

Cambridge AS & A Level · Sociology 9699 · Notes

Research issues

AS

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

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What you need to know

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

1. **Explain the three kinds of consideration that shape research: theoretical** (what the researcher believes about society and knowledge), **practical** (time, money, access, skills) and **ethical** (what is morally acceptable). You need to show how they affect three decisions: the **choice of topic**, the **choice of method or methods**, and the way the research is **carried out**.
2. **Explain how findings can be biased** by what the sociologist does and believes (their **values**), and by decisions about **funding**, **designing** and **conducting** the research.
3. **Use five key concepts to judge any method: validity, reliability, objectivity, representativeness and ethics**.

The methods themselves are in the note on types of data, methods and research design, and positivism and interpretivism are in the note on approaches to sociological research. This topic is about the issues that run through every piece of research, whatever the method.

Understand it

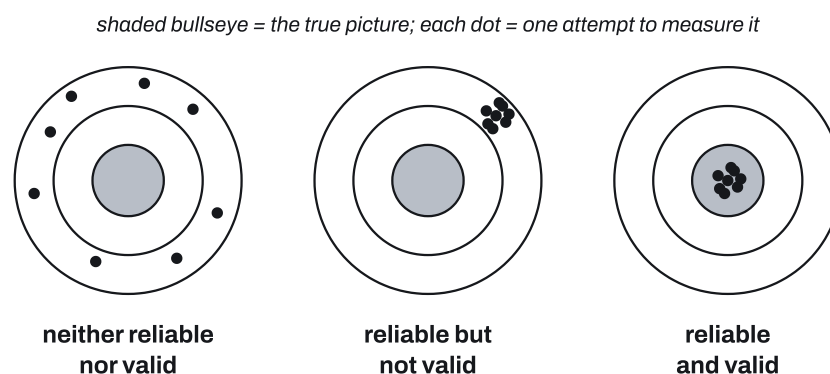
The five concepts for judging research

Almost every answer in this topic uses these five words. Get them exactly right: examiners say every year that candidates mix them up.

- **Validity**: the data gives a **true picture** of what it claims to show: what people really think, feel or do. Qualitative methods in natural settings (participant observation, unstructured interviews) are usually high in validity. **Ecological validity** means the findings hold in real life, outside an artificial setting such as a laboratory.
- **Reliability**: another researcher using the **same method** would get the **same results**. Standardised methods (closed-question questionnaires, structured interviews, experiments with a written procedure) are reliable because every respondent gets the same questions in the same order and the method can be repeated and checked.

- **Objectivity:** the findings reflect the social world, **not the researcher's opinions or feelings**. A detached researcher using standardised methods aims for it; a researcher closely involved with a group may lose it.
- **Representativeness:** the sample has the **same characteristics** as the wider group (the population) it is drawn from, in the right proportions, so the findings can be **generalised** to that group. Large samples chosen from a good sampling frame tend to be representative; one gang or one school usually is not.
- **Ethics:** whether the research is **morally acceptable**: whether people agreed to take part, were protected from harm and had their identities kept secret.

A method can be strong on one concept and weak on another. A closed-question survey of 5,000 people may be reliable and representative but low in validity, because fixed answers force people into the researcher's categories (the **imposition problem**). A year of covert observation in one gang may be high in validity but unreliable, unrepresentative and unethical.



The targets show why reliability alone is not enough. Repeating a method gives the same answer each time (a tight cluster), but if the questions miss what people really mean, it is the same **wrong** answer. Valid data hits the true picture; reliable data hits the same spot every time.

Three kinds of consideration

Every research decision is pulled by three kinds of factor. Keep them separate: examiners report that many candidates call ethical issues "practical", or give ethical and theoretical factors when the question asks for practical ones, and those points earn nothing.

Theoretical factors come from the researcher's view of what society is and how to study it.

- **Positivists** see society as made of measurable social facts. They want **reliable, objective, representative** data, so they choose quantitative methods: questionnaires, structured interviews, official statistics, experiments.
- **Interpretivists** want to understand the **meanings** behind actions (*verstehen*). They value **validity**, so they choose qualitative methods: participant observation, unstructured and group interviews, personal documents.
- **Feminists** often favour qualitative, two-way methods that give women a voice and reduce the power gap between researcher and researched (**Oakley** treated interviews as a conversation, answering her respondents' questions too).
- A researcher's theory can also shape the **topic**: a Marxist is drawn to class inequality, a feminist to gender.

