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UNIVERSITY OF CAMBRIDGE INTERNATIONAL EXAMINATIONS

GCE Advanced Subsidiary Level and GCE Advanced Level

MARK SCHEME for the October/November 2009 question paper for the guidance of teachers

9699 SOCIOLOGY

9699/21 Paper 21 (Data Response), 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.

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1 Positivists believe that the social world is like the natural, physical world. It is made up of objective facts, independent of individuals, just waiting to be discovered. Sociologists should approach the study of society, therefore, rather like a biologist investigating the structure of a living organism or an astronomer examining the stars. The ultimate aim is to identify a set of laws that govern human behaviour rather like the laws of the universe that physicists seek to explain. Positivists argue that this aim can only be achieved by sociologists adopting the methods and procedures that are used in the natural sciences.

Through following the rules of scientific method, verifiable data and valid correlations can be established that may be used to confirm or deny a *hypothesis*. In essence, 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 their own values influencing the research findings.

Interactionists 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. Interactionists 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 *hypothesis*? [2]

A hypothesis is an untested statement about the relationship between concepts within a given theory. Two marks for a clear and accurate definition; one mark for a partial definition such as 'something the sociologist wants to test' or 'a supposed relationship between things'.

(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 if the description makes it clear that the candidate has in mind quantitative-based content analysis. One mark for the example plus one mark for development (2 × 2 marks).

(c) Explain why it might not be possible, or even 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 arguments for and against using scientific methods in sociological research. [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 two or three 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 five or six 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 Questionnaires are a set of written questions that are either given to respondents to complete or are posted to them. Postal questionnaires are most likely to reach the largest group, although they have the lowest response rate. Questionnaires are widely used in sociological research because they allow a large number of questions to be asked to a wide group in a short space of time.

Sociologists working within the positivist tradition favour the use of questionnaires because of the *reliability* of the method and the ability to identify trends and make generalisations from the data that is collected. From an interactionist perspective, however, research based on questionnaires is said to lack validity.

Interviews are an alternative to questionnaires. There are three main types of interview – structured, semi-structured and unstructured. Whereas a questionnaire will be given to a respondent to complete privately, an interview consists of a face-to-face question-and-answer session between interviewer and interviewee. The presence of the interviewer in this process creates many advantages and disadvantages when compared to questionnaires.

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

Reliability is a measure of the ability to repeat the research procedure and produce the same results. Two marks for a clear and accurate definition; one mark for a partial definition such as 'able to repeat a study' or 'the results are always the same'.

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(b) Describe *two* reasons why postal questionnaires may have a low response rate. [4]

Reasons why postal questionnaires may have a low response rate include, for example, the following: address details are out of date; people can't be bothered to fill in and return the questionnaire; the questionnaire is seen as junk mail and thrown away; absence of help to fill in the questionnaire; people unclear why the questionnaire has been sent to them. One mark for the example plus one mark for development (2 × 2 marks).

(c) Explain why interactionists consider that research based on questionnaires lacks validity. [8]

0–4 A few general points about the strengths/limitations of questionnaires with no clear reference to the concept of validity would be worth two or three marks. A simple statement of one or two reasons why questionnaires might lack validity would trigger the top of the band.

5–8 A sound account of the reasons why the data produced by questionnaires might lack validity, perhaps with only tenuous links to the interactionist perspective, would merit five or six marks. To go higher, the links to interactionism need to be clear and accurate.

(d) Assess the strengths and limitations of using interviews rather than questionnaires in sociological research. [11]

0–4 A few isolated points about interviews or questionnaires, without any reference to strengths/limitations, might be worth two or three marks. A couple of practical strengths/ limitations of interviews noted, without further development, would trigger the top of the band.

5–8 Lower in the band, answers are likely to concentrate wholly or mainly on the practical strengths/limitations of interviews. Answers that lack balance i.e. consider only strengths or only limitations, can achieve no more than six marks. Higher in the band, the answers will include more references to relevant theoretical issues and/or will make explicit comparisons between interviews and questionnaires. Candidates who distinguish between the different types of interview are also likely to trigger at least the top of this band, if not the higher.

