

Cambridge AS & A Level · Sociology 9699 · Notes

Approaches to sociological research

AS

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Read first: [Types of data, methods and research design](#)

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What you need to know

By the end of this topic you should be able to:

1. **Weigh up four research approaches that each draw on several methods:** case studies, social surveys, ethnography and longitudinal studies.
2. **Explain the mixed methods approach:** using more than one method in a study, through **triangulation** (checking one method's results against another's) and **methodological pluralism** (combining methods to build a fuller picture).
3. **Explain the positivist approach:** sociology modelled on the **scientific method**, aiming for **objectivity**, **reliability** and **value-freedom**.
4. **Explain the interpretivist approach:** studying the **meanings** people give to their actions, through **verstehen**, accepting **subjectivity** and aiming for **validity**.
5. **Evaluate two debates:** whether sociology can, or should, use the methods and procedures of the natural sciences; and what part values play in sociological research.

The methods themselves (questionnaires, interviews, observation, experiments, official statistics and so on) are in the note on types of data, methods and research design. Here they are evidence in a bigger argument about how society should be studied.

Understand it

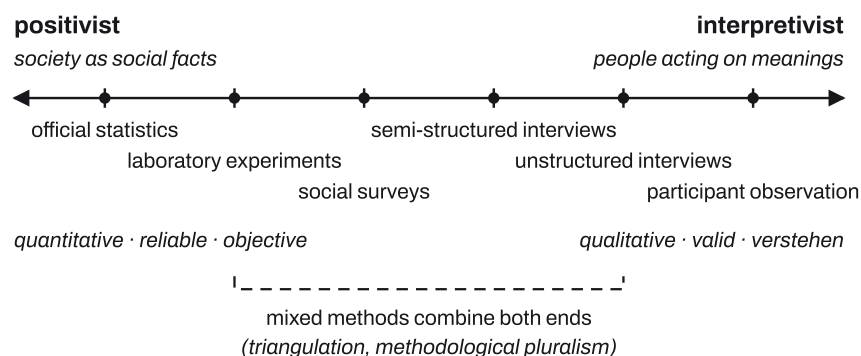
Two ways of seeing society

Every argument in this topic goes back to one question: **are people like objects in nature, or are they different?**

Positivists say society can be studied the way a chemist studies chemicals. Behaviour is shaped by forces outside the individual, which **Durkheim** called **social facts**: norms, values, institutions, levels of religion or family ties. Social facts exist whether or not any one person notices them, and they can be measured. So sociology should look for patterns, measure them with numbers, and find the **causes** of behaviour. **Comte**, who invented the word "sociology", hoped it would become a science of society that could find laws as firm as those of physics.

Interpretivists say people are not like chemicals. People think, choose and act on the **meanings** they give to situations. A chemical cannot decide to behave differently because it is being watched; a person can. So the sociologist's job is to understand those meanings from the inside. **Weber** called this **verstehen** ("understanding"): seeing the world through the eyes of the people being studied. Interpretivism stresses **agency** (people's ability to make choices) over **structure** (forces that shape them).

	Positivism	Interpretivism
View of people	Shaped by external social facts; behaviour can be predicted	Active, with free will; act on meanings
Aim	Find causes, patterns and laws	Understand meanings (verstehen)
Key quality	Reliability and objectivity	Validity
Data	Quantitative	Qualitative
Favoured methods	Official statistics, questionnaires, structured interviews, laboratory experiments, quantitative content analysis	Participant observation, unstructured interviews, personal documents, ethnography
Samples	Large and representative, so findings can be generalised	Small, studied in depth, in natural settings
Researcher's role	Detached and neutral	Involved, building rapport
Key names	Comte, Durkheim, Popper (on science)	Weber, Goffman, Becker