Practical factors are about what is possible with the resources available.

- **Time:** participant observation and longitudinal studies take months or years; a questionnaire can be done in weeks.
- **Money and funding:** interviewers, travel and long fieldwork cost money; the funding body may set the topic, the deadline and even the method.
- **Access:** some groups are easy to reach through a sampling frame (pupils on a school register); others are closed, hidden or hostile (gangs, the very rich, religious sects).
- **The researcher's characteristics and skills:** age, gender, ethnicity, class and personality affect who will let them in and whether they can blend in; some researchers are skilled interviewers, others statisticians.
- **The nature of the topic:** a sensitive topic (domestic violence, drug use) may need anonymity or rapport, which rules some methods in and others out.
- **Choice of topic:** what is in the news or fashionable, what will help the researcher's career, a chance opportunity (being already part of a group), or what the researcher already knows about.

Ethical factors are about protecting the people studied (and society). Professional bodies such as the British Sociological Association publish guidelines covering them:

- **Informed consent:** people should know what the research is for and agree to take part. **Covert** research, where the group does not know it is being studied, breaks this rule by **deception**.
- **Avoiding harm:** physical, psychological or social harm, during the research or when findings are published. **Milgram's** obedience experiments caused participants great stress; **Zimbardo's** prison experiment had to be stopped early.
- **Confidentiality and anonymity:** personal details are kept secret and people cannot be identified in the published work. This matters most in small communities, where a description can give someone away.
- **The right to withdraw:** people can leave the study, and take their data with them, at any time.
- **Vulnerable groups:** children, people with mental illness and victims of crime need extra care and often a guardian's consent.
- **Illegal or dubious activity:** a researcher in a deviant group may witness crime, or be pressed to take part, and face a dilemma about reporting it.
- **The purpose of research:** some sociologists argue research should aim to do good, not just avoid harm.

The three kinds interact. A positivist (theory) may still use interviews because no sampling frame exists for the group (practical). A researcher may want covert observation for validity (theory) but reject it as deception (ethics). Weighing them against each other is the core of the essays.

Gaining access to a study group

Access is a practical problem with ethical sides, and it decides whether research can happen at all.

- **Making contact:** there may be no list of members and no obvious way in. A **gatekeeper**, someone who controls entry (a head teacher, a gang leader, a company manager), may be needed. **Whyte** got into an Italian American street gang in Boston through "Doc", a respected member who vouched for him.

- **Being accepted:** the group must trust the researcher. Building **rappport** takes time, and suspicion can close the group off or make members act differently.
- **Social differences:** a researcher of a different age, class, gender or ethnicity may not blend in, which matters most in **covert** work. **Patrick**, a young teacher studying a Glasgow gang, could pass as a member, but small mistakes in dress and behaviour nearly gave him away, and he left when the violence became too much.
- **Explaining one's presence:** in covert research the researcher needs a cover story; in overt research the gatekeeper may only allow access on conditions (what can be seen, what can be published).
- **Legal and ethical limits:** research on children, prisons or hospitals needs official permission, and some activities cannot lawfully be joined.
- **Cost:** travel, membership fees or time away from paid work.

A gatekeeper solves one problem but can create another: they may steer the researcher towards people who show the group in a good light, which lowers **validity** and **representativeness**.

Covert participant observation: the test case

Covert observation is where the research issues collide, which is why it is asked so often.

Strengths:

- **No Hawthorne effect:** people who do not know they are being studied keep acting naturally, so the data is **valid**.
- **Access to closed or deviant groups** that would refuse an open researcher: **Humphreys** studied secret sexual encounters between men in public toilets; **Patrick** joined a violent gang.
- **Insight from the inside** (verstehen): the researcher lives the group's life and sees meanings an outsider would miss.

Limitations:

- **Ethics:** deception and no informed consent; possible harm if the group finds out or is identified (Humphreys traced men's home addresses from their car number plates); the researcher may witness or be drawn into crime.
- **Going native:** becoming so close to the group that the researcher loses **objectivity** and stops seeing it critically.
- **Recording data:** notes cannot be taken openly, so the researcher relies on memory, which lowers accuracy.
- **Danger and leaving:** the researcher has no protection if exposed, and leaving without arousing suspicion is hard.
- **Unreliable and unrepresentative:** a one-off study of one group cannot be repeated or generalised.

