

UNIVERSITY OF CAMBRIDGE INTERNATIONAL EXAMINATIONS
GCE Advanced Subsidiary Level and GCE Advanced Level

MARK SCHEME for the May/June 2011 question paper
for the guidance of teachers

9699 SOCIOLOGY

9699/23

Paper 2 (Principles and Methods 2), maximum raw mark 50

This mark scheme is published as an aid to teachers and candidates, to indicate the requirements of the examination. It shows the basis on which Examiners were instructed to award marks. It does not indicate the details of the discussions that took place at an Examiners' meeting before marking began, which would have considered the acceptability of alternative answers.

Mark schemes must be read in conjunction with the question papers and the report on the examination.

- Cambridge will not enter into discussions or correspondence in connection with these mark schemes.

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- 1 Positivists believe that the best way to study society is through adopting the methods and procedures of the natural sciences. They believe that by taking a scientific approach it is possible to identify patterns in human behaviour that are similar to the laws of the universe studied by natural scientists. For the positivist, the aim of research is to gather data that may be used to confirm or deny a hypothesis. This involves testing theoretical statements against evidence that is gathered by the most logical method in an objective manner and interpreted in an impartial way. Positivists believe that it is possible for sociologists to study society without the research findings being influenced by *value judgements*.

Interpretivists have questioned whether it is appropriate to study society using the methods and procedures of the natural sciences. They have also challenged the notion that value freedom is possible when studying society, or even whether it is desirable. Interpretivists prefer methods of research that enable the sociologist to enter the lives of the people they are studying and develop an in-depth understanding of how they interpret and negotiate their social relationships.

- (a) What is meant by the term *value judgements*? [2]

A value judgement is a decision about what is right or wrong, good or bad that ultimately depends on personal belief. Two marks for a clear and accurate definition; one mark for a partial definition such as 'someone's own personal view' or 'something that people believe to be right'.

- (b) Describe two methods of sociological research favoured by positivists. [4]

Accept the following research methods: questionnaires, structured interviews, experiments. Also accept references to social surveys, quantitative secondary data, and content analysis. One mark for the example plus one mark for development (2 x 2 marks).

- (c) Explain why it might not be possible or desirable to study society in a value-free way. [8]

0–4 A few simple points about why it might be difficult to study social reality objectively, without development or links to theoretical perspectives, could trigger the top part of the band. Lower in the band, answers are likely to demonstrate a misunderstanding about what is meant by value-freedom or be in some other way tangential to the question.

5–8 A sound account of the reasons why it might not be possible to study society in a value-free way would fit the lower part of the band. It is not necessary to state or to defend the opposite view i.e. that value-freedom is possible. Higher in the band, there will be clear and accurate links to theoretical perspectives and the interactionist position in particular. Answers that also consider the desirability of studying society in a value-free way are likely to achieve full marks.

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(d) Assess the positivist view that the best way to study society is through using the methods of the natural sciences. [11]

0–4 A few simple points about research methods in general or some observations about natural science poorly linked to the question might be worth 2 or 3 marks. One or two bare points about the strengths/limitations of using scientific methods in sociological research would trigger the top of the band.

5–8 A list-like account of a few arguments for and/or against using scientific methods would fit the lower part of the band. Likewise, a sound account of the positivist perspective that is not particularly well applied to the question could also be worth 5 or 6 marks. A good account of the issues concerning the use of scientific methods in sociology, without effective use of links to theoretical perspectives, would trigger the top part of the band. Both the arguments for and against using scientific methods would need to be addressed, though not necessarily in a balanced way, to go higher than 6 marks.

9–11 The issues about sociology as a science will be explained clearly and thoroughly at this level. There will also be explicit links to theoretical perspectives and answers are likely to be constructed in terms of the debate between positivists and interactionists, though we might also see useful references to feminist and postmodernist views on the relationship between sociology and science. Answers that merit the top of the band are likely to include some overall evaluative statements about whether it is appropriate to use scientific methods in sociological research. Sophistication in handling relevant theoretical issues would also help identify answers that merit full marks.

- 2 Interviewing is a popular technique used by sociologists to gather data. Positivists prefer to use structured interviews. With this type of interview, a carefully worded set of questions is chosen and each respondent is asked the same questions in the same order. The researchers try to standardise their interview technique so that they behave in exactly the same way with each respondent. The purpose of all this care is to make sure that nothing ‘irrelevant’ in the wording of the questions or the performance of the interviewer will influence the answers. In this way it is hoped that the data collected will be free from any *researcher bias*.**

Interpretivists prefer to use unstructured interviews. With this approach, the interview resembles more an informal conversation between the researcher and the respondent. It allows scope for the respondent to expand on the answers given and the researcher can vary the questions that are asked in order to explore their research topic in a more flexible way. Unstructured interviews are thought to be high in validity but low in reliability.

(a) What is meant by the term *researcher bias*? [2]

Researcher bias refers to a situation where some attributes or characteristics of the researcher influence the behaviour and responses of the people being studied so that the data collected is not a true reflection of what it claims to represent. Two marks for a clear and accurate definition; one mark for a partial definition, such as ‘people give the answers they think the researcher wants’ or ‘the data reflect the influence of the researcher’.