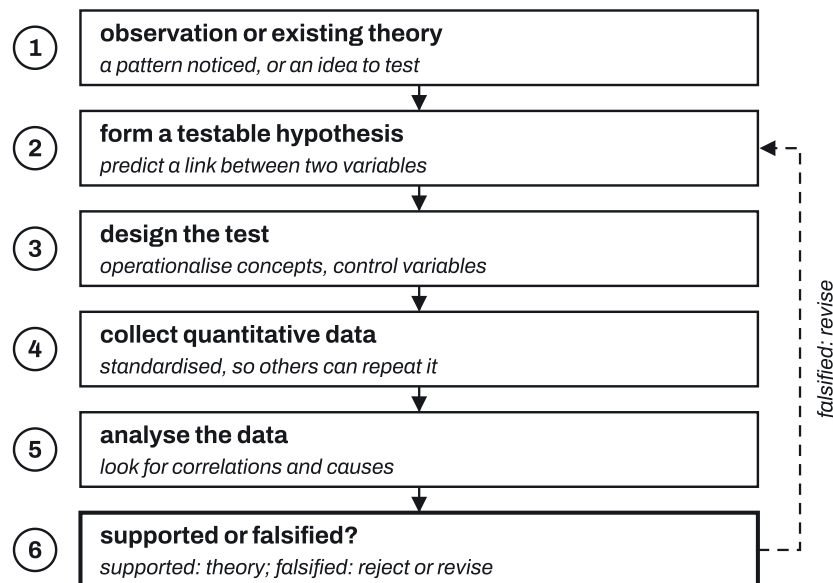


The positivist approach

Scientific method. Positivists want sociology to follow the procedure of the natural sciences, the **hypothetico-deductive method**:

1. Start from an observation or an existing theory.
2. Form a **hypothesis**: a testable statement predicting a link between two variables ("the more integrated a religious group is, the lower its suicide rate").
3. Design a test: **operationalise** the concepts (turn them into things that can be measured) and decide how to control other variables.

4. Collect **quantitative** data.
5. Analyse it: look for **correlations** (two things varying together) and, where variables were controlled, **cause and effect**.
6. If the data contradicts the hypothesis, reject or revise it; if it supports it, it becomes part of a theory, which stays open to further testing.



Durkheim's study of suicide is the classic example. He compared official suicide statistics across countries, religions and family types, and found stable patterns: Protestants killed themselves more often than Catholics, the unmarried more than the married. He explained the pattern by a social fact, the level of **social integration** (how strongly people are tied into groups) and **regulation** (how strongly society controls their desires). An act that looks completely individual turned out to have social causes.

Objectivity means the findings reflect the social world as it is, not the researcher's opinions or feelings. Positivists achieve it by keeping a distance from those studied and using standardised methods that leave little room for personal judgement.

Reliability means another researcher using the same method would get the same results. Standardised questionnaires and structured interviews, closed questions and laboratory experiments with a written procedure can be repeated and checked. Publishing the method lets others test the findings, and **peer review** (other experts checking work before it is published) catches mistakes.

Value-freedom means the researcher's own values (their moral and political beliefs) do not influence the research. Positivists argue that values distort results, so they must be kept out of the choice of method, the way the research is carried out and the interpretation of the findings. A sociologist should report what is, not what ought to be.

Strengths of the positivist approach:

- **Patterns, trends and comparisons:** numerical data shows how often something happens, how it changes over time and how groups differ.
- **Large, representative samples**, so findings can be **generalised** to the whole population.

- **Reliable and checkable:** standardised methods can be repeated by others.
- **Useful for policy:** governments want numbers to plan services, which also brings in **funding** for research.
- **Cause and effect:** experiments and comparisons can test hypotheses rather than only describe.

Limitations (mostly the interpretivist case):

- **Meanings are lost:** numbers show what people do, not why. Statistics may themselves be **social constructions**: **Douglas** and **Atkinson** argued that suicide rates depend on how coroners interpret deaths.
- **Low validity:** closed questions force answers into the researcher's categories (the **imposition problem**), so the data may not show what people really think.
- **Variables cannot be controlled** in real social life, and laboratory experiments on people are artificial and raise ethical problems (deception, harm).
- **Values creep in anyway:** the researcher still chooses the topic, the hypothesis and the categories.

The interpretivist approach

Verstehen. Weber argued that sociology must understand the **meaning** an action has for the person doing it. A man chopping wood might be earning a wage, keeping warm or working off anger: the action looks the same, but the meanings differ, and only meanings explain it. The researcher must put themselves in the other person's position, usually by spending time with them, building **rapport** (trust) and listening.

Meaning. Interpretivists such as symbolic interactionists see social life as built by people in interaction. Labels, identities and situations mean what people take them to mean. **Goffman** studied patients in a mental hospital (*Asylums*) by working there for a year, to see how they made sense of institutional life; **Becker** showed that "deviant" is a label applied by others, not a fixed quality of an act.