Defenders reply that some groups can only be studied covertly, that the harm can be reduced (anonymity, careful publication, debriefing where it is safe) and that the knowledge gained can justify the method. No method is free of ethical cost, so the real test is whether the harm is outweighed by what the study reveals.

Group interviews and validity

A **group interview** (or focus group) puts several people together to discuss a topic, with the researcher guiding. It is often used with young people in schools: **Willis** interviewed his twelve "lads" together, and **Mac an Ghail** used group discussions with boys to study masculinity.

Reasons the group setting raises **validity**:

- **A relaxed, familiar setting**: people with friends around feel more confident and less intimidated by the researcher, so they say what they really think.
- **Discussion sparks ideas**: members react to each other, remember things and think again, which gives fuller, deeper answers.
- **Shared meanings come out**: the group's own language, jokes and views appear as they talk to each other, not to the researcher.
- **Less researcher imposition**: the group, not the interviewer, drives much of the talk, so answers follow what matters to them rather than the researcher's agenda.

Against this, a dominant member or **peer pressure** may silence others or push people to show off, which lowers validity, and anonymity is impossible within the group.

How values and funding bias research

Bias means the findings are distorted, so they no longer give a true picture. A sociologist's **values** (their moral and political beliefs) can get in at every stage:

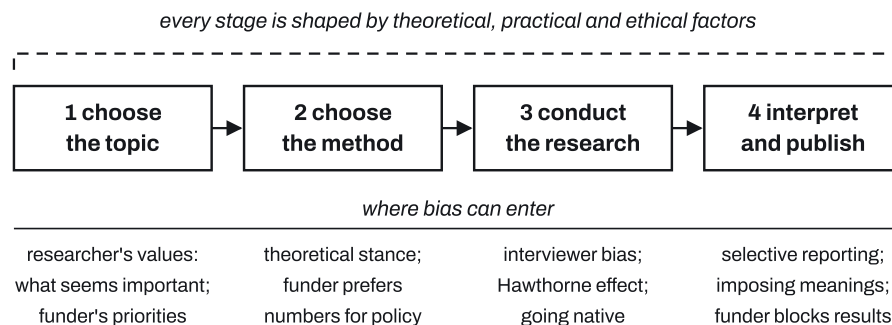
1. **Choosing the topic**: researchers study what they care about (a feminist sociologist is drawn to research on domestic violence), and what they ignore matters too. **Weber** called this **value relevance** and thought it unavoidable.
2. **Designing the research**: the hypothesis, the questions asked and left out, and how concepts are **operationalised** all reflect what the researcher expects to find. Loaded or leading questions push respondents towards an answer.
3. **Conducting the research: interviewer bias**: tone of voice, facial expressions or reactions show what the interviewer thinks, and respondents adjust their answers to please them (**social desirability**). In observation, the researcher notices what fits their views and may **go native**.
4. **Interpreting and presenting findings**: deciding what the data means, which quotes to use and which findings to stress or leave out (**researcher imposition**: putting the researcher's meanings on other people's words).
5. **The ideas of the time**: **Kuhn** argued that scientists work within a **paradigm**, the shared assumptions of their field; sociologists likewise take for granted the common-sense views of their society and time.

Funding adds a second source of bias. Governments, businesses and charities pay for much research, and the funder may:

- choose the **topic** (what the funder wants to know, not what is most important);
- prefer a **method** (governments often want quantitative data for policy);

- set **deadlines** that rule out long qualitative work;
- **block or delay publication** of unwelcome findings, or present only the helpful parts.

Researchers may also hold back findings that could lose them future funding. Peer review, publishing the method, and stating one's values openly (as **Gouldner** and **Becker** urged) are the main defences.



Key facts and formulas

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

Key term	Status
Validity (true picture; ecological validity), reliability (same method, same results), objectivity (free of the researcher's opinions), representativeness (sample like the population, so generalisable)	Learn it
Theoretical factors (positivism: reliability and objectivity; interpretivism: validity; feminism), practical factors (time, money, funding, access, skills, characteristics, topic), ethical factors	Learn it
Ethics: informed consent, deception, avoiding harm, confidentiality and anonymity, right to withdraw, vulnerable groups, illegal activity	Learn it
Access: making contact, gatekeepers (Whyte's "Doc"), being accepted and rapport, social differences, cover stories, legal limits, cost	Learn it
Covert participant observation: no Hawthorne effect, access to closed groups (Humphreys, Patrick); deception, going native, recording from memory, danger, unreliable	Learn it
Group interviews: relaxed peer setting, discussion, shared meanings, less imposition (Willis, Mac an Ghail); peer pressure	Learn it
Bias from values at each stage: topic (value relevance), design (questions, operationalisation), conduct (interviewer bias, social desirability), interpretation (researcher imposition), paradigms (Kuhn)	Learn it
Funding: sets topic, method and deadlines, can block publication	Learn it
Question 2(a) points: 4 marks each, $2 \times 4 = 8$; Question 2(b) points: 3 marks each, $2 \times 3 = 6$; essays AO1 8, AO2 8, AO3 10	Learn it

