Evaluate the usefulness of different types of interviews in sociological research (20 marks)

When a sociologist wishes to gain more information on a topic they are researching, interviews play a key part in gaining a wider knowledge on the topic they wish to learn about. Interviews involve a social interaction between the interviewer and interviewee, unlike other social surveys such as postal questionnaires which do not link the researcher and the respondent and this means that there is no direct contact between them and takes place at a distance. While interviews directly link the researcher with the respondent, there are various different types that a sociologist could use to carry out their research, such as structured or unstructured interviews.

A structured interview is also known as a formal interview. They contain clear and precise instructions on the way an interviewee should answer they question. This type of interview is very standardised and is carried out the same way each time, from the questions that are asked to the order, tone and voice in which they are asked. This type of interview is similar to a questionnaire due to them both having a set of prepared questions that are usually closed ended. However, as it is an interview, the questions are read out by a trained interviewer to the interviewee and there is direct contact between them.

A structured interview creates many practical issues such as training interviewers the required set of skills is costlier than sending out postal questionnaires even though the training is not very expensive. Further more, because they need to be carried out in large numbers with limited resources available, they do not allow as much research to be collected than postal questionnaires which can reach huge figures. However, structured interviews are also useful for gathering straightforward information like a person’s age or height. Also, the results are easily quantifiable because they are closed ended and can be put into graphs or charts more simply. This makes them suitable for hypothesis testing.

The large numbers of people who are surveyed in a structured questionnaire create a more representable sample of the population and Young and Wilmot only had 54/987 people they asked to interview reject them which means there is a higher response rate than a questionnaire and could be because it is harder to turn down a face to face interview when asked to complete one. To increase a response rate, a researcher could make call backs to those who rejected but doing so increases the cost of performing the survey. However, people who are willing to be interviewed may have a lot of time on their hands and this could result in invalid data as they are ‘untypical’. Moreover, a structured interview is seen as reliable because each interview is carried out the same way and are controlled. This also means that the data can be easily compared because all the people were asked the same questions in the same way and similarities and differences can be easily spotted.

Structured interviews face issues of validity when being conducted. This is because there are a limited number of answers a person could choose, and if the one they wish to say is not available, they cannot choose it and will have to compromise with another answer, therefore making the data invalid. Moreover, they are very inflexible and if a set of questions cannot be changed after they have already been asked and establishing the questions beforehand means that leads will not be able to be followed and valuable insights may be lost. Feminists, such as Graham say that the survey methods treat women as