Subjectivity. Interpretivists accept that research involves people studying people, so the researcher's own understanding is part of the process. Rather than pretending to be a detached observer, the researcher uses empathy and their own experience to understand others, and should be open about how they may have influenced the data.

Validity. The main aim is **valid** data: a true, in-depth picture of what people think, feel and do, ideally in their **natural setting** and in their own words. Unstructured interviews, participant observation and personal documents give rich **qualitative** data.

Strengths of the interpretivist approach:

- **High validity and depth:** rapport, probing and natural settings give a true picture of meanings.
- **Verstehen:** the researcher sees the world as members do, and can explain why people act as they do.
- **Fits human beings:** people make choices and interpret their world, and these interpretations only show up when you listen to them.
- **Less imposition:** respondents raise what matters to them, so new ideas emerge from the data.
- **Access to hidden groups** through observation and gatekeepers.

Limitations (mostly the positivist case):

- **Low reliability:** unique, unstandardised studies cannot be repeated or checked.
- **Unrepresentative:** small samples, so findings cannot be generalised.
- **Subjective and open to bias:** the researcher's own views shape what is recorded and how it is read; close involvement risks **going native**; the researcher's presence may change behaviour (**Hawthorne effect**) and they may impose their own meanings on what they see.
- **Hard to test:** no hypotheses or numbers, so claims cannot be checked against evidence in the scientific way.
- **Practical and ethical problems:** slow and costly; covert observation involves deception.

Approaches that draw on several methods

These four are not single methods but research designs, each of which can use several methods.

Case studies study one example in depth: a single school, firm, family, community or event. **Willis** studied twelve working-class boys ("the lads") in one school, using observation and group interviews.

- Strengths: detail and depth, so valid; can disprove a generalisation (one case where it fails is enough); can suggest hypotheses for larger studies.
- Limitations: one case may be untypical, so findings cannot be generalised; hard to repeat.
- Usually interpretivist, though a case study can use questionnaires too.

Social surveys collect the same information from a large sample, usually by questionnaire or structured interview. National surveys of crime victims or household spending are examples.

- Strengths: large and representative samples; standardised, so reliable; numbers for comparison and policy.
- Limitations: surface answers with little depth; imposition problem; response rates and honesty vary.
- The positivists' favourite design.

Ethnography describes the whole way of life of a group from the inside, usually through long-term participant observation, often backed by interviews and documents. **Whyte's** study of an Italian American street gang and **Goffman's** *Asylums* are examples.

- Strengths: verstehen, rich detail in a natural setting, high validity.
- Limitations: slow, small-scale, unrepresentative, unrepeatable; risks of observer bias and going native.
- The interpretivists' favourite design.

Longitudinal studies study the same sample at intervals over years or decades. The **National Child Development Study** has followed everyone born in one week of 1958 in Britain; the **7 Up** documentaries filmed the same children every seven years.

- Strengths: show **change over time** and its likely causes, rather than a one-off snapshot; less reliance on memory.

- Limitations: **sample attrition** (people drop out, so the sample becomes unrepresentative); costly; repeated study may change behaviour.
- They can be quantitative (repeated surveys) or qualitative (repeated interviews), so they suit both approaches.

Mixed methods: triangulation and methodological pluralism

Many sociologists reject the either/or choice and combine methods.

- **Triangulation** uses two or more methods (or researchers, or sources) to study the same thing and checks whether they agree. If a questionnaire and observation give the same result, the finding is more trustworthy; if they disagree, that is worth exploring. The idea comes from surveying, where a position is fixed from two known points.
- **Methodological pluralism** uses different methods for different parts of a study, so each adds something: numbers to show the scale of a pattern, and interviews or observation to explain what it means.

Barker's study of the Moonies (a new religious movement) used participant observation, in-depth interviews and questionnaires. The questionnaires showed how typical her interviewees were; the observation and interviews showed why people joined.

- Strengths: combines **reliability** with **validity**; each method's weaknesses are offset by another's strengths; a fuller picture; shows that the positivist–interpretivist divide is less sharp in practice.
- Limitations: more time, money and skill; results from different methods may be hard to combine or may clash; some argue the two approaches have different ideas of what counts as knowledge, so they cannot simply be added together.

Can sociology be a science?

This is the first of the two debates. The answer depends on what "science" means.