How to do it

We have tagged 18 questions for this topic (2021–2026, Paper 1 only), 13 different (the same questions were often set on two papers in a session). 2 of them mix two types, so the counts add up to 20.

Question type	Questions
Evaluate a view on a research issue (26-mark essay)	6
Explain two ethical issues in research	3
Explain two difficulties in gaining access to a study group	3
Explain two ways the sociologist's values bias research	2
Explain how research achieves reliability or validity	2
Explain two practical factors in choosing a research topic	2
Explain strengths or limitations of covert participant observation	2

Question 2(a) (8 marks) wants two points, each worth up to 4 marks:

1. **Make the point** (1): name the issue, factor or way in a few words.
2. **Explain it** (1): say what it means or how it happens.
3. **Select sociological material** (1): a concept, method, theory or named study.
4. **Show how the material supports the point** (1): a sentence that links the example back, not one that just repeats the point.

Question 2(b) (6 marks) wants two strengths or limitations, each worth up to 3 marks: **identify** it (1), explain **why the method has it** (1), and explain **why it is a strength or limitation** (1), usually by naming its effect on validity, reliability, representativeness or ethics.

1. Evaluate a view on a research issue (26-mark essay) (6 questions)

Asked as: the arguments for a covert approach to participant observation (twice), ethical issues make covert participant observation unsuitable (twice), practical factors are the most important influence on choice of research method, and questionnaires have limited value because they lack validity.

Marked **AO1** knowledge and understanding 8, **AO2** interpretation and application 8, **AO3** analysis and evaluation 10, so $8 + 8 + 10 = 26$.

1. **Introduction**: define the key terms (covert, ethics, practical factors, validity) and say which side the view is on.
2. **The case for the view** (4–5 developed paragraphs): each point explained with a concept (validity, Hawthorne effect, informed consent, reliability) and a study or theory.
3. **The case against** (4–5 paragraphs), each tied back to the view.
4. **Evaluate throughout** and **conclude** with a judgement on how far the view holds.

Covert participant observation (for or against):

- **For:** valid data with no Hawthorne effect; natural behaviour in a natural setting; depth and verstehen; the only way into closed or deviant groups (Humphreys, Patrick); the interpretivist case for studying meanings from the inside.
- **Against:** deception and no informed consent; possible harm to the group and to the researcher; involvement in crime and whether to report it; going native, so lost objectivity; recording from memory; hard to leave; cost and time; unreliable and unrepresentative (positivist critique).
- **Evaluation moves:** compare with **overt** observation, which keeps much of the validity with fewer ethical problems: Whyte, and Venkatesh's study of a Chicago gang whose leader knew he was a researcher, got into deviant groups through a gatekeeper without deception; ethical harm can be reduced by anonymity and debriefing; no method is free of ethical cost, so weigh the possible harm against the knowledge the study produces.

Practical factors are the most important influence on choice of method:

- **For:** time, money and funding, access and sample issues, the nature of the group or topic, the researcher's skills and characteristics; practical factors matter most in **sponsored** research, where the funder sets the deadline and budget.
- **Against:** the researcher's **theoretical** stance (positivist or interpretivist) may decide the method before practicalities are weighed; **ethical** considerations can rule a method out (covert research with children); the funder's or researcher's **values**; research the sociologist starts on their own account is more driven by theory and ethics.
- **Evaluation moves:** the three factors interact; feminist researchers chose qualitative methods for theoretical reasons even when costly; conclude that practical factors often decide **what is possible**, but theory decides **what is wanted**.