9–11 At this level, we should expect answers to cover a good range of practical and theoretical points related to the strengths/limitations of interviews. There will also be a concerted attempt to compare interviews with questionnaires. Features that might help distinguish answers that merit the top of the band include, for example, a sharp analysis of the differences between the various types of interviews and/or the development of overall evaluative conclusions about the usefulness of interviews compared to questionnaires.

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3 In traditional societies the social position of an individual is generally ascribed at birth in accordance with law, custom or inherited status. Such systems are characterised by very little *social mobility* and are sometimes referred to as 'closed' societies because the life prospects of each person are fixed or predetermined.

Under the process of industrialisation traditional systems of stratification gave way to a more open system that was characterised by competition and a higher degree of social mobility. Customary divisions and traditional distinctions were replaced by distinctions based on social class. Class position is largely determined by an individual's place within the economic system and is to some extent achieved.

Sociologists within the functionalist tradition claim that in modern industrial societies class origins are irrelevant in determining where an individual is placed in the economic system. They say that a meritocracy exists in which access to higher status positions in society is based on achievement and ability. This view has been challenged by sociologists in the Marxist and Weberian traditions who argue that social class background does have a major influence on the way modern industrial societies are stratified. However, postmodernist writers have suggested that class divisions have little role in shaping social identities today.

(a) What is meant by the term *social mobility*? [2]

Social mobility refers to the movement of individuals (or groups) between different positions within the system of social stratification in any society. Two marks for a clear and accurate definition; one mark for a partial definition such as 'an open society' or 'no barriers to achievement in society'.

(b) Describe *two* ways in which an individual might achieve a higher position in society. [4]

Upward social mobility can be achieved by, for example: job promotion, educational achievement, entrepreneurial activity, marriage, lottery win, inheritance, and various other means. One mark for the example plus one mark for development (2 × 2 marks).

(c) Explain why postmodernist writers think that class divisions have little role in shaping social identities today. [8]

0–4 A few general points about the significance of class divisions today, with no clear links to postmodernism, might be worth two or three marks. A simple discussion of the possible links between social class divisions and social identities today, again with no obvious connection with postmodernist ideas, would trigger the top of the band.

5–8 A basic account of one or two reasons why postmodernists think the influence of social class has declined would fit the lower part of the band. Higher in the band, answers will provide a fuller and more coherent summary of the postmodernist perspective on social class, possibly with references to relevant theorists such as Pakulski and Waters. Candidates are not required to challenge the postmodernist view in this question and can achieve full marks simply by explaining in a well informed way postmodernist claims about the declining influence of social class.

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(d) Assess the extent to which a meritocracy exists in modern industrial societies. [11]

0–4 A few general points about social stratification in modern industrial societies with little or no direct link to the question might be worth one or two marks. A simple definition of meritocracy and some assertions in favour of the idea that achievement is the basis of hierarchy in modern industrial societies would trigger the top of the band. Likewise one or two isolated points against the notion of a meritocracy, without further development, would be worth three or four marks.

5–8 A clear sociological account of the arguments in favour of the idea that modern industrial societies are meritocratic, with little or no consideration of the alternative viewpoints, would fit the lower part of the band. A list-like account of some of the arguments against the existence of a meritocracy, with no clear references to theories, concepts or studies, might also be worth five or six marks. To go higher, the arguments for and against the existence of a meritocracy need to be considered, though not necessarily with equal balance. There should also be some use of appropriate sociological sources (concepts, evidence, theories, studies) in answers that merit the top of the band and higher.

9–11 Answers at this level will demonstrate a good understanding of the concept of a meritocracy and the assessment will be sustained and well supported by references to evidence and/or theories. Higher in the band, answers will contain clear evaluative conclusions about the extent to which meritocracy exists in modern industrial societies. Detailed use of relevant empirical data and/or good understanding of the theoretical underpinnings to these debates, may be another feature of answers that merit full marks.

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