structural theories you should write about functionalism, Marxism and feminism.

**Evaluating Structural Theories**

- A criticism of some structuralist theories is that they are **deterministic**: that they suggest that an outcome is predictable and inevitable. One example is that some Marxists suggest that a communist revolution is inevitable (although not all Marxists agree about this). "March of Progress"-type functionalist theories, like Young and Wilmott's theory on the developmental stages of family form or Walt Rostow's 5 stages of development that are at the heart of modernisation theory (in global development) are other good examples of sociological theories that are accused of being deterministic.

- Many, particularly action theorists, would suggest that, because people have agency, no theory can predict human behaviour entirely accurately. For example, while labelling theory suggests a self-fulfilling prophecy, its adherents would always suggest that individuals could also choose to reject a label because they have agency; therefore, the theory is not deterministic.

- Structural theories are also often accused of being **reductionist**. For example, Marxists might be accused of reducing everything to economics or class, while feminists might be accused of reducing everything to gender. Essentially, what this means is taking a complex problem and giving a simple (arguably an over-simple) explanation for it.

**Social Action Theories**

Action theories are also known as **micro** theories and refer to sociological theories that focus not on the structures of society or large-scale trends and patterns, but instead, on small groups and individuals.

Action theorists focus on people as **social actors** who have agency; they make their own decisions and are not pushed along by forces beyond their control.

Interactionism – or **symbolic interactionism** - is a broad sociological perspective. It is a micro, action theory rather than a macro, structuralist one. Associated with George Herbert Mead and Max Weber, it is a perspective that sees society as the product of how interactions, and the meanings that individuals place on those interactions. Instead of trying to explain human behaviour in the context of large social structures or fundamental conflicts or cleavages in society, they examine society at a smaller level, acknowledging that humans have agency, create their own meanings and are not swept away by forces outside their control. However, it is important to avoid making this too stark a contrast: Weber recognised that small-scale interactions and social structures influenced human behaviour.

Because these theories do not suggest a single, over-arching structure that can explain society, they are more difficult to summarise. A number of interesting ideas develop from action theories, some of which are considered better described as **social psychology**.

One interactionist idea is that of the **looking-glass self**. This concept, developed by Cooley, suggests that the individual's own identity or sense of self is created by their interactions with other people. Our idea of self comes from how we understand others see us. This perspective informs a lot of interactionist and interpretivist thought in sociology, including ideas from Goffman about the **dramaturgical approach** to sociology and **labelling theory**, the concept that people take on a label that others give them.

The **dramaturgical approach** argues that people play roles in society, like actors on a stage. When we play a particular role in society, we are very conscious of the part we are playing and sometimes even follow a script. Erving Goffman (in *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*) wrote about waiters in a restaurant playing the part of waiters following the actions and dialogue of others who played the same role. The same may be seen with teachers and pupils: the teacher performs an expected role, at the front of the
class, saying expected lines (“what time do you call this?”) and the pupils respond in accordance.

Labelling theory was developed by Howard Becker and focuses on how, when a label is applied to someone, it can influence their self-concept (how they think about themselves) and might become their master status: their identity. In that way, the way other people view and react to individuals can shape how they go on to behave. This was developed into the idea of a self-fulfilling prophesy.

What these concepts have in common is the decision not to link them entirely to social structure. Becker, and other theorists who explored similar ideas, noted how it was often people with low incomes who were negatively labelled, but they did not link that fact with the fundamental structure of society in the way a Marxist would. Similarly, these concepts avoid any sense of inevitability: labelling might cause a self-fulfilling prophesy, but no interactionist would argue that such an outcome is certain. People could easily choose to reject a label.

Evaluating Social Action Theories

- These ideas had a huge impact on the discipline of sociology and the nature of sociological inquiry. Holding a different view about the nature of modern society went hand in hand with having a different view about what sociologists needed to research and how they should go about it. As such they took an interpretivist approach to sociological research, rather than a positivist one (see Sociology a Science?).

- While most sociologists today would acknowledge that individuals have agency and people are not entirely subject to social structures, some would argue that interactionists essentially observe interesting phenomena about some human behaviour that they reach few useful conclusions. Some sociologists who lean towards structuralist approaches would ask, “so what?”

- One reason for this is that the methods used by such sociologists are ones where the conclusions are unable to be generalised to the wider population. Goffman, for instance, can only conclude that the waiters he observed behaved in a particular way, not that it is a widespread phenomenon amongst waiters everywhere, let alone people in other occupations.