Questionnaires lack validity:

- **For:** the imposition problem (the researcher's categories, not the respondent's); no chance to clarify or probe; closed answers reduce complex lives to ticks; low response rates distort the sample; people may lie or give socially desirable answers (interpretivist critique).
- **Against:** open questions give more depth; anonymity can make answers on sensitive topics more honest; no interviewer, so no interviewer bias; their **reliability** and **representativeness** make up for lower validity (positivist defence); for large populations they may be the only realistic method.

2. Explain two ethical issues in research (3 questions)

1. Choose two **different** issues: informed consent and deception, avoiding harm, confidentiality and anonymity, the right to withdraw, involvement in illegal activities, or the purpose of research.
2. Explain each: what the rule is and why it matters to the people studied.
3. Link each to a method or study: covert observation (no consent), experiments (Milgram's stress), research on sensitive topics such as domestic violence (harm if victims are identified).

4. Finish each point by showing **how** the example illustrates the issue, for example "because the gang members did not know Patrick was studying them, they could not agree to take part".

Don't give practical issues (cost, time) or validity and reliability: examiners say these earn nothing here.

3. Explain two difficulties in gaining access to a study group (3 questions)

1. Pick two from: making contact, being accepted and trusted, social differences that stop the researcher blending in, explaining one's presence without suspicion, legal or ethical limits, and the cost of getting in.
2. Explain why each happens with that kind of group.
3. Use material: gatekeepers (head teacher permission for a school; Whyte's "Doc"), rapport, covert and overt observation, Patrick's Glasgow gang.
4. Show how the material supports the point: "a gatekeeper may refuse, or allow access only to the parts of the school that look good".

Stay on **getting in**: examiners report answers drifting into the general strengths and limitations of covert observation, which are not credited.

4. Explain two ways the sociologist's values bias research (2 questions)

Asked as values leading to **bias in findings** (2023) and values influencing **the research process** (2022).

1. Use the stages: choice of topic, design and question wording, conduct (interviewer bias, verbal and non-verbal cues), interpretation and presentation (researcher imposition), and the common-sense ideas of the time (Kuhn's paradigms).
2. Explain how the value gets in at that stage and what it does to the findings.
3. Support with a concept or example: interviewer bias, social desirability, a feminist researcher choosing to study domestic violence.
4. Link back: "so respondents give the answers they think the researcher wants, and the findings reflect the researcher's views".

Keep the focus on **the researcher's values**. In 2023 examiners did not credit general causes of bias, funding or personal characteristics not linked to values, or simply naming positivism or interpretivism as "a way". (The 2022 "research process" wording did accept the researcher's theoretical position and ethical choices, but only as one of the two ways.)

5. Explain how research achieves reliability or validity (2 questions)

Asked as two ways of **achieving reliability** (2024) and two reasons **group interviews are high in validity** (2026).

Reliability: choose a method others can **repeat**; use **standardised** quantitative methods; ask every respondent the **same questions in the same order**; use **closed questions**; use **large samples**; keep the researcher's **involvement low**. Material: positivism, a closed-question questionnaire, structured interviews. Link: "so another researcher using the same questionnaire should get the same results".

Validity of group interviews: the relaxed peer setting, discussion that deepens answers, a group dynamic that sparks ideas, shared meanings coming out, less researcher imposition. Material: Willis, Mac an Ghaill, rapport, interpretivism. Every point must depend on the **group**: "open questions give qualitative data" fits any unstructured interview, and examiners in 2026 did not credit it. Points about representativeness also miss the question.

6. Explain two practical factors in choosing a research topic (2 questions)

1. Pick two: time available, ease of access, funding and sponsorship, what is fashionable or newsworthy, chance opportunity, the researcher's knowledge and skills, career prospects, cost.
2. Explain how each makes some topics more likely to be studied than others.
3. Support with a study or method: Patrick's covert gang study needed a long time to get in and then to observe.
4. Link back to the **topic** chosen.

Ethical and theoretical factors are not practical factors and earn nothing here; examiners have reported this in several sessions.

7. Explain strengths or limitations of covert participant observation (2 questions)

1. **Identify** a strength (no Hawthorne effect, access to closed or deviant groups, joining in activities an open researcher would be kept out of) or a limitation (going native, recording from memory, danger, hard to leave, no consent, can't be repeated, time and cost).
2. Explain **why covert observation has it**: it must depend on the secrecy. "Rich, in-depth data" fits any participant observation and examiners did not credit it.
3. Explain **why it matters**: "this increases validity", "this reduces objectivity", "this makes the study unethical". Many candidates stop after two steps; finish with "this is a strength because...".