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- (b) Describe two reasons why it may be difficult for a researcher to avoid influencing the answers when carrying out interviews. [4]**

Reasons why it may be difficult for sociologists to avoid influencing the answers when carrying out interviews include: lack of awareness of their own values and prejudices, and how they may show through in their interview questions and technique; difficulty in remaining impartial and dispassionate in relation to the topic on which questions are being asked; the interviewer may lack the skills/personal attributes required to help the respondents to relax and give uninhibited responses; respondents may be influenced by characteristics of the researcher such as their age, class, ethnicity and gender; the respondents may give the answers they think the researcher wants to hear. One mark for each appropriate reason and one mark for the development (2 x 2 marks).

- (c) Explain why unstructured interviews are thought to be high in validity but low in reliability. [8]**

0–4 A few basic points about unstructured interviews with no clear links to the issues of validity and reliability may be worth one or two marks. An answer that demonstrates an understanding of the concepts of validity and reliability, without linking that knowledge to unstructured interviews specifically, would trigger the top part of the band.

5–8 A basic explanation of why unstructured interviews are thought to be high in validity and low in reliability, with perhaps some lack of precision in the use of those concepts, would fit the lower part of the band. Higher in the band, answers are likely to demonstrate greater theoretical understanding and a strong grasp of what the concepts of validity and reliability mean.

- (d) Assess the strengths and limitations of *structured* interviews. [11]**

0–4 At this level we can expect a few limited observations about interviews in general, with few if any links to relevant sociological knowledge. At the top of the band answers may contain one or two vaguely relevant points about the strengths and/or limitations of structured interviews specifically.

5–8 Answers that fit this band will focus on the question as set, though they are likely to be mostly descriptive in content and may lack some balance in the treatment of strengths and limitations. The distinction between structured interviews and other types of interviews may be somewhat obscured lower in the band, but will be clear at the top. The strengths and limitations may be discussed within a positivist versus interpretivist framework, though be wary of rewarding too highly general accounts of the latter debate that are lacking in references to research methods.

9–11 Answers at this level will be balanced in the coverage of strengths and limitations. They will also be balanced in terms of covering both practical and theoretical issues. There will be some attempt at assessment, though lower in the band this may take the form of juxtaposing the positivist and interpretivist views on the usefulness of structured interviews in sociological research. To go higher, the assessment will be more explicit and draw reasoned conclusions about the value of structured interviews. Good answers are also likely to demonstrate awareness that much depends on the theoretical perspective adopted when assessing the merits of particular research methods.

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- 3 There are many different views in sociology about how poverty should be defined and measured. Most definitions of poverty are relative, though an absolute standard may also be used. Marx wrote about the immiseration of the working class. By this he meant that, under capitalism, the wages paid to manual workers would gradually fall to a level where working class families were living at, or close to, absolute poverty. However, it can be argued that most sections of the working class in modern industrial societies have remained free from absolute poverty in the years since Marx was writing and that relative poverty has been by far the greater problem.

Using the concept of relative poverty, some sociologists have argued that an 'underclass' exists in modern industrial societies. In this view, the underclass refers to groups of people who live on very low incomes, such as the long-term unemployed, single-parent families living on welfare benefits, and some of the elderly population. It has also been claimed that certain ethnic minorities, such as Hispanic and African-Caribbean groups in the USA, are disproportionately represented within the underclass. However, not all sociologists agree that an underclass exists or that it is a helpful concept when studying the nature and extent of poverty in modern industrial societies.

- (a) What is meant by the term *relative poverty*? [2]

Relative poverty is poverty that is seen in relation to the standard of living of the majority of the people in any one society or at any one time. Two marks for a clear and accurate definition; one mark for a partial definition, such as 'lacking what everyone else has' or 'not having a fridge when most other people in the society have one'.

- (b) Describe two factors that influence the level of poverty in a society. [4]

Factors that may influence the level of poverty in a society include: the state of the economy, wage levels, rates of unemployment, availability of welfare benefits, voluntary aid for the needy, opportunities for poor people to achieve upward social mobility, overseas aid and issues relating to natural disasters such as drought in many developing countries especially. One mark for the example plus one mark for development (2 x 2 marks).

- (c) Explain why some sociologists have questioned whether an underclass exists. [8]

0–4 Answers at this level will show only a very limited understanding of the question. Some recognition that the composition of the most disadvantaged stratum of society is too diverse and transient to be deemed a 'class', with little or no further development, may be worth 3 or 4 marks.

5–8 A clear explanation covering a few relevant points would merit 5 or 6 marks. A more developed response would reach the top of the band. Criticisms of the concept of an underclass include the following: those commonly identified as the underclass are not in fact a homogeneous group; members of the purported underclass (or many of them) are not as detached and isolated from the rest of society as the term may imply; the concept has been used as an umbrella term to attempt to link social problems such as the rise of lone parents, ethnic discrimination, relative poverty and increasing criminality that are in reality only tenuously linked. There are also many criticisms of the idea of a black underclass that could be made relevant to this question.

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(d) Assess Marxist explanations of the existence of poverty in modern industrial societies. [11]

- 0–4 Some general reflections on the causes of poverty, with little or no sociological backing, may be worth two or three marks. A simple account of Marxist theory with no clear reference to poverty would trigger the top of the band.
- 5–8 A sound descriptive account of the Marxist perspective on poverty would merit five or six marks. A more developed account could reach the top of the band without attempting any assessment. Candidates who distinguish between different strands of Marxist theory are likely to trigger at least the top of this band.
- 9–11 Answers at this level will demonstrate a good understanding of Marxist explanations of poverty. Other sociological explanations for the existence of poverty may also be discussed and provide the basis for a well-informed assessment of the Marxist theories. At the top of the band, the assessment will be both explicit and sustained, perhaps noting the limitations of both cultural and structural explanations of poverty.