Links to Core Themes

- One of the core themes of A Level sociology is socialisation. It is a concept that all the structuralist theories engage with. While functionalists see socialisation as the process which creates a value consensus in society, both Marxists and radical feminists instead see it as a process which imparts ideology, creating false consciousness. Other feminists, too, see it as a process by which people learn patriarchal values that benefit men, rather than shared norms and values that benefit the whole of society.

- Other core themes include social differentiation, power and stratification. These are fundamental to structuralist theories. Key questions for structuralists are about how society is stratified and who holds power. By evaluating structuralist theories in any way, you will automatically address these core themes.
Possible Exam Questions

**Item C:** According to Marxists, society is based on conflict between the ruling class and the working class, with the ruling class exploiting the workers and enforcing a particular set of ideas onto them.

Not all Marxists agree about how society changes or what contemporary capitalism is really like.

1. Applying material from Item C and your own knowledge, evaluate the usefulness of Marxist approaches in understanding society. (20 marks)

Exam Hint: You will note that the item avoids using too much key terminology, describing concepts in other ways. A good way to get some key terms in there is to quickly translate those ideas from the item. You could use them into your introduction, or just note them for use when appropriate. So here we know that Marxists call the ruling class the bourgeoisie, and the workers the proletariat. We can say more about exploitation (extracting surplus value) and we know that the particular set of ideas are bourgeois ideology. We can also see a hint in the second paragraph about the differences between traditional Marxism and neo-Marxism that we can develop further. Even a very brief item can be more useful than you might initially think!

**Item C:** Functionalist sociologists view society like a human body, with different institutions acting like the various organs. They argue that these institutions teach members of society how to behave and ensure a broad level of agreement about what is normal. In this way, society works effectively.

2. Applying material from Item C and your own knowledge, evaluate the usefulness of functionalist approaches in understanding society. (20 marks)

Exam Hint: so, using the same approach as above, we have the organic analogy; there is socialisation, consensus and norms and values, immediately meaning you are deploying key terminology and have several concepts to develop and explore.

**Item C:** Feminists argue that contemporary society is male-dominated although they do not all agree about the extent to which this is the case, nor how best to improve society. Other sociologists disagree about gender being the most important identity in society.

3. Applying material from Item C and your own knowledge, evaluate the usefulness of feminist approaches in understanding society. (20 marks)

**Item C:** Some sociologists argue that society is made up of small-scale interactions between individuals and small groups rather than built on big structures, like class conflict or value consensus. However, other sociologists question how useful theories are if conclusions cannot be applied to the whole of society.

4. Applying material from Item C and your own knowledge, evaluate the usefulness of interactionist approaches in understanding society. (20 marks)

**Item C:** Some sociologists are consensus theorists: they believe that different parts of society work together for the good of everybody. An example would be functionalis.

Other sociologists are conflict theorists and believe there is a fundamental conflict at the heart of society. An example would be feminists. Action theorists also recognise some conflict in society, through ideas such as labelling.
5. Applying material from **Item C** and your own knowledge, evaluate the view that consensus approaches are more useful than conflict approaches to our understanding of society. (20 marks)

**Item C:** Some sociologists take a structuralist view of society, arguing that the best way to understand society is to understand the way it is structured and organised on a large scale. For example, Marxists think that contemporary society is structured around whether people own companies or work for them.

Other sociologists argue that individuals are influenced by their interactions with others, on a small scale, and that the fundamental structures of society are much less important.

6. Applying material from **Item C** and your own knowledge, evaluate the view that social action approaches are more useful than structural approaches to our understanding of society. (20 marks)
**METHODS IN CONTEXT**

**Specification:** Students must be able to apply sociological research methods to the study of education.

**WHAT YOU NEED TO KNOW**

Develop and practice the skill of evaluating the use of a particular method for researching a specific topic area relating to education

**Contextualising**

In these questions you will be asked to apply any of the research methods you have studied to any topic in Education. The question will always take the form of:

Applying material from Item C and your knowledge of research methods, evaluate the strengths and limitations of using <research method> to investigate <topic from education>.

The item will tend to include some information about the specific topic and one or two strengths or limitations of the method, in context, to get you started. The question is asking for more than just an evaluation of the method. The information in the previous sections about the strengths and limitations of all the methods, relating to issues like reliability, validity, ethics, etc., is all very relevant, but it is essential to try and contextualise these points.

To really drill down into the context, ask the questions: Who? What? Where?

Who is being researched? Are there any particular characteristics about that group (e.g. children) that make that method a good or bad choice of method?