Worked examples

Example 1

Explain two ways in which funding may lead to bias in sociological research. [8]

Way 1. One way is that the funding body may **choose the research topic (1)**. Organisations pay for research on the questions that concern them, so topics that matter to powerful funders get studied while issues facing less powerful groups are neglected (1). Government-funded research on crime is an example (1): it tends to focus on street crime recorded in official statistics, so the findings can suggest crime is mainly a working-class problem while white-collar crime is under-researched (1).

Way 2. A second way is that the funder may **control what is published (1)**. If the findings are unwelcome, a sponsor can delay or block publication, or release only the parts that suit it, so the public sees a distorted picture (1). This links to the idea that research is never fully **value-free (1)**: as Gouldner argued, sociologists

who depend on sponsors may avoid conclusions that would cost them future funding, so the values of the funder shape the findings, not just the data **(1)**.

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

Example 2

Explain one strength and one limitation of using covert participant observation to study a religious sect. **[6]**

Strength. It **avoids the Hawthorne effect (1)**. Because the members do not know they are being studied, they have no reason to change their behaviour or hide their beliefs from an outsider **(1)**. This is a strength because the researcher sees the sect's everyday practices as they really are, which gives highly **valid data (1)**.

Limitation. It **lacks informed consent (1)**. Joining the sect under false pretences means members never agree to be studied and cannot withdraw, and they may feel betrayed if they later read the findings **(1)**. This is a limitation because it breaks a key ethical guideline and could cause psychological harm to people whose faith matters deeply to them **(1)**.

Each point identified, explained as a feature of **covert** observation, and linked to validity or ethics: **6 marks**.

Example 3

Evaluate the view that ethical issues should be the main influence on how sociological research is carried out. **[26]**

Introduction. Ethical issues are about whether research is morally acceptable: informed consent, avoiding harm, confidentiality and the right to withdraw. The view says these should come before **theoretical** concerns (getting valid or reliable data) and **practical** ones (time, cost, access).

For the view (AO1/AO2).

- **Research is done on people**, who have rights. Experiments such as **Milgram's**, which caused participants severe stress, and **Zimbardo's** prison study, stopped early because of the distress it caused, show the damage research can do when ethics comes second.
- **Informed consent and deception:** covert studies such as **Humphreys'** involved deceiving men and tracing their home addresses, which could have ruined lives if published carelessly. Professional guidelines exist because such risks are real.
- **Trust in sociology:** if researchers are seen to deceive or harm people, groups will refuse access to future researchers, so ethics also protects the discipline.
- **Feminist researchers** argue that research should be a respectful, two-way relationship (Oakley), so ethics shapes the method itself, not only the rules around it.

Against the view (AO3).

- **However**, putting ethics first can rule out the only way to study some groups. Interpretivists argue that covert observation of deviant groups (Patrick, Humphreys) gives valid knowledge that no open method could, and that knowledge may help those groups.

- **Theory** may be a more important influence in practice: positivists choose standardised methods for reliability and objectivity, and these raise fewer ethical problems as a by-product, not because ethics came first.
- **Practical factors** often decide in real life: a funder's budget and deadline may dictate the method, whatever the researcher's ethical preferences.
- **Ethical problems can be managed** rather than avoided: anonymity, careful publication, debriefing and getting retrospective consent can make even covert research acceptable, so ethics is a limit to work within rather than the main driver.

Conclusion. Ethics should set firm limits, especially on harm and on research with vulnerable people. But within those limits, most research is shaped by theoretical aims and practical constraints, and a strict rule against all deception would leave some important groups unstudied. The view is right that ethics must never be ignored, but it is more convincing as a boundary than as the main influence.

How it would be marked. A range of detailed points with studies and concepts (AO1 7–8), applied to "the main influence on how research is carried out" throughout (AO2 7–8), with each counter-point explicitly weighed and a justified conclusion (AO3 9–10). In the exam, make each bullet a full paragraph.