Positivists say yes. Society has measurable social facts; quantitative methods give reliable, objective data; hypotheses can be tested; Durkheim's suicide study shows patterns and causes can be found.

Interpretivists say no, and it shouldn't try. People have consciousness and free will, so their behaviour is not caused in the way a chemical reaction is. What an action means to the person doing it is invisible to a researcher who only counts. Variables in society cannot be controlled, and laboratory experiments are artificial. To treat people as objects gives data that lacks validity. For interpretivists, the issue is not only that sociology **cannot** use scientific methods but that it **should not**.

Three thinkers ask what science really is:

- **Popper: falsification.** Popper argued that a theory is scientific only if it can be **falsified**: if some evidence could prove it wrong. Scientists should try to disprove hypotheses, not just collect supporting cases ("all swans are white" is never proved by counting white swans, but one black swan falsifies it). Many sociological theories fail this test: Marxists explain both revolution and its absence by class conflict, so no

evidence could show them wrong. But Popper also thought sociology **could** be scientific if it produced falsifiable hypotheses, and he saw open criticism and publication as the way science corrects biased ideas.

- **Kuhn: paradigms.** Kuhn argued that natural scientists work within a **paradigm**: a shared set of assumptions about what the world is like and how to study it. "Normal science" solves puzzles inside the paradigm rather than testing it, and ignores awkward results until a **scientific revolution** replaces it. So natural science is not as objective and open-minded as positivists claim. Sociology has several competing perspectives (functionalism, Marxism, feminism, interactionism) and no single paradigm, so in Kuhn's terms it is **pre-paradigmatic**, not yet a science.
- **Kaplan: the logic of research.** Kaplan distinguished the **reconstructed logic** of science (the tidy method in textbooks and published papers) from its **logic in use** (what scientists actually do: guesses, hunches, accidents). If natural scientists do not really follow the hypothetico-deductive method step by step, it makes little sense to measure sociology against it.

Realism offers a middle way. Realists (such as **Sayer**, and **Keat and Urry**) say science is about finding the underlying **structures** and mechanisms that cause what we see, even when they cannot be observed directly. Some sciences study **closed systems** (a laboratory, where variables can be controlled); others, such as meteorology or seismology, study **open systems** (weather, earthquakes) where they cannot, yet they are still sciences. Society is an open system, so sociology can be scientific in the way meteorology is, and it can study both structures (as positivists do) and meanings (as interpretivists do).

Postmodernists go further: they reject the idea that any approach, scientific or not, gives one true account of society. Science is just one "big story" (**metanarrative**) among many, so the debate itself is out of date.

Values in sociological research

The second debate. **Values** are beliefs about what is good, right or important. They can enter research at every stage:

1. **Choosing the topic:** what the researcher (or funder) thinks matters.
2. **Choosing the method:** an approach reflects a view of what society is like.
3. **Carrying out the research:** question wording, what is noticed and recorded, the effect of the researcher on respondents.
4. **Interpreting and reporting:** which findings are stressed and what conclusions are drawn.
5. **Use of findings:** who funds the research and what they do with the results.

Two separate questions are asked, and exam essays turn on which one is set:

- **Can research be value-free?** (Is it possible?)
- **Should research be value-free?** (Is it desirable?)

A related distinction: **value-freedom** means values play no part at all; **value-neutrality** means the researcher does not take sides on the moral or political questions the findings raise.

The case that research can and should be value-free:

- **Positivists** (Comte, Durkheim): sociology is a science, and like other sciences it should report facts, not opinions. Standardised, quantitative methods and a detached researcher keep values out of data collection and interpretation.
- **Popper**: even if a theory starts out biased, open publication and repeated testing will falsify it. Science as a whole corrects individual values.
- **Publication, replication and peer review** let others check the research and expose bias.
- **Weber**: values are unavoidable in **choosing a topic** (he called this **value relevance**) and in deciding what to do with findings, but **while collecting and analysing data** the researcher can and should be objective. Weber's position supports the view partly: research can be objective at its core, even if not value-free throughout.