What is the subject matter? The topic? Are there reasons why the method might be inappropriate or appropriate because of the topic (e.g. sensitivity, or professional confidentiality, etc.)?

Where will the research take place? If, for example, it is in a school, what implications might that hold for the practicalities of using the method?

So remember: W.W.W. Who? What? Where?

The important thing to remember is that, while you might make points about the method or about the context, the points that rack up the marks are those that apply the method to the specific context. When evaluating the strengths and limitations of a particular method to research a particular topic, your starting point can be the general strengths and limitations of the method, as listed above. But for each of those points, you need to remember to ask who, what or where. This will turn a generic point about the method into a point about the method in context.

The examiners assess each of the points made in terms of five bands. You should write as many points that are marked at the higher bands as possible. However, even a full-mark answer is likely to include a number of points from any of the lower bands.
Students sometimes do “false” band 4 and band 5 points, so you need to be wary of this. Simply adding “when studying anti-school subcultures” at the end of a general strength or limitation does not count as applying the method to education, because the last part of the sentence could have been anything. “Covert observation means that there will be no Hawthorne Effect when studying anti-school subcultures”, would have been just as true as “covert observation means there will be no Hawthorne Effect when studying dogwalking”. For the point to be applied genuinely, it must develop some characteristic of the context. For example, “pupils are unlikely to behave naturally if they know they are being observed, as they are likely to associate the researcher with the school and authority and assume that behaviour that breaches school rules, for instance, will be punished. Therefore, using covert observation avoids this Hawthorne Effect, ensuring more valid data.”

A good approach to preparing for this would be to consider the main research characteristics of some key education debates/topics.

### Table: Education Debate/Topic vs Research Characteristics

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<tr>
<th>Education Debate / Topic</th>
<th>Research Characteristics</th>
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<tr>
<td>The Hidden Curriculum</td>
<td>This is something that takes place within schools, so would require access to a school and/or teachers. There are likely to be gatekeepers for researching within a school, particularly the head teacher. It would be a practical issue relating to most plausible research methods for researching this topic. The “hidden” nature of the hidden curriculum might be a barrier to gaining valid data. While some aspects of the so-called “hidden curriculum” might well be official policy (such as promoting British values, or encouraging good timekeeping skills) potentially controversial elements of the hidden curriculum would be harder to uncover. Teachers and managers are unlikely to speak openly about such things in an interview, for example, leaving this perhaps to the interpretation of an observer, or the opinions of pupils.</td>
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</table>
The facts of differential achievement are readily available through official statistics. These are data which are routinely collected, and so it is possible to discover ethnic differences in achievement, gender differences in achievement and (slightly more problematically) class differences. Class differences are harder to find because of the problem of operationalising class. Details such as whether a pupil is in receipt of free school meals or brings in pupil premium funding is likely to be used, whereas ethnicity and gender is more clear-cut. There may, however, be some missing data on ethnicity.

However, if the researcher is looking for the reasons for differential achievement then official statistics are less useful. They are (arguably) reliable, but not valid – they do not offer verstehen. The research characteristics of the reasons for differential achievement will depend on whether the researcher is considering in-school or out-of-school factors. For in-school factors, see the next two sections for examples of the sorts of issues that might arise. Out-of-school factors bring their own research issues. Official statistics might offer some insight about issues such as whether English is a first language or there are housing problems, but it would not always be possible to marry this with the achievement data. There are gatekeepers at home – notably parents – who might be unwilling to contribute to this sort of research. The issues might be sensitive and therefore difficult to access. Parents and pupils might worry about being judged or criticised.

As previously mentioned, any research conducted in schools must get past gatekeepers in the form of headteachers and, quite possibly, governors and parents too. If pupils who are under 18 are to be involved in the research, parents will need to give consent, not just the pupils.

Teachers are unlikely to be honest about labelling. Labelling is unprofessional and (in some cases) possibly illegal; and however anonymous the research, they might worry about their jobs. So interviewing teachers is unlikely to yield valid results. Pupils might not recognise whether or not they have been labelled and other pupils might see the opportunity to discuss this issue to target certain teachers unfairly. As such the validity of the data would come under question. Observation then might be a better option. However, if the observation were overt then the teacher would act differently and try and avoid obvious labelling (even if they were not fully aware that that was the purpose of the observation). To observe lessons covertly then brings with it all the ethical issues, made worse by the fact that most of those being observed would be minors.

We know this topic has been studied via field experiments (particularly relating to the self-fulfilling prophesy) but this too raised ethical issues and potentially interfered with children’s education. It is better to observe what is actually happening rather than to create a false situation, even in the field.