Common mistakes

- **Mixing up validity, reliability and representativeness.** Examiners report this in almost every session. Validity: a true picture. Reliability: the same results if repeated. Representativeness: the sample matches the population.
- **Putting a point in the wrong category.** Ethical issues given as practical factors (the most common error in the practical-factors essay), and cost or time given as ethical issues. Check each point against the category in the question.
- **Losing the fourth mark in Question 2(a).** Many answers name a study and then repeat the point. Write a sentence that shows **how** the study or concept proves the point.
- **Losing the third mark in Question 2(b).** Answers identify and explain but never say why it is a strength or limitation. End with "this is a strength because it increases validity...".
- **Ignoring the key word.** "Covert" questions answered about participant observation in general; "group" interviews answered as any interview; "access" answered as the general pros and cons of covert observation. The point must depend on the word in the question.
- **Values questions answered about bias in general.** Funding or the researcher's age are not "values"; tie each point to the researcher's beliefs.
- **Scattergun answers:** listing several issues in one paragraph instead of developing two clearly separate points.
- **Juxtaposition in essays:** a block for and a block against, with no weighing. Say why each counter-argument weakens the view and reach a judgement.
- **Too few studies and concepts in essays.** Examiners note weaker covert-observation essays lacked supporting studies; Humphreys, Patrick, Whyte and Venkatesh, plus validity, verstehen and going native, are expected.

How to get the marks

- **"Explain two..." (8 marks):** two separate paragraphs, each with the four steps: point, explanation, sociological material, how the material supports the point. Only the best two points are credited, so don't write three.
- **"Explain two strengths/limitations..." (6 marks):** identify, explain why the method has it, explain why it matters. Keep it short; long descriptions earn nothing extra.
- **Sociological material** can be a concept (rapport, gatekeeper, Hawthorne effect, interviewer bias), a theory (positivism, interpretivism, feminism) or a named study. A study usually gives the clearest link.
- **"Evaluate..." (26 marks):** AO1 8 for a range of detailed points with concepts and studies; AO2 8 for applying them to the exact question; AO3 10 for evaluation that is clear, explicit and sustained. Juxtaposed arguments or a few simple counter-points stay in the middle AO3 bands.
- **Top-band moves** the mark schemes reward: weighing theoretical, practical and ethical factors against each other; comparing covert with overt observation; noting that sponsored research is more driven by practical factors; noting that all methods raise some ethical issues; using the five concepts accurately.
- **Use the question's words** in the last sentence of each paragraph, so the examiner sees the link.
- **Plan for 5 minutes** before an essay: points for, points against, the counter-point that answers each, and your judgement.

Quick check

1. Define validity, reliability, objectivity and representativeness in one sentence each.
2. Sort these into theoretical, practical or ethical factors: (a) a researcher cannot afford to travel to the group; (b) the researcher would have to deceive the group about why they are there; (c) the researcher wants statistics to test a hypothesis; (d) the study must finish in six months.
3. What is a gatekeeper? Give one way a gatekeeper helps and one way a gatekeeper can bias research.
4. Explain why "covert observation gives rich, in-depth data" would not earn marks as a strength of the **covert** approach, and give a point that would.
5. A researcher reacts with obvious approval whenever a respondent criticises the government. What kind of bias is this, and what does it do to the findings?

Answers

1. **Validity**: the data gives a true picture of what people really think, feel or do. **Reliability**: another researcher using the same method would get the same results. **Objectivity**: the findings reflect the social world, not the researcher's opinions or feelings. **Representativeness**: the sample has the same characteristics as the population, so the findings can be generalised.
2. (a) Practical (cost and access). (b) Ethical (no informed consent, deception). (c) Theoretical (a positivist wants quantitative data to test hypotheses). (d) Practical (time).
3. A gatekeeper is someone who controls entry to a group, such as a head teacher or a gang leader. They help by vouching for the researcher, so members accept and trust them (Whyte's "Doc"). They can bias research by steering the researcher towards people or places that show the group in a good light, lowering validity and representativeness.
4. Rich, in-depth data comes from any participant observation, overt or covert, so it does not depend on the secrecy. A point that would earn marks: because the group does not know it is being studied, there is no Hawthorne effect, so members act naturally and the data is more valid.
5. Interviewer bias: the respondent picks up the researcher's values from their reactions and gives more critical answers to please them (social desirability). The findings then exaggerate criticism of the government and reflect the researcher's views, so they lack validity.

Past questions to try

- **9699/12/M/J/23 Q2**: (a) how the sociologist's values bias findings; (b) strengths of covert participant observation.
- **9699/13/O/N/22 Q5**: essay on whether ethical issues make covert participant observation unsuitable.
- **9699/12/M/J/21 Q2**: (a) two ethical issues in sociological research.
- **9699/13/M/J/24 Q5**: essay on whether questionnaires lack validity.