The case that it cannot or should not be:

- **Interpretivists**: research is a social interaction; the researcher's own meanings and identity shape what they see and how respondents react (interviewer effect, observer bias). Full objectivity about human meanings is impossible.
- **Funding and institutions**: governments, businesses and charities choose which topics get money and may push for certain methods or results; universities and careers reward some research over others.
- **Kuhn**: even natural scientists work inside paradigms that shape what they look for.
- **Gouldner** argued that "value-free" sociology is a myth, and a convenient one: it let sociologists sell their skills to anyone and avoid responsibility for how findings were used. He criticised American functionalists (**Parsons, Merton**) for claiming neutrality while their work supported the existing social order. Sociologists should state their values openly.
- **Becker** asked "whose side are we on?" Since all research takes a side, sociologists should take the side of the **underdog** (the less powerful), whose voices are rarely heard.
- **Committed sociology**: many **Marxists** and **feminists** argue research should be openly committed to exposing inequality and changing society. Feminist researchers such as **Oakley** reject the detached interviewer as both impossible and unhelpful.

A strong answer separates the stages: values almost certainly affect **topic choice** and **use of findings**; the real argument is about **data collection and interpretation**, where careful method, openness and peer review can reduce, though perhaps not remove, bias.

Key facts and formulas

There is no formula list in Sociology. "Learn it" means you must remember it.

Key term	Status
Positivism: social facts (Durkheim), scientific method, hypothesis testing, quantitative data, objectivity, reliability, value-freedom, generalisation	Learn it
Interpretivism: meanings, verstehen (Weber), subjectivity, qualitative data, validity, rapport, agency over structure	Learn it

Key term	Status
Hypothetico-deductive method: observation, hypothesis, test, data, analysis, accept or falsify	Learn it
Case studies, social surveys, ethnography, longitudinal studies (sample attrition)	Learn it
Triangulation (methods check each other) and methodological pluralism (methods combined for a fuller picture); Barker	Learn it
Popper (falsification), Kuhn (paradigms, pre-paradigmatic), Kaplan (reconstructed logic vs logic in use)	Learn it
Realism (open and closed systems, underlying structures); postmodernism (no single truth)	Learn it
Values: value-freedom vs value-neutrality; "can" vs "should"; Weber's value relevance; Gouldner; Becker ("whose side are we on?"); committed sociology	Learn it
Essay marks: AO1 knowledge and understanding 8, AO2 interpretation and application 8, AO3 analysis and evaluation 10	Learn it

How to do it

We have tagged 10 questions for this topic (2021–2025), 9 different essays (one November 2025 essay was set on two papers). All are Section B "Evaluate the view..." essays worth 26 marks, except one 25-mark "Explain and assess" essay from the old Paper 2 (June 2021). None mixes types.

Question type	Questions
Evaluate whether sociology should or can use scientific (positivist) methods	5
Evaluate whether research can or should be value-free or objective	3
Evaluate the interpretivist approach as the best way to study society	2

Every essay is marked out of 26: **AO1** knowledge and understanding up to 8, **AO2** interpretation and application up to 8, **AO3** analysis and evaluation up to 10, so $8 + 8 + 10 = 26$. Evaluation carries the most marks.

The plan for every essay:

- 1. Introduction** (3–4 lines): define the key terms in the question (scientific approach, value-free, objective, interpretivism), name the two sides and say which approach backs the view.
- 2. The case for the view** (4–5 developed paragraphs): each makes a point, explains it with a concept, and supports it with a named thinker, study or method.
- 3. The case against** (4–5 developed paragraphs), each tied explicitly back to the view. Don't just describe the other approach: say **why** it undermines the view.

4. **Evaluate throughout:** weigh each point ("this is strongest for...", "however, this assumes..."), question the key word ("what counts as science?", "can or should?"), and use a third position (realism, Weber, mixed methods) to move beyond the two sides.
5. **Conclusion:** a judgement on **how far** the view is right, with a reason.

1. Evaluate whether sociology should or can use scientific (positivist) methods (5 questions)

Asked as: sociologists should use a scientific approach (twice), the positivist view that they should, scientific methods have **no value**, the methods of the natural sciences **should not be used**, and (old Paper 2) "there is no comparison to be made between sociology and the natural sciences".

1. **Find which side "the view" is.** "Should use a scientific approach" is the positivist view; "have no value" or "should not be used" is the interpretivist view. Build the view's side first.
2. **Positivist side:** social facts (Durkheim); hypothetico-deductive method; objectivity, reliability, value-freedom; numerical data showing patterns, trends and comparisons; large representative samples, so generalisable; examples of scientific methods used in sociology (laboratory and field experiments, social surveys, structured interviews, quantitative content analysis, official statistics); value for social policy and funding.
3. **Interpretivist side:** people choose how to act, guided by their own understandings of situations, which no outside measure can capture; verstehen (Weber); validity; imposition; variables cannot be controlled; experiments are artificial and unethical; statistics as social constructions (Douglas, Atkinson).
4. **Question science itself:** Popper (is sociology falsifiable?), Kuhn (science works inside paradigms, so it is not purely objective), Kaplan (scientists don't follow the textbook method either). Your verdict hinges on what you count as a science.
5. **Go beyond the two sides:** realism (sociology studies an open system, like meteorology); methodological pluralism and triangulation (the two approaches can be combined, and in real studies they overlap more than the textbook split suggests).
6. **For "no value":** even if a fully scientific sociology is impossible, scientific methods still have **some** value (large-scale patterns, policy), so the word "no" is usually too strong.

2. Evaluate whether research can or should be value-free or objective (3 questions)

Asked as: research **can** be value-free, society **can** be studied objectively, research **should** be value free.

1. **Define** value-freedom (no values influence the research) and objectivity (findings reflect the world, not the researcher). Note the difference between **can** and **should**, and between value-freedom and value-neutrality.
2. **Use the stages of research** as your structure: topic choice, method, conducting, interpreting, using the findings. Ask at each stage how far values get in.
3. **For:** positivist hypothetico-deductive method keeps values out of method, conduct and interpretation; Popper's falsification; publication, replication and peer review; Weber (value relevance in topic choice, but objectivity in data collection and analysis).

4. **Against**: the interpretivist view of subjectivity; the researcher's effect on respondents; funding and institutional pressures; variables cannot be controlled; Kuhn's paradigms; Gouldner's myth of value-free sociology (Parsons, Merton); Becker's "whose side are we on?"; committed Marxist and feminist sociology.
5. **For "should"**: the committed sociologists' case that taking sides is **desirable**, against the positivist case that values distort research. For "can": whether it is **possible**.
6. **Conclude** by separating the stages: values are hard to avoid in topic choice and use of findings, but objectivity in data collection is a realistic aim.

3. Evaluate the interpretivist approach as the best way to study society (2 questions)

The November 2025 question, "the interpretivist approach provides the best way to understand society", was set on two papers.

1. **For**: qualitative methods; people make choices based on how they understand their situation, and numbers from outside cannot reach those understandings; rapport; studying groups in their natural setting (ethnography, participant observation); verstehen (Weber); high validity; focus on agency over structure; the argument that scientific methods carry the researcher's assumptions too, so their objectivity is partly an illusion.
2. **Against** (the positivist critique): not replicable, so low reliability; subjective and value-laden; researcher bias and imposition of the researcher's own meanings; small, unrepresentative samples, so no generalisation; ethical problems (covert observation); time and cost; Durkheim's social facts show structure matters; Popper (claims cannot be tested).
3. **"Best"** invites comparison: best for what? Meanings and hidden groups, yes; national patterns and policy, no. Use mixed methods or realism to argue that no single approach is best.

Worked examples

Example 1

Explain two reasons why interpretivists reject the use of scientific methods in sociological research. [8]

(This is a Question 2(a) shape, a point-based 8 marks; the Section B essays use the same ideas at length.)

Reason 1. Interpretivists argue that **people have free will and act on meanings**, unlike the objects natural scientists study (1). A chemical reacts in a fixed way, but people decide how to act based on how they understand a situation, so their behaviour cannot be predicted by laws (1). Weber's idea of **verstehen** supports this (1): to explain an action we must understand what it means to the person, which a questionnaire with fixed answers cannot uncover, so scientific methods miss the causes of social action (1).

Reason 2. A second reason is that **scientific methods produce data low in validity** (1). Laboratory experiments place people in artificial settings, and closed questions force answers into the researcher's categories, so the data may not reflect what people really think or do (1). Goffman's study *Asylums* shows the

alternative **(1)**: by spending a year inside a mental hospital he uncovered how patients made sense of their treatment, a valid, in-depth picture that a survey of patients could not have produced **(1)**.

Two reasons, each made, explained, supported with sociological material and linked back: **8 marks**.

Example 2

Evaluate the view that sociologists should openly take sides in their research. [26]

Introduction. Taking sides means being **committed**: stating one's values and using research to support a group or a cause. This is the opposite of the positivist ideal of **value-freedom**. The question asks whether sociologists **should** do this, not only whether they can avoid it.

For the view (AO1/AO2).

- **Becker** argued that all research takes a side, whether or not the researcher admits it, so it is better to choose openly. He chose the **underdog**, giving a voice to groups such as deviants whose views are usually ignored.
- **Gouldner** argued that claims of value-freedom were a cover: functionalists such as **Parsons** presented themselves as neutral while their work supported the existing social order. Admitting values is more honest than hiding them.
- **Marxists** and **feminists** argue that sociology should expose inequality and help change it. Feminist interviewers such as **Oakley** found that a warm, two-way relationship gave more honest answers than detachment.
- **Interpretivists** add that the researcher's own meanings always shape the research, so openness lets readers judge the findings.

Against the view (AO3).

- **However**, if sociologists start from a side, they may find only what they expected. Positivists argue that values distort the choice of method, the conduct of research and the interpretation of results, so taking sides risks propaganda rather than knowledge.
- **Popper's** view cuts both ways: open criticism and testing correct biased theories, so committed research can still be checked, but only if it produces hypotheses that could be falsified.
- **Weber** offers a middle position: values legitimately guide **which** topic is chosen (value relevance), but once research starts the sociologist should be objective. On this view, sociologists may care about a cause without letting it shape the data.
- **Practical point**: research seen as one-sided is easier for governments and the public to dismiss, so committed research may lose influence and funding.

Conclusion. The case that research can never be wholly value-free is strong, and stating values openly is more honest than pretending to neutrality. But taking sides in **collecting and interpreting** data threatens the credibility that makes research worth using. The most defensible position is Weber's: openness about values in choosing a topic, with careful, checkable methods in carrying it out.

How it would be marked. Detailed points with named sociologists and concepts (AO1 7–8), applied to "should take sides" throughout (AO2 7–8), with explicit evaluation in each paragraph and a justified conclusion (AO3 9–10). In the exam, make each bullet a full paragraph.

Example 3

Evaluate the view that sociology can be a science. [26]

Introduction. A science, for positivists, uses the hypothetico-deductive method to produce objective, reliable knowledge of cause and effect. Whether sociology can do this depends on the nature of human beings and on what "science" really is.

For the view (AO1/AO2).

- **Social facts:** Durkheim argued that society has measurable features (integration, regulation) that shape behaviour from outside. His suicide study used official statistics to compare groups and found stable patterns with social causes, as a natural scientist would.
- **Scientific methods are widely used:** social surveys, structured interviews and quantitative content analysis give standardised, reliable data from large representative samples, so findings can be generalised and checked.
- **Hypothesis testing:** field experiments such as Rosenthal and Jacobson's test of teacher expectations show that sociological hypotheses can be tested and falsified, which meets **Popper's** test of science.
- **Realism:** realists such as **Sayer** argue that sciences like meteorology study **open systems** where variables cannot be controlled, yet they are still sciences. Society is an open system too, so the lack of control does not stop sociology being scientific.

Against the view (AO3).

- **However**, interpretivists argue that people act on meanings and have free will, so behaviour has no fixed causes. Durkheim's statistics may be **social constructions**: Douglas and Atkinson showed that suicide rates reflect coroners' decisions, which undermines the claim to objective measurement.
- **Popper** also argued that many sociological theories cannot be falsified: Marxism can explain both revolution and its absence. So much of sociology fails his test.
- **Kuhn** suggests sociology is **pre-paradigmatic**: without one agreed paradigm, competing perspectives disagree on what to study, so sociology is not yet a science in his sense. But Kuhn also shows natural science is less objective than positivists claim, which weakens the standard sociology is being judged against.
- **Kaplan:** if scientists' **logic in use** is messier than the textbook method, then sociology's departures from that method are less important than they seem.

Conclusion. Whether sociology can be a science depends on the definition. If science means the controlled laboratory method, sociology largely cannot be one. If, as realists argue, science means explaining the hidden structures behind events in an open system, sociology can be scientific while still studying meanings, and mixed methods show both approaches working together. The view is therefore partly right: sociology can be scientific in method, but not in the narrow positivist sense.

How it would be marked. A wide range of concepts and thinkers on both sides (AO1 7–8), consistently applied to "can be a science" (AO2 7–8), with sustained evaluation that questions the meaning of science and reaches a reasoned judgement (AO3 9–10).

Common mistakes

- **Describing methods instead of the debate.** Examiners report many answers that list strengths and limitations of quantitative and qualitative methods, or of each method in turn, with no link to the view. Methods are evidence; the essay is about the approach, science or values.
- **Juxtaposition instead of evaluation.** A block on positivism followed by a block on interpretivism keeps answers in the middle AO3 levels. Examiners note this in most sessions. Say **why** each counter-argument weakens the view, and reach a judgement.
- **Mixing up validity and reliability**, reported again in 2023. Validity: a true picture. Reliability: the same result if repeated.
- **Not defining the key term.** Examiners report little discussion of what objectivity, value-freedom or science actually mean. Define it in the introduction and return to it.
- **Ignoring "can" versus "should"**, and the difference between value-freedom and value-neutrality; examiners say few candidates use Weber's distinction or cover the debate directly.
- **Asserting instead of explaining:** "values cause bias" with no account of **how** or **at which stage**. Use the stages of research.
- **Unbalanced essays:** a long case for the view and a few lines against. Evaluation is the largest share of the marks (10 of 26).
- **Getting the side wrong** in questions worded negatively ("no value", "should not be used"): the view in the question is the interpretivist one there.

How to get the marks

- **"Evaluate"** (26 marks): AO1 8 for a range of detailed points with concepts and theory or research evidence; AO2 8 for material that is accurate, well developed and applied to the exact question; AO3 10 for evaluation that is clear, explicit and sustained. A few simple counter-points, or theories set side by side, stay in the middle AO3 bands.
- **Use the question's words** in every paragraph's last sentence ("...so research cannot be fully value-free at the interpretation stage").
- **Named thinkers lift answers:** Comte, Durkheim, Popper on one side; Weber, Kuhn, Kaplan, Gouldner, Becker on the other; realism (Sayer, Keat and Urry) and postmodernism as wider positions. Theories such as Marxism or feminism help but are not needed for full marks.
- **Top-band moves** the mark schemes reward: questioning what science is; using realism; separating the stages of research when discussing values; using triangulation or methodological pluralism to show the divide is overstated.

- **Old Paper 2 ("Explain and assess", 25 marks)** wanted the same material: explain the view first, then assess it, with a well-formed conclusion.
- **Plan for 5 minutes:** list points for and against, pair each counter-point with the point it answers, and decide your conclusion before you write.

Quick check

1. What is the difference between triangulation and methodological pluralism?
2. Give three features of the positivist approach and three of the interpretivist approach.
3. Explain what Popper meant by falsification, and why it causes a problem for some sociological theories.
4. How does realism answer the claim that sociology cannot be a science because variables cannot be controlled?
5. Explain Weber's view of values in research. Does it support or challenge the view that research can be value-free?

Answers

1. **Triangulation** uses two or more methods to study the same thing and checks whether the results agree, so it is mainly about testing validity and reliability. **Methodological pluralism** uses different methods for different parts of a study, each adding something, to build a fuller picture.
2. **Positivist**: society as measurable social facts; the hypothetico-deductive method; quantitative data; objectivity, reliability and value-freedom; large representative samples. **Interpretivist**: people act on meanings and have free will; verstehen; qualitative data; validity; small groups in natural settings; rapport.
3. A theory is scientific only if evidence could prove it wrong (falsify it); scientists should try to disprove hypotheses rather than collect supporting cases. Some sociological theories, such as Marxism, can explain any outcome (both revolution and its absence), so no evidence could falsify them, which by Popper's test makes them unscientific.
4. Realists say some sciences, such as meteorology and seismology, study **open systems** where variables cannot be controlled, yet they are still sciences because they explain the underlying structures that cause events. Society is also an open system, so lack of control does not stop sociology being scientific.
5. Weber said values are unavoidable when **choosing a topic** (value relevance) and in deciding how findings are used, but the researcher should be **objective when collecting and analysing data**. It partly supports and partly challenges the view: research cannot be value-free throughout, but it can be objective at its core.

Past questions to try

- [9699/12/M/J/23 Q5](#): essay on whether sociologists should use a scientific approach.
- [9699/12/F/M/22 Q5](#): essay on whether the methods of the natural sciences should not be used.
- [9699/12/F/M/21 Q5](#): essay on whether research should be value free.
- [9699/24/M/J/21 Q3](#): old Paper 2 essay comparing sociology with the natural